

The English cultural movement

Lincoln Allison

Many of the most passionate conflicts now—whether on motorways or beer—are about values, not economics. Why is this?

In England, "progress" is a word with a curiously ambiguous emotive power. It denotes tendencies which we accept, even formally approve, yet of which we are privately suspicious. To the politicians and economists trying to hurry us down the paths of progress and growth, this suspicion indicates a debilitating stubbornness. Witness John Mackintosh in a recent essay:

"In Britain part of the problem lies in the current psychology of the public and particularly of those sections of the public who set the prevailing intellectual atmosphere. It is not too much to say that there is a general distaste for change. Middle class people, despite inflation and the trade unions, have a very comfortable life so why alter or build anything? Yet it is clear that if their standards are to be shared by the rest of the community there will have to be new houses, larger sewage schemes, more holiday spaces, modern schools, more universities: in short, many distasteful developments."

I want to argue that Mackintosh has expressed an important half-truth. He is right that the English are highly suspicious of change, that there is an important and growing spirit of anti-modernism, and that sections of the middle class provide the impetus which makes this spirit at least partially effective. He is wrong to equate it with conventional class issues. I shall call this spirit, when it is expressed and acted on, the English cultural movement. I would argue that it represents a dimension in all classes and that, though it has an important content of political and social ideas, these ideas cannot be placed on the conventional political spectrum of left, right and centre.

A starting point—perhaps a surprising one—for my argument is in the United States and an econo-

mist's analysis of the state of that society. Tibor Scitovsky's recent book, *The Joyless Economy*, is a culturist attack on American capitalism. It is an unusual book because, as Scitovsky himself says, "it is concerned with matters not hitherto considered part of economics. People's tastes, the way they spend their money and arrange their lives, are matters economists have always regarded as something they should observe, but must not poke their noses into." Orthodox economists have made consumer sovereignty, a myth, into a totem; the fear of being arrogant and paternalistic has forced their attentions away from considerations of the deeper effects of economic change on the quality of life.

Scitovsky abandons this reticence and with it the economists' view that human life is like sitting in a Chinese restaurant and choosing from the menu. This is not merely an inadequate view of life, he argues, it is an inadequate view of Chinese restaurants where "we seem invariably to order either the wrong dishes or the same old ones. Only on occasions when an expert does the ordering do we realise how badly we do on our own and what good things we miss."

He finds Americans deeply dissatisfied both with their work and their pleasure. (Statistics are produced to show how little social life Americans have as compared with Europeans, how little recreation they have, especially of a "stimulating" kind, and how they spend comparatively large proportions of their lives alone and involved in increasingly specialised work.) The market lures individuals in the direction of hard work and a comfortable private life and away from deeper sources of pleasure—culture and sociability.

To Scitovsky, "comfort" is a negative satisfaction. It is the eradication of discomfort; furthermore, it is the enemy of genuine pleasure, the normal sequence being "comfort gained, pleasure lost, awareness of the loss and more or less regretful acquiescence in it." He gives a number of examples of the sequence as it affects individual Americans, but the table gives four of my own.

Of course, many others could be added to this table, including the ownership of homes (old versus new), or even cars. Scitovsky defines culture sees people as being prone to choose comfortable alternatives, to the ultimate detriment of the quality of their lives. Comfort is the enemy also of culture.

Let me generalise the theory and give it a historical dimension. The modernisation of society (ignoring for the moment its more traumatic phases such as Manchester in the 1840s or Russia in the 1930s) involves changes which can be abstracted as follows: industrialisation, urbanisation, specialisation, mass production and the rationalisation of relationships. These processes go on within industrial societies as well as in the transition from rural to urban society. The process is accompanied by a reaction of intellectuals perceiving that the transi-

tion—despite making us formally "better off"—has harmful effects on the quality of life.

Very broadly, the intellectual reactions can be divided into two. Structuralist reactions perceive the "real" problem (and thus its solution) in terms of the establishment of certain kinds of relation in society: property relations, status relations, distributive relations. Culturist reactions attempt merely to preserve and enhance qualitative features of life: existing communities, skilled and creative activities, architecture and landscape.

Some thinkers have amalgamated elements of both reactions into their ideas. Arguably, Marx was one of these. Certainly, William Morris was. Both "romantic" and "revolutionary" (in E. P. Thompson's terms), he was a marxist who founded the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings. He was a saint whose bones have been claimed by many sects, by Stanley Baldwin (who often quoted him in speeches) at one end of the conventional spectrum and by Thompson at the other.

