

CULTURE IN NEW COUNTRIES

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IN last issue of this *Review* I tried to distinguish some meanings that have been given to the word "culture", speaking chiefly of the culture of groups. It remains to glance at the relation between the group and the individual, and in this paper I shall be specially concerned with the countries generally called "new".

There is a curious notion afloat that new countries are especially favourable soil for the formation of a virile culture. By "new" is meant something old that has been transplanted to a background devoid of historical associations. It would be remarkable if a plant, flourishing in heavy black loam, suddenly acquired a new virility on transplantation into a shallow sandy soil. Metaphors are dangerous things that prove nothing, but experience suggests the soundness of this particular figure. Indeed, there is nothing more tenuous, more shamelessly imitative and external, less virile and self-joyous, than the cultures of so-called new countries. The environments of these transplanted cultures are new, the cultures themselves are old with the sickly age of arrested development. If signs of a genuine blossoming of culture are belatedly beginning to appear in America, this is not because America is still "new"; rather is America coming of age, beginning to feel a little old. In a genuinely new country, the preoccupation with the immediate ends of existence reduces creativeness in the sphere of the more remote ends to a minimum. The net result is a perceptible dwarfing of culture. The old stock of non-material cultural goods lingers on without being subjected to vital remodellings, becomes progressively impoverished, and ends by being so hopelessly ill-adjusted to the economic and social environment that the more sensitive spirits tend to break with it altogether and to begin anew with a frank recognition of the new environmental conditions. Such new starts are invariably crude. They are long in bearing the fruits of a genuine culture.

It is only an apparent paradox that the subtlest and the most decisive cultural influences of personality, the most fruitful revolts, are discernible in those environments that have long and uninter-

edly supported a richly streaming culture. So far from being suffocated in an atmosphere of endless precedent, the creative spirit gains sustenance and vigour for its own unfolding, and—if it is strong enough—it may swing free of that very atmosphere with a poise hardly dreamt of by the timid iconoclasts of unformed cultures. Not otherwise could we understand the cultural history of modern Europe. Only in a mature and richly differentiated soil could arise the iconoclasms and visions of an Anatole France, a Nietzsche, an Ibsen, a Tolstoi. In America, at least in the America of yesterday, these iconoclasms and these visions would either have been strangled in the cradle, or, had they found air to breathe, they would have half-developed into a crude and pathetic isolation. There is no sound and vigorous individual incorporation of a cultured ideal without the soil of a genuine communal culture; and there is no genuine communal culture without the transforming energy of personalities at once robust and saturated with the cultural values of their time and place. The highest type of culture is thus locked in the embrace of an endless chain, to the forging of which goes much labour, weary and protracted. Such a culture avoids the two extremes of “externality,”—the externality of surfeit, which weighs down the individual, and the externality of barrenness. The former is the decay of Alexandrianism, in which the individual is no more; the latter is the combined immaturity and decay of an uprooted culture, in which the individual is not yet. Both types of externality may be combined in the same culture, frequently in the same person. Thus it is not uncommon to find in America individuals who have had engrafted on a barren and purely utilitarian culture a cultural tradition that apes a grace already embalmed. One surmises that this juxtaposition of incongruous atmosphere is in certain circles even typical.

Let us look a little more closely at the place of the individual in a modern sophisticated culture. I have insisted throughout that a genuine culture is one that gives its bearers a sense of inner satisfaction, a feeling of spiritual mastery. In the higher levels of civilization this sense of mastery is all but withdrawn, as we have seen, from the economic sphere. It must, then, to an even greater extent than in more primitive civilizations, feed on the non-economic spheres of human activity. The individual is thus driven, or should be if he would be truly cultured, to the identification of himself with some portion of the wide range of non-economic interests. From the standpoint adopted in this study, this does not mean that the identification is a purely casual and acquisitive process; it is, indeed, made not so much for its own sake as in order to give the self the

