

To Hell with Culture

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Herbert Read was an influential art critic during his life, but fell into disrepute followed by oblivion after his death in 1968, supposedly¹ because his views of art were not concordant with the prevailing Marxist orthodoxy, somewhat ironic in the view of the fact that Read was perfectly happy to go along with the Marxists most of the way, and the appreciation not to say the admiration he expresses for the Sovietunion would appear to us nowadays as rather quaint. The present collection, of which the title essay may be the most provocative, was at one time collected by Red himself and published in the 50's or early 60's, although most of the individual essays must have been written much earlier, probably in the late 30's and early 40's. It is very annoying that exact dates are not provided² because that would have been a great help in appraising them. What is written about the Sovietunion e.g. makes a big difference whether conceived in the *Zeitgeist* of the 30's as oppose to that of the postwar decades.

Read writes essays and thus intrudes on topics beyond his expertise. This is inevitable in the writing of essays, and in fact provides one of the major motivations for the activity. His basic theme is of course Art, which he sees as the supreme manifestation of the human spirit. In fact ultimately a Civilization is judged by the quality of its Art, its Art eventually being the only thing that remains after its demise. As to beauty he seems both to take an extreme Platonist view, meaning that what is good art is objective and something for humans to discover, and a more relative biological, in which it is seen as something that touches deeply on the ways human are constructed mentally and physically, and thus ultimately expressions of their inner needs. Neither of those two strains of thoughts are explored in any depth, pointing to what is the main weakness, or at least the most disappointing aspect of Reads essays, namely their superficiality. I mean this not necessarily in the usual disparaging sense, as something shallow and hackneyed, but in a more specific sense of Read being content with sketching the outlines of a problem, setting up expectations in the mind of the reader, only to disappoint them by neglecting to penetrate further. To a large extent this is due to the limited space given to a short essay, yet it gives to the overall ambition an impression of truncation.

First and foremost Read resents the modern industrial society in which man is alienated from production, whose purpose is quantity not quality to be sold entirely for profit not for use. At the time Read was writing, the even greater excesses of what we now call the consumer society had not yet become prevalent, but of course the tendency was clear and had been so since the end of the 19th century. This is a sentiment which is quite common to intellectuals, and one which I myself have been sympathetic to all my life³ It

¹ As expressed in the foreword to this recent reissue.

² maybe subsequent editing made such meaningless in the opinion of the recent publisher

³ And which may have contributed to my choice of pure mathematics as a calling.

is also a sentiment that exposes itself to the charges of naivety and cynical sentimentality. C.P.Snow in his (in)famous lectures on the two cultures pits the practical scientist against the ineffectual literary intellectual. The world is beset by poverty and only the hard-nosed pursuit of science can alleviate it. Read envisions how native huts are being razed for the benefit of air-conditioned buildings, the simple bowl of maize replaced by that of a succulent steak, and the loin-cloth discarded in favour of the immaculate tweed suit. Is this progress? Read's heart sinks and his spirit rebels against this one-dimensional mechanical vision of human aspiration. Some parts of progress can be measured, and that is material wealth, but that is of course not all there is to life, only the basic prerequisite.

Of course spiritual values cannot be scientifically confirmed, they have to be taken on instinctive trust (like religion?), and the automated mechanized world-view of Snow is one incapable of stimulating the better instincts and thus impotent as to the deliberation of higher order decisions. Now the same dilemma presented to Read also presents itself to us, but now with a new twist, namely that of ecological sustainability, which if vaguely sensed was never explicitly articulated in his time. But as noted before, his essays are essentially those of truncations, and having presented the dilemma he does very little to probe it further. On the positive side his contention is that everybody is more or less an artist without being necessarily conscious of it. Whenever something is made with love and immediate purpose out of an inner necessity, it is by definition a work of art. In an ideal society in which everyone would have the opportunity to pursue their unconscious artistic impulses, good taste would reign, because good taste inevitably is an expression of sound and healthy instinctive activity, and needs as such no external instruction, but emerges naturally when given the freedom to do so.

The relation of Art to Society is a subtle one fraught with contradictions and constitutes the main theme of Reads essays (and as noted above, forces him to step beyond his acknowledged expertise). In particular the question of what kind of society is most beneficial to the flowering of the arts. Read notes that so far there is no correlation between society and art, totalitarian societies which show a great interest in the cultivation of the arts, and he cites with approval the Sovietunion, do not generate better art than others, for the simple reason that art has to come from below, not from above. It has to be a spontaneous initiative, something Read returns to over and over again in his essays. But nevertheless there is an ideal society for arts and that is the democratic society, never mind that a truly democratic society is yet to be established, and thus the claim is still hypothetical. Three conditions are necessary for the establishment of a democratic society according to Read, first that production should be for use never for profit, that each should give according to his abilities and each receive according to needs, and finally that the means of production should be owned and controlled by its workers. And as a meta-principle, the notion of equality. Thus a non-socialist democracy is a contradiction in terms, and in addition to fraternity and liberty equality should thus never be forgotten. Nowadays the prevalent dogma is that democracy is not possible without a free market, thus giving the notion of liberty a more precise economic interpretation. As to equality of man that is the central dogma of democracy, none which can be justified by other means, but is more of a moral axiom which you either embrace or reject. Present so called democratic societies are so only by name, they may be headed by governments *of* the people

