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THE COMMERCIALISATION OF CULTURAL LIFE

CULTURE may be defined to include all those things which enable men to comprehend the beauty, the poetry, and the essential truths of life. To some people the word "culture" implies attending concerts and looking at art galleries. These and similar activities are not the sole or even indeed the most important form of culture. Culture, for different individuals, or for different nations, comprehends innumerable different things. A man's culture shows itself in the style of his house, the design of his furniture, the flavour of his food and drink, the brightness of his clothes, the zest of his sports, the profundity of his reading, the wit and learning of his conversation; it reveals itself in the Australian at his surf-club, the German singing songs in his beer-garden, the Swede hanging lanterns on his Christmas tree, the Frenchman savouring his food. Culture is not the whole of life. Man's life has religious, political, economic and family elements which may be distinguished from the cultural element. But culture makes up a large part of it.

Man's happiness (both individual and communal) depends upon keeping these various elements of his life in their right relation to each other. When one of them begins to grow at another's expense, then there is trouble. The worst illness of the human body is cancer, which is caused by the uncontrollable growth of one organ at the expense of its neighbours. The worst ills of the social body are caused in similar fashion. Totalitarianism is an overgrowth of the political organs, which attempt to interfere with every aspect of life, and will not tolerate the existence of any independent cultural or economic life. An overgrowth of cultural life (as in Renaissance Italy) or of family life (as in China), at the expense of political and economic life, leads to anarchy and impoverishment. When religion intervenes in spheres which do not belong to it we have theocracy, of which examples are to be found in the civilisations of Ancient Egypt, Babylon and Peru: attaining a high cultural and economic level, but stagnant and incapable of growth.

It is of the last and worst form of social cancer that I am now writing, namely, that which follows from an over-development of economic and commercial life, and generally known as commercialism.

In the first place, we must make clear the distinction between Commerce and Commercialism. Commerce is a legitimate and necessary activity. It is when it goes outside its proper sphere of effecting the exchange of goods and services that it becomes commercialism.

Labour (which should normally be the lot of every man) may be classified broadly into the two categories of production and commerce. Production may be further subdivided according to whether the goods produced are merely useful, such as drain pipes or fertilizers; or, on the other hand, such goods as sailing boats, plum puddings, song books, jewels, tankards or crayfish, which contain indeed an element of utility, but also an element of beauty, wisdom, or poetic appropriateness, and are thus the implements of man's cultural life. The production of useful goods, and commerce, are necessary activities, but they are not an end in themselves. It is in the production of beautiful things that a community's real achievements lie.

The economic and the cultural element must always be intermingled. Communists, rightly horrified by the excesses of our commercial civilisation, propose as an ideal the complete abolition of economic relationships and the establishment of a community of workers in which all goods are held in common. (They hold out no hopes that this will be achieved within any measurable period of time.) This is throwing away the baby with

the bath water. Without buying and selling, it will be very difficult to decide what should be produced either for use or for beauty. One can conceive a system in which all production is ordered by political authority, but this is not the communist ideal of a community of free workers. It also demands an improvement of the standards of impartiality and of culture among Government officials which we can hardly hope to attain.

Socialists are right in saying that a man's primary desire should be to "do his job" and that the question of reward should be secondary. It should indeed be secondary, but not entirely absent. There is no harm in an artist painting a picture and then selling it; indeed, unless we visualise a state of affairs in which approved artists receive a pension from a Government academy, there is no other basis on which he can live. The artist paints the best that is in him and then sells his picture to make a living. What is wrong, what is degrading, what is commercialism, is when the artist or craftsman, for the sake of money, lets his work fall short of the best that he can do. (This is what he is often compelled to do nowadays, poor devil: the blame generally lies not with him, but with the commercialised taste of the public, which prefers the worse to the best.) Selling goods is not necessarily commercialism: making goods "to sell," which are not the most useful or beautiful that their creator can make, that is commercialism.