wherewithal to develop its powers. Concretely considered, this would mean, for instance, that a mediocre person moderately gifted with the ability to express his aesthetic instincts in plastic form and exercising that gift in his own sincere and humble way (to the neglect it may be, of practically all other interests) is *ipso facto* a more cultured individual than a person of brilliant endowments who has acquainted himself in a general way with all the "best" that has been thought and felt and done, but who has never succeeded in bringing any portion of his range of interests into direct relation with his volitional self, with the innermost shrine of his personality. An individual of the latter type, for all his brilliance, we call "flat." A flat person cannot be truly cultured. He may, of course, be highly cultured in the conventional sense of the word "culture," but that is another story. I would not be understood as claiming that direct creativeness is essential, though it is highly desirable, for the development of individual culture. To a large extent it is possible to gain a sense of the required mastery by linking one's own personality with that of the great minds and hearts that society has recognized as its significant creators. Possible, that is, so long as such linking, such vicarious experience, is attended by some portion of the effort, the fluttering towards realization that is inseparable from all creative effort. It is to be feared, however, that the self-discipline that is here implied is not very often practised. The linking, as I have called it, of self with master soul too often degenerates into a pleasurable servitude, into a facile abnegation of one's own individuality, the more insidious that it has the approval of current judgment. The pleasurable servitude may degenerate still further into a vice. Those of us who are not altogether blind can see in certain of our acquaintances, if not in ourselves, an indulgence in aesthetic or scientific goods that is strictly comparable to the abuse of alcoholic intoxicants. Both types of self-ignoring or self-submerging habit are signs of a debilitated personality; both are antithetical to the formation of culture.

The individual self, then, in aspiring to culture, fastens upon the accumulated cultural goods of its society, not so much for the sake of the passive pleasure of their acquirement, as for the sake of the stimulus given to the unfolding personality and of the orientation derived in the world (or better, in *a* world) of cultural values. The orientation, conventional as it may be, is necessary if only to give the self a *modus vivendi* with society at large. The individual needs to assimilate much of the cultural background of his society, many of the current sentiments of his people, to prevent his self-

expression from degenerating into social sterility. A spiritual hermit may be genuinely cultured, but he is hardly socially so. To say that individual culture must needs grow organically out of the rich soil of a communal culture is far from saying that it must be for ever tied to that culture by the leading strings of its own childhood. Once the individual self has grown strong enough to travel in the path most clearly illuminated by its own light, it not only can but should discard much of the scaffolding by which it has made its ascent. Nothing is more pathetic than the persistence with which well-meaning applicants to culture attempt to keep up or revive cultural stimuli which have long outlived their significance for the growth of personality. To keep up or brush up one's Greek, for example, in those numerous cases in which a knowledge of Greek has ceased to bear a genuine relation to the needs of the spirit, is almost a spiritual crime. It is acting "the dog in the manger" with one's own soul. If the travelling in the path of the self's illumination leads to a position that is destructive of the very values the self was fed on, as happened—though in very different ways—with Nietzsche and with Tolstoi, it has not in the slightest lost touch with genuine culture. It may well, on the contrary, have arrived at its own highest possible point of cultural development.

Nietzsche and Tolstoi, however, are extreme types of personality. There is no danger that the vast army of cultured humanity will ever come to occupy spiritual positions of such rigour and originality. The real danger, as is so abundantly attested by daily experience, is in submitting to the remorselessly levelling forces of a common cultural heritage and of the action of average mind on average mind. These forces will always tend to a general standardization of both the content and the spirit of culture, so powerfully indeed that the centrifugal effect of robust, self-sustaining personalities need not be feared. The caution to conformity with tradition, which the champions of culture so often feel themselves called upon to announce, is one that we can generally dispense with. It is rather the opposite caution, the caution to conformity with the essential nature of one's own personality, that needs urging. It needs to be urged as a possible counter-irritant to the flat and tedious sameness of spiritual outlook, the anæmic make-believe, the smug intolerance of the challenging, that so imprison our American souls.

