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To Hell with Culture

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Any word that stretches from a Petrie dish of toxic chemicals mixed up by scientists in a lab, at one end of the spectrum, to the complete works of Shakespeare at the other is bound to suck in plenty of bullshit in between. So, should we abandon the word 'culture' as far too vague to be meaningful or pare it back to see what we really mean when we use it? In desperation the poet, Ezra Pound, junked it in favour of 'Kulchur,' meaning, for the most part, he did not think it meant anything useful at all. And the sculptor Eric Gill said: 'When will revolutionary leaders realize that 'culture' is dope, a worse dope than religion; for even if it were true that religion is the opiate of the people, it is worse to poison yourself than to be poisoned…To hell with culture, culture as a thing added like a sauce to otherwise unpalatable fish'. The Greeks did not have a word for it, according to Herbert Read, since for them they just had a good way of life that encompassed everything and definitely did not need a separate commodity called 'culture' to make it taste better. The term appears to have been first coined by the Romans, who turned culture into that commodity, 'Roman Culture', and then dumped it onto the unsuspecting peoples they conquered and absorbed into their empire, whether they liked it or not. The British did much the same a millennium and a half later.

In his book *Culture and Society*, written when he taught Workers' Education Association (WEA) classes in the 1950s, Raymond Williams was one of the first to point out just how oblique and confusing the term was. Until then, probably most learned folk would say that Culture with a capital C meant 'the best that had been written or spoken' and imply that if anyone didn't know that then they were unlikely to be cultured people and therefore not welcome into the ranks of polite society. It was a class thing. Williams countered that the Greeks had got it right when they believed that culture was 'a whole way of life' and not just its decorative ornament. This anthropological sense of the word culture tended not to be used with a capital c. He even shockingly claimed that there was such a thing as 'working-class culture'. Unlike 'middle class culture', it differed not such much in its literary or artistic works

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but in its social, political and organisational innovations like the Co-operative movement, trade unions, Labour Party and campaigning Socialist groups, all of which grew into significant cultural and political forces in the late nineteenth century. Insofar as this powerful class culture was ideological, it embraced co-operation rather than competition, social solidarity rather than bourgeois possessive individualism, fought for the equality of all people and insisted on democratic governance rather than the oligarchy of the wealthy. Needless to say, it was resisted tooth-and-nail by those who had most to lose but, by the late nineteenth century, a significant section of the liberal middle class began to identify with these aims and a great many social reforms were achieved, like the shortening of the working day and improvement in working conditions through a number of Factory Acts, Educational Acts like that of Forster's in 1870, bringing in elementary schooling and a form of Municipal Socialism that was even embraced by Tory reformers like Joseph Chamberlain .

Some, however, were still concerned about Culture with a capital C. What about Shakespeare, Beethoven and Leonardo? And it was a good question. Many working people understandably craved the opportunity to become acquainted with their undeniably fine artistic works and many middle-class reformers agreed that they should have access to them, often as much for their own (middle-class) benefit, hoping that it might turn workers away from more revolutionary pursuits, while providing then with a modicum of polish.

The great designer, poet and revolutionary socialist, William Morris, tried to bridge these concerns by recognising both the value of the cooperative culture of working-class trade unionism and socialism but also the value of Art. The problem, as he saw it, of much working-class culture that fed into the later nineteenth-century Labour movement was its spirit of 'Puritanism', in that it was suspicious and even fearful of the so-called 'refined' tastes of the middle-class master class: their over-decorated houses, fashionable but not necessarily tasteful clothes, affectations of speech that despised regional accents or ways of talking and their 'exquisite' manners and social codes that rigorously excluded members of the lower orders. The working-class response of many radicals was 'ok, they don't want us, so we don't want them, their tastes or their ways'.