Undoubtedly, it is Morris's eloquence in defence of culturist values which appeals to such a diverse audience. In *News from Nowhere*, Morris wrote of his future Utopian society that "The spirit of the new days, of our days, was to be a delight in the life of the world; intense and over-weening love of the very skin and surface of the earth on which man dwells, such as a lover has in the fair flesh of the woman he loves . . ." The style is far removed from Scitovsky's, but the spirit is close.

We should not be surprised at this closeness of spirit, nor at the closeness of apparent radicalism and conservatism in much culturist thought. Yeats went a long way to explain the reaction in a speech in New York in 1904 when he said that "Whenever men have tried to imagine a perfect life, they

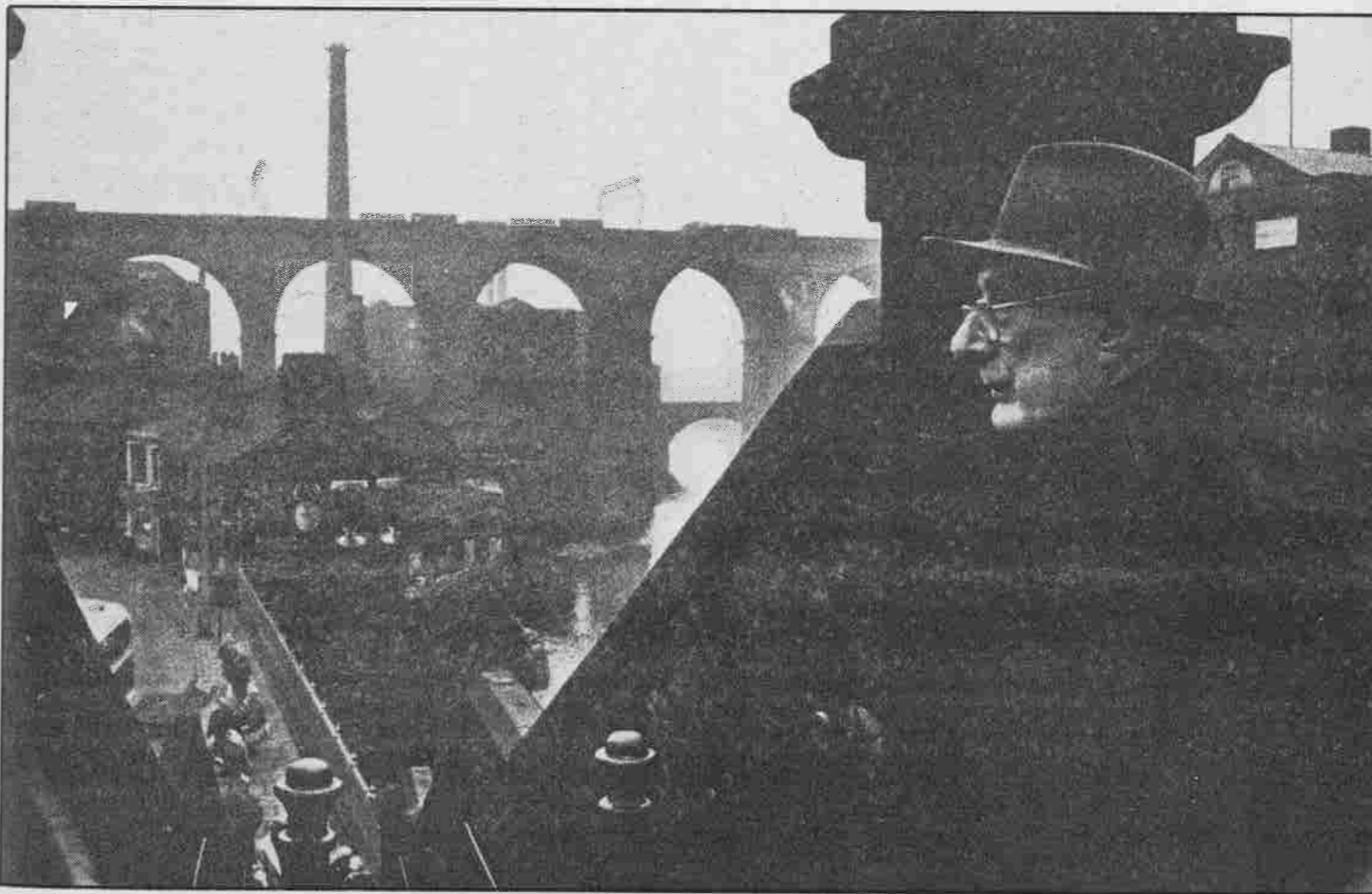
have imagined a place where men plough and sow and reap, not a place where there are great wheels turning and great chimneys vomiting smoke . . . We wish to preserve an ancient ideal of life. Whenever its customs prevail, there you will find the folk song, the folk tale, the proverb, and the charming manners that come from ancient culture."