No greater test of the genuineness of both individual and communal culture can be applied than the attitude adopted towards the past, its institutions, its treasures of art and thought. The genuinely cultured individual or society does not contemptuously

reject the past. He honours the works of the past, but not because they are gems of historical chance, not because, being out of our reach, they must needs be looked at through the enshrining glass of museum cases. These works of the past still excite our heart-felt interest and sympathy because, and only in so far as they may be recognized as the expression of a human spirit warmly akin, despite all differences of outward garb, to our own. This is very nearly equivalent to saying that the past is of cultural interest only when it is still the present or may yet become the future. Paradoxical as it may seem, the historical spirit has always been something of an anti-cultural force, has always acted in some measure as an unwitting deterrent of the cultural utilization of the past. The historical spirit says, "Beware, those thoughts and those feelings that you so rashly think to embody in the warp and woof of your own spirit—they are of other time and of other place and they issue from alien motives. In bending over them you do but obscure them with the shadow of your own spirit." This cool reserve is an excellent mood for the making of historical science; its usefulness to the building of culture in the present is doubtful. We know immensely more about Hellenic antiquity in these days than did the scholars and artists of the Renaissance; it would be folly to pretend that our live utilization of the Hellenic spirit, accurately as we merely know it, is comparable to the inspiration, the creative stimulus, that those men of the Renaissance obtained from its fragmentary and garbled tradition. It is difficult to think of a renaissance of that type as thriving in the critical atmosphere of to-day. We should walk so gingerly in the paths of the past for fear of stepping on anachronisms, that, wearied with fatigue, we should finally sink into a heavy dose, to be awakened only by the insistent clatter of the present. It may be that in our present state of sophistication such a spirit of criticism, of detachment, is not only unavoidable but essential for the preservation of our own individualities. The past is now more of a past than ever before. Perhaps we should expect less of it than ever before. Or rather expect no more of it than to hold its portals wide open, that we may enter in and despoil it of what bits we choose for our pretty mosaics. Can it be that the critical sense of history, which galvanizes the past into scientific life, is destined to slay it for the life of culture? More probably, what is happening is that the spiritual currents of to-day are running so fast, so turbulently, that we find it difficult to get a culturally vital perspective of the past, which is thus, for the time being, left as a glorified mummy in the hands of the pundits. And, for the time being, those others of us who take their culture neither as know-

ledge nor as manner, but as life, will ask of the past not so much "what?" and "when?" and "where?" as "how?" and the accent of their "how" will be modulated in accordance with the needs of the spirit of each, a spirit that is free to glorify, to transform, and to reject.

To summarize the place of the individual in our theory of culture, we may say that the pursuit of genuine culture implies two types of reconciliation. The self seeks instinctively for mastery. In the process of acquiring a sense of mastery that is not crude but proportioned to the degree of sophistication proper to our time, the self is compelled to suffer an abridgment and to undergo a moulding. The extreme differentiation of function which the progress of man has forced upon the individual menaces the spirit; we have no recourse but to submit with good grace to this abridgment of our activity, but it must not be allowed to clip the wings of the spirit unduly. This is the first and most important reconciliation—the finding of a full world of spiritual satisfactions within the straight limits of an unwontedly confined economic activity. The self must set itself at a point where it can, if not embrace the whole spiritual life of its group, at least catch enough of its rays to burst into light and flame. Moreover, the self must learn to reconcile its own strivings, its own imperious necessities, with the general spiritual life of the community. It must be content to borrow sustenance from the spiritual consciousness of that community and of its past, not merely that it may obtain the wherewithal to grow at all, but that it may grow where its power, great or little, will be brought to bear on a spiritual life that is of intimate concern to other wills. Yet despite all reconciliations, the self has a right to feel that it grow as an integral, self-poised, spiritual growth whose ultimate justifications rest in itself, whose sacrifices and compensations must be justified to itself. The conception of the self as a mere instrument towards the attainment of communal ends, whether of state or other social body, is to be discarded as leading in the long run to psychological absurdities and to spiritual slavery. It is the self that concedes, if there is to be any concession. Spiritual freedom, what there is of it, is not alms dispensed, now indifferently, now grudgingly, by the social body. That a different philosophy of the relation of the individual to his group is now so prevalent, makes it all the more necessary to insist on the spiritual primacy of the individual soul.