If we take this as our criterion (and to the best of my capacity I have tried to place it on a basis of firm reason) and look through our cultural life of to-day, we shall be appalled at the hold which commercialism has obtained. We are becoming so conditioned to commercialism that, in our very entertainment, we only enjoy commercialised entertainment which someone sells us at a profit, and have ceased to enjoy the simple pleasures of life. Our present-day furniture will some day be exhibited in museums, to show the depths to which aesthetic taste could descend. There are ugly signs that the medical profession is becoming commercialised like everyone else, and that instead of following its sacred mission of relieving suffering, it is beginning to think in terms of how much money it can extract from wealthy hypochondriacs. I cannot trust myself to speak restrainedly about what has happened to our beer and wine. Vast masses of shoddy and deceitful goods of every kind are forced upon us by business men who have found that this sort of thing is the most profitable to make. A limited number of capitalists accumulate great wealth and use it to crush the genuine craftsman and to extend the market for their own "goods." They smother all independent thinking and cultural judgment by endless advertising; and simultaneously, by the threat to withhold advertising, they bring the press and the radio into complete subservience to business interests. By all manner of indirect means they secure control over intellectual circles, universities and even governments, so as to make sure that there shall be no independent cultural criticism of the business man marketing shoddy goods for his own profit.

Australia in this respect is no worse, perhaps a little better, than other newly settled countries. American civilisation has been more debauched than any other by plutocratic control of government and education. In the European countries the position is different. Rich traditions of culture and craftsmanship have survived from past ages and are able to stand up to the commercialism of the present day. But the traditional English culture was essentially rural and enmeshed with the class hierarchy of rural England. Many elements of this old rural culture have survived—if it be not considered ludicrous, one might quote as the two best examples horse racing and cricket, both essentially rural sports, with all their attendant amenities—and have even been transplanted to the British

Dominions. But the industrialisation of England in the nineteenth century struck the old culture a blow from which it will never really recover.

England has always been more aristocratic and hierarchical than the countries of continental Europe, whose traditional civilisation is more that of the peasant and the craftsman. Many of the European countries have preserved a fine cultural tradition based on these classes, but at the expense of distorting their economic structure and delaying its expansion. The country which has most successfully preserved and developed its traditional culture, and has shown that this is not incompatible with industrial development and a high standard of living, is Sweden. Nowhere else does one see such a high level of culture, not confined to a limited class, but pervading the whole nation; showing itself largely in the beauty of their earthenware and curtains and furniture and cutlery, and all the common objects of life. Sweden perhaps was fortunate in that she remained a primitive and isolated community until late in the nineteenth century. By the time industrialism reached her it had lost some of its worst features and could be grafted on to the ancient peasant and craftsman traditions, rather than destroying them.

I am firmly convinced that the essential element in cultural life is the spirit and tradition of craftsmanship. Those who think of culture in terms of Arts Degrees at universities, and fashionable concert parties, are thinking in a void. The culture of the leisured bourgeoisie is of its nature narrow and sterile. Old aristocratic communities like England had a genuine enough culture, but it cannot survive in the modern democratic world. The culture that will survive and grow down the ages is the culture of craftsmen who love their work, and of similar creators.

There is no doubt that Australia is terribly lacking in the spirit of craftsmanship, particularly of course in the cities. Australian farming communities have kept some portion of the traditional rural craftsmanship and culture of their European ancestors. But most of the old European rural culture is quite inapplicable in Australia and many of the rural population have succumbed to the false commercialised cultural values promulgated by the radio and the women's magazines. The Australian farmer, though he generally does not know it, leads the world in the skill and efficiency with which he can carry out modern scientific farming. In future years, it is reasonable to hope he will have a greater pride in his occupation, and will develop a living culture of his own.

It is the urban population whose case is so difficult. They have long since lost whatever traditional culture they possessed, and have completely given themselves over to the cloying attractions of a commercialised culture. This state of affairs is at its worst in Sydney which in this, as in other respects, is the plague spot of Australia, the focus from which the poison of commercialism is disseminated to a continent only too willing, alas, to receive it.

One thing we may be sure of—there will be no quick or easy solution to this problem. In the course of years we may be able to do something through immigration. Australia should go out of its way to encourage the immigration of craftsmen, and should seek particularly men from countries with a rich cultural tradition. Our principal immigrants during recent years have been the sort of people who have brought us not craftsmanship but an intensified commercialism. We can also do something to revise our educational system so as to give encouragement and honour to craftsmanship and creative work rather than to commercial cleverness. But for us, as for the rest of the world, it will take a long slow climb to get out of the bog into which we have been thrust by the capitalist commercialism of the present epoch.