But Morris believed that this approach would always leave the working-class with a sense of cultural inferiority; that there was something mysterious about Art that they just did not, or could not, get. Not that he wanted 'Art' in the shape of decorative paintings to hang on the

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walls or sculpture to stand in the hall, in order to be 'appreciated' and show your cultured status but, on the contrary, for art to be taken off the walls, metaphorically, and integrated into everyday life. 'Have nothing in your house that is not either useful or beautiful' was one of his key sayings and his popular visionary novel of post-revolutionary life *News from Nowhere* imagined a life where necessary work for the community was chosen voluntarily without coercion and embedded in an imaginative leisured life in which to exercise all creative faculties. All would be educated to encourage and develop their creative individual talents, through examining techniques and crafts involved in producing beautiful things, especially furniture, textiles and everyday objects, even pots and pans, and gain a sense of moral and aesthetic judgement. A range of essential technical skills would also be learnt, but 'Craft' would be the defining element. Education would be lifelong and freely accessible. Morris's vision was, of course, dismissed as a fantasy by the hard headed 'realists' of the Labour Movement - and definitively knocked on the head by the Stalinised Soviet Union of the 1930s, but the novel has nevertheless had a continuing popularity – and is still available as a Penguin paperback.

By the late twentieth century, culture had increasingly been bound up with issues of 'identity'. Just as refusal by many in the Labour movement to have anything to do with artyfarty middle-class romanticism because it was not authentically gritty 'working class culture', so certain styles of dress, ideas and ways of life generally are seen as speaking to group and individual identities. 'Ethnic' and sexual identity have become very important sources for telling yourself and others who you are. Usually, such identities are claimed by excluded or marginalised minorities who understandably feel alienated by the dominant culture. But, in recent years, some sections of the white working-class have also adopted 'downtrodden minority' identities, alarmingly displayed by the mob of St George flag-waving nationalists who scuffled around the Cenotaph on Memorial Saturday, jeering at the police that they were 'not English anymore'. Largely white male, middle aged, self-employed working-class, some with previous arrest for football hooliganism, they saw the huge pro-Palestine demonstration as an assault on 'their English way of life'. Many, indeed, had seen their jobs disappearing, the impoverishment of the NHS meaning there was not sufficient care for their elderly relatives or access to GPs, and lack of decent affordable housing as somehow the fault of 'immigrants'; whipped up by populist demagogues and the dominant right-wing press. But, instead of putting the blame

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where it really lay in political decisions made by the government, they saw it as a product of 'Woke' culture.

In reality, we are affected by so many cultural, political and occupational cross currents that what we feel as our primary identities can change from hour to hour, from teachers to mothers, for example, depending on the time of day; English, Scottish Irish or Welsh, but 'British' at Passport Control, even from men to women, and back. What seems a prominent identity at any one time might quickly change and is in flux. Religion may serve as a beacon identity, because it is reinforced by religious 'authorities', close community groups and, most importantly, because it is a sign of resistance to political attacks by the dominant culture. Gendered identities are more slippery and have become a passionately political problem in sport and in Party politics, when for example someone, who was formerly (and biologically still is) a man, has reassigned their gender and seeks to chair a Woman's Group, be housed in a women's prison or take part in a women's race, as has recently happened.

All these issues can be imaginatively investigated in the work of artists and this is where, it seems to me, contemporary Art is at its most interesting. It has nothing to do with the fantastically expensive art commodities that can be hung on walls or, more often, stored in bank vaults for their market value to increase, but is all about everyday life. Take a recent exhibition at the Tramway in Glasgow by Jasleen Kaur, a Glaswegian Sikh woman, born and bred on the Southside but now based in London. Her work is an ongoing exploration of the lives of the Global Ethnic Majority (formerly misleadingly labelled as 'minority,') often migrant, communities and situated in the locality, drawing on her own family experience. Much of her work exemplifies what the cultural theorist Stuart Hall called 'cultures of resistance', wittily bringing together examples of cultural difference into illuminating juxtaposition like a huge traditionally decorated doily draped over a bright red, vintage Ford Fiesta car, an example of what the exhibition calls 'Sociomobile'. In another piece, a treasured 'ethnic' shawl is draped over a motorbike parked in the kitchen. She takes everyday objects like plastic flipflops, has them made into ceramics with holes bored into their edges and used for standing incense sticks in. These are often surreal juxtapositions which defamiliarize ordinary things and make them ironically into 'Art', but in other exhibitions such as that in Rochdale Public Gallery, last year, she attempts more serious work. Here, after a long process of working closely with local community groups, she made a number of videos centring on their experiences of migration