It is a noteworthy fact that wherever there is discussion of culture, emphasis is instinctively placed upon art. This applies as well to individual as to communal culture. We apply the term "cultured" only with reserve to an individual in whose life the

æsthetic moment plays no part. So also, if we would catch something of the spirit, the genius, of a bygone period or of an exotic civilization, we turn first and foremost to its art. A thoughtless analysis would see in this nothing but the emphasis on the beautiful, the decorative, that comports with the conventional conception of culture as a life of traditionally moulded refinement. A more penetrating analysis discards such an interpretation. For it the highest manifestations of culture, the very quintessence of the genius of a civilization, necessarily rest in art, for the reason that art is the authentic expression, in satisfying form, of experience—experience not as logically ordered by science, but as directly and intuitively presented to us in life. As culture rests, in essence, on the harmonious development of the sense of mastery instinctively sought by each individual soul, this can only mean that art, the form of consciousness in which the impress of the self is most direct, least hampered by outward necessity, is above all other undertakings of the human spirit bound to reflect culture. To relate *our* lives, *our* intuitions, *our* passing moods to forms of expression that carry conviction to others and make us live again in these others, is the highest spiritual satisfaction we know of, the highest welding of one's individuality with the spirit of one's civilization. Were art ever really perfect in expression, it would indeed be immortal. Even the greatest art, however, is full of the dross of conventionality, of the particular sophistications of its age. As these change, the directness of expression in any work of art tends to be increasingly felt as hampered by a something fixed and alien, until it gradually falls into oblivion. While art lives, it belongs to culture; in the degree that it takes on the frigidity of death, it becomes of interest only to the study of civilization. Thus all art appreciation (and production, for that matter) has two faces. It is unfortunate that the face directed to civilization is so often confounded with that which is fixed on culture.

An oft-noted peculiarity of the development of culture is the fact that it reaches its greatest heights in comparatively small, autonomous groups. In fact, it is doubtful if a genuine culture ever properly belongs to more than such a restricted group, a group between the members of which there can be said to be something like direct and intensive spiritual contact. This direct contact is enriched by the common cultural heritage on which the minds of all are fed; it is rendered swift and pregnant by the thousands of feelings and ideas that are tacitly assumed and that constantly glimmer in the background. Such small, culturally autonomous groups were the Athens of the Periclean Age, the Rome of Augustus, the inde-

pendent city states of Italy in late mediæval times, the London of Elizabethan days, the Paris of the last three centuries. It is customary to speak of certain of these groups and of their cultures as though they were identical with, or represented, widely extended groups and cultures. To a curiously large extent such usages are really figures of speech, substitutions of a part for the whole. It is astonishing, for instance, how much the so-called history of French literature is really the history of literary activity in the city of Paris. True enough, a narrowly localized culture may, and often does, spread its influence far beyond its properly restricted sphere. Sometimes it sets the pace for a whole nationality, for a far-flung empire. It can do so, however, only at the expense of diluting in spirit as it moves away from its home, of degenerating into an imitative attitudinizing. If we realized more keenly what the rapid spread or imposition of a culture entails, to what an extent it conquers by crushing the germs of healthier autonomous growths, we would be less eager to welcome uniformizing tendencies, less ready to think of them as progressive in character. A culture may well be quickened from without, but its supersession by another, whether "superior" or not, is no cultural gain. Whether or not it is attended by a political gain does not concern us here. That is why the deliberate attempt to impose a culture directly and speedily, no matter how backed by good will, is an affront to the human spirit. When such an attempt is backed, not by good will, but by military ruthlessness, it is the greatest conceivable crime against the human spirit, it is the very denial of culture.

Does this mean that we must turn our backs on all internationalistic tendencies and vegetate for ever in our nationalisms? Here we are confronted by the prevalent error that internationalism is in spirit opposed to the intensive development of autonomous cultures. The error proceeds from a failure to realize that internationalism and nationalism and localism are forms that can be given various contents. We cannot intelligently discuss internationalism before we know what it is that we are to be internationalistic about. Unfortunately we are so obsessed by the idea of subordinating all forms of human association to the State and of regarding the range of all types of activity as coterminous with political boundaries, that it is difficult for us to reconcile the idea of a local or restrictedly national autonomy of culture with a purely political state-sovereignty and with an economic-political internationalism.