and *for* the people, but never so far *by* the people. For one thing economy is so far never socialized, there is still a cult of the leader (Read refers both to Hitler and Churchill as dictators), and in particular he is critical of the trade unions, whose leaders have renounced any ambition to take over the control of the production being solely content with bargaining for as good material terms as possible for their members acknowledging the sole competence of managerial classes to run industries. In a democratic society the material needs of everybody will be assured, and hence the freedom from want, enabling everybody to pursue their interests. In a democratic society man is freed from the interference of man and no one exercises authority over another. Clearly Read, without really intending it, is discussing a Utopia. There are of course some important and difficult questions here. What is meant really by equality between people? If everyone would be an artist, not everyone would be as good, the kind of genius as exemplified by a Homer, a Michelangelo or a Shakespeare, clearly transcends the common man. How to accommodate differences in inherent ability and actual performance? As to the literal interpretation of equality, Bernard Shaw's suggestion that everyone should have the same income, is rejected as a crude kind of equality according to Read, clearly we would like to go beyond the merely material. The best example he can think of is the 'equality before the law' acknowledged at least by civilized countries. This is yet another example of the truncated nature of Read's essays, an important problem is touched upon only to be brushed aside.

Otherwise as to the putative differences between so called democratic societies and fascist ones he has some interesting things to say. Things which might not have been so shocking in the 30's, but which have subsequently been forgotten and might strike the modern reader as counter-intuitive to the point of being absurd. First and foremost there is a deep ideological difference between them, deep enough of a chasm as to lead to war. But once in war there is a convergence. Democratic societies becoming more and more authoritarian, with their economies more and more centralized, in order to meet the demands of war; likewise totalitarian societies are forced to make more or more concessions to the public will in order to ensue loyalty in their task. And in both kind of societies there is more and more reliance on the supreme leader (cf. Reads remark on Hitler and Stalin). As to Nazism it incorporated many features of the democratic ideas which were becoming popular in the 20th century. Hitler was not imposed from above, he was a man from the depth of society who had risen through popular appeal, playing skillfully on the dreams and aspirations of a large segment of the population. A man with whom many could identify as well as idolize. The movement as such with its mass demonstrations, clearly inspired by the communists, thus embodied what already Plato and Aristotle had warned against, namely the power of populism and the the rise of the rubble. The German people were bamboozled, but willingly so, the men of power realizing that if you want to control, you need to lie very close to the wishes of those you want to control and endeavor to make them obey you out of free will and create a deep sense of group loyalty. And is that not what democracy is about, at least elective democracy intended to let the will of the people speak (as interpreted by its chosen representatives). More specifically the Wehrmacht of the Second World War was much more egalitarian than the traditional German army of Prussian tradition. (Thus it is rather misleading to think of Nazism as a continuation of the Prussian tradition, and ultimately put the blame of Hitler on Bismarck; there was

a radically new element introduced). It certainly was more 'democratic' than the Allied counterparts, less authoritarian in its hierarchy encouraging individual initiative. It is believed that the superior German fighting power was due to this democratic structure. However, we are talking about local democracies and the overblown rhetoric of democratic discourse, being mere methods of fascism as opposed to constitute ultimate aims. One should never lose sight of the simple fact that at the core the Nazi movement there was the pursuit of naked power for its own sake. About that Read has no illusions, even if the piece must have been written before the disclosure of the Holocaust.

The kind of socialism Read envisions is not the big centralized one as developed in the Sovietunion. Although he does not out of hand reject mass-production, what he prefers is the small enterprise, making the control by its members tangible. In fact he hankers back to the medieval guild, which he also sees as the ideal artists cooperative. In fact Read seems to have absorbed many of his ideas from the British Arts and Craft movement, and his arguments are rather parallel to those of Roger Fry, in particular when it comes to the refinement of the general taste. Read (as Fry) thinks of the general taste as having been corrupted by the proliferation of ugly things, from everyday objects, to architectures and public decoration. Remove those and replace them by better ones, and imperceptibly the ordinary mans taste will improve. Another more direct venue is through education, and here Read stresses the education of the senses, not of the intellect. The child discovers the world primarily through its senses, and that natural path to discovery should not be thwarted.

Does Read see anything good in modern life, or is it all ugly? Yes he does, he is not one to hark back to the past, some of the modern developments such as the racing car and the airplane he founds to be works of art. Why? Because they are not made for profit, they are made to solve a problem of design, guided by ultimate use, with no shortcuts taken to cuts costs and raise profits. They are done for their own sake, for going very fast or for flying, and those goals have not been compromised, as a result a thing designed entirely for its use is bound to emerge beautiful. Yet of course when it comes to the production of many things affordable to the many, there is bound to be some rationalization. Would Read want to do without this that makes the material standards for the many accessible? The minimal material standard which he thinks it is the right of everyone, especially the right of the artist. Also his criteria for beauty depending on use can be applied at many different levels. It can be made at the level of mass-production itself. Does that not adhere to his criterion? Its products might not individually be beautiful, but their production might be. Mass-production is designed for a specific use, be it to produce ugly things en masse. Of course, if questioned, Read would have been puzzled at best. Such a confusion of categories (or Russellian types) might have struck him as stupid. He would be a nominalist, the things which exist in this world, and to which we should pay attention, are the simple things which we enjoy directly through our senses. Intellectual play strays into the mist of abstraction. Capitalism itself is an abstraction, a way of economy, in which the common things used for barter, have been replaced by the process of bartering itself. The value of a thing is no longer in its use, but in the profit it can make. This is another kind of use, but one of a higher order. It is exactly against this kind of shifting of attention that a Marx or a Read takes offense.

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