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and dealing with their new location. In one especially memorable piece, five women in traditional dress are perched in a narrow alleyway in an archive or box store reading out extracts from the 'Ethnic Minorities' section of the local studies library held at Touchstones. But the words are printed on rice paper and then eaten – they have eaten their words. In another video, a group of women attempt to 'clean' the statue of a local Victorian entrepreneur, associated with Indian colonialism, with yoghurt to grow cultures on it. These are thoughtful pieces that don't always make sense until you've mulled them over - and then not always - but this is what Art should be about: not 'appreciated' or worshipped but making you think.

So, to Hell with Culture, but let us celebrate the creative diversity of cultures and make them universally available for reflection and understanding. Museums and galleries should be properly funded, free and accessible. Exhibitions should be commissioned from young artists whose lives are often precarious, rather than older well-established artists. The 'Great Masters' (and it is a mark of patriarchal culture that there are rarely 'Mistresses') should of course be on display, but alongside educational documentaries, lectures and discussions showing their contexts and ways of working, not hagiographies. Schools should abandon National Curriculum Gradgrindery and, instead, be recentred on developing cultural creativity and craft skills, as well of course as the skills necessary for making a living and promoting the public good. Further and Adult Education should be freely available for all, not just for technical education, necessary as it is, but for individual re-learning and self-re-finding at any point in life, with fully-paid occupational leave.

The Satanic, corporate-business, qualification factories formerly known as 'Universities' should be rethought as Higher Education collegiate spaces that engage staff and students in collective, collaborate learning and research. Fully-funded from taxation rather than by student loans, they should prioritise access from non-privileged schools and lower income families. Universities should reinstitute and reinvigorate their former 'Extramural Departments', most of which have been shamefully closed down in the last two decades, to serve the cultural needs of adults, many of whom have not benefited from a university education. The old EM Departments of the early twentieth century were democratically energised by pressure from working-class self-help educational bodies like the Workers Education Association and the Marxist Labour Colleges which gave them a radical, reforming edge that reflected back onto the universities themselves. They invented a new academic field called Cultural Studies and

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enabled a radically new kind of history like E P Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. A new iteration of this link between HE institutions and social movements might be the establishment of a network of self-governing 'Popular Universities' or Folk High Schools, such as widely existed - and in some cases still do - in Europe. Here, the massive learning and research resources and highly qualified staff of HE could be drawn on to provide a 'university quality' lifetime education for all.

The fact that we live in one of the world's most prosperous and privileged societies is too frequently obscured by the fact of Victorian levels of social, financial and political inequality; in which the top ten percent consume more than the whole of the bottom half put together, and exert overwhelmingly harmful influence on governments of all shades. This makes a mockery of democracy. We also face the real likelihood of climate catastrophe, in large part brought on by this over-consumption, the rise of xenophobic nationalism, cynically exploited by narcissistic psychopaths, deadly new viruses for which we are not prepared and a potential breakdown of the social solidarity which will be essential to overcome these threats. So, we need more than ever before to draw on all our vast cultural resources to show us how to survive and reinvent the world as a place where all can live and, most importantly, flourish.

Of course, this is a utopian dream of which, we hope, William Morris would be proud, and impossibly impractical. But need it be?

More information about Jasleen Kaur and examples of her work can be found at her website: https://jasleenkaur.co.uk

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