No one can see clearly what is destined to be the larger outcome of the present world conflicts. They may exacerbate rather than allay national-political animosities and thus tend to strengthen the

prestige of the State. But this deplorable result cannot well be other than a passing phase. Even now it is evident that the war has, in more ways than one, paved the way for an economic and, as a corollary, a semi-political internationalism. All those spheres of activity that relate to the satisfaction of immediate ends, which, from the vantage point that we have gained, are nothing but means, will tend to become international functions. However the internationalizing processes will shape themselves in detail, they will at bottom be but the reflection of that growing impatience of the human spirit with the preoccupation with direct ends which I spoke of before. Such trans-national problems as the distribution of economic goods, the transportation of commodities, the control of highways, the coinage, and numerous others, must eventually pass into the hands of international organizations for the simple reason that men will not eternally give their loyalty to the uselessly national administration of functions that are of inherently international scope. As this international scope gets to be thoroughly realized, our present infatuations with national prestige in the economic sphere will show themselves for the spiritual imbecilities that they are.

All this has much to do with the eventual development of culture. As long as culture is looked upon as a decorative appanage of large political units, one can plausibly argue that its preservation is bound up with the maintenance of the prestige of these units. But genuine culture is inconceivable except on the basis of a highly individual spiritual consciousness, it rarely remains healthy and subtle when spread thin over an interminable area, and in its higher reaches it is in no mood to submit to economic and political bonds. Now a generalized international culture is hardly thinkable. The national-political unit tends to arrogate culture to itself and up to a certain point it succeeds in doing so, but only at the price of serious cultural impoverishment of vast portions of its terrain. If the economic and political integrity of these large State-controlled units becomes gradually undermined by the growth of international functions, their cultural *raison d'etre* must also tend to weaken. Culture must then tend with ever increasing intensity to cling to relatively small social and to minor political units, units that are not too large to incorporate the individuality that is to culture as the very breath of life. Between these two processes, the integration of economic and political forces into a world sovereignty and the disintegration of our present unwieldy culture units into small units whose life is truly virile and individual, the fetish of the present State, with its uncontrolled sovereignty, may in the dim

future be trusted to melt away. The political State of to-day has long been on trial and has been found wanting. Our national-political units are too small for peace, too large for safety. They are too small for the intelligent solution of the large problems in the sphere of direct ends; they are too large for the fruitful enrichment of the remoter ends, for culture.

It is in the New World, perhaps more than in any other part of the globe, that the unsatisfactory nature of a geographically widespread culture, of little depth or individuality to begin with, is manifest. To find substantially the same cultural manifestations, material and spiritual, often indeed to the minutest details, in New York and Chicago and San Francisco is saddening. It argues a shallowness in the culture itself and a readiness to imitation in its bearers that is not reassuring. Even if no definite way out of the flat cultural morass is clearly discernible for the present, there is no good in basking for ever in self-sufficiency. It can only be of benefit to search out the depths of our hearts and to find wherein they are wanting. If we exaggerate our weakness, it does not matter; better chastening than self-glorification. We have been in the habit of giving ourselves credit for essentially quantitative results that are due rather to an unusually favouring nature and to a favouring set of economic conditions than to anything in ourselves. Our victories have been brilliant, but they have also too often been barren for culture. The habit of playing with loaded dice has given us a dangerous attitude of passivity — dangerous, that is, for culture. Stretching back opulently in our easy chairs, we expect great cultural things to happen to us. We have wound up the machinery, and admirable machinery it is; it is “up to” culture to come forth, in heavy panoply. The minute increment of individuality which alone makes culture in the self and eventually builds up a culture in the community seems somehow overlooked. Canned culture is so much easier to administer.

Just now we are expecting a great deal from the European war. No doubt the war and its aftermath will shake us out of some part of our smugness and let in a few invigorating air currents of cultural influence, but, if we are not careful, these influences may soon harden into new standardizations or become diluted into another stock of imitative attitudes and reactions. The war and its aftermath cannot be a sufficient cultural cause, they are at best but another set of favouring conditions. We need not be too much astonished if a Periclean culture does not somehow automatically burst into bloom. Sooner or later we shall have to get down to the humble task of exploring the depths of our consciousness and

dragging to the light what sincere bits of reflected experience we can find. These bits will not always be beautiful, they will not always be pleasing, but they will be genuine. And then we can build. In time, in plenty of time—for we must have patience,—a genuine culture,—better yet, a series of linked autonomous cultures,—will grace our lives. And New York and Chicago and San Francisco will live each in its own cultural strength, not squinting from one to another to see which gets ahead in a race for external values, but each serenely oblivious of its rivals because growing in a soil of genuine cultural values.