Returning to Scitovsky's analysis, I would say that an Englishman reading it is struck by two things. First, contemporary America is the most "modern" of all societies and the most culturally deprived. Scitovsky blames this on what he calls the "Puritan Ghost." But whatever the explanation, it is clear that we are a great deal better off. Second, a movement to protect English culture has grown and gathered strength over the last ten years. The movement though barely conscious of its own existence has political, intellectual and social wings. The political vanguard of the movement, the front-line troops, are, to use Anthony Barker's phrase, the "amenity movement."

The Civic Trust has almost 1,500 local organisations affiliated to it, involving a total of about a third of a million individuals. In their struggles against modernising developments, they undoubtedly represent a political expression of culturism. (I should hasten to add, though, that they are inevitably allied, in individual struggles, with people who simply have an interest at stake and cannot properly be described as principled culturists. Some, but only some, apparent culturists are simply defenders of their own privileges). There are also many national organisations involved in cultural conservationism. The National Trust and the Council for the Protection of Rural England are the most prominent among many others.

Conservation is by no means the only con-

L. S. Lowry in Stockport



Crispin Eurich

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pleasurable form	comfortable form
shopping	
Small specialist shops	Supermarket, hypermarket
Individual attention—lengthy, involves walking. Expensive and inefficient. Requires skill but sociable and involves individual relationships	Cheaper, quicker, more efficient. Requires no skill, but irritating, pressurised and anonymous
watching football	
Standing on the terraces	Sitting in a box
Dangerous, tiring, exposed, but intense sense of involvement and community of partisanship	Comfortable. Refreshments easily available, but detached from community and lacking excitement
drinking	
Unreformed pub	Home drinks cabinet
Danger of meeting boring, aggressive or embarrassing people. Product variable, but can reach very high standard. Same true of people	Choose your own company. Danger avoided. Products standardised, mediocre. Lack of novelty, sense of change
visiting the countryside	
Walking	Motoring
Tiring, small space covered. Satisfying, enables observation of minute detail. Good for health	Less taxing, immune from elements, more space covered. Less sensation of escape, less detail seen. Not so good for health

temporary thriving form of culturism. I would also include those commendable fanatics whose energies are devoted to reviving canals, to re-establishing steam railways and to collecting folk songs. The extraordinary love and care with which many middle class people revive old houses also represents a determination to opt for culture rather than comfort. We must include, too those people who keep many obscure but valuable English competitions alive—grassroots cricket, leek growing, pigeon fancying and village shows. More doubtful is the "consumer movement," many of whose actions are culturally ambiguous. But where the consumer movement serves not merely to inform the potential consumer of the best buy, but attempts also to preserve the quantity, variety and style of a product then it qualifies as genuinely culturist. The most outstanding example is the Campaign for Real Ale. The 1970s vogue for serious historical soap operas on television is a relation of the movement; they at best stimulate a historical and social understanding which is culturally far better than the American cop show.

Any movement needs saints and heroes. I have already suggested that Morris must be at the head of the pantheon. The most obvious example of a modern saint is John Betjeman. Let us forget, for now, the paradox that Betjeman wants to preserve much that Morris hated, and note only the strange note of approval of the overtly conservative Betjeman by the socialist playwright and critic, Dennis Potter. In the *Sunday Times* Potter said: "Betjeman is the surviving proof that it is all right, after all, to be an Englishman. He stands at the wrought-iron gates, ready to hold back the flood." The analogy is desperately pessimistic; but so is Potter's whole view of life.

More important is the position of George Orwell. Some of Orwell's writings, such as the novel, *Coming Up for Air*, or the essay, "England your England," are unmistakably culturist in tone; but the major themes of culturism run through all of his work. Remember the scene in the ministry canteen in 1984 where Winston Smith asks: "... was it not a sign that this was not the natural order of things, if one's heart sickened at the discomfort and dirt and scarcity, the interminable winters, the stickiness of one's socks, the lifts that never worked, the cold water, the gritty soap, the cigarettes that came to pieces, the food with strange evil tastes? Why should one feel it to be intolerable unless one had some kind of ancestral memory that things had once been different."

A strange hero is L. S. Lowry. An amateur painter of the northern industrial scene; a lonely, eccentric bachelor; a habitual liar with a bizarre fascination with cripples. Yet Lowry painted the urban scene with a vivid expression of its richness and sense of community and has met his response late in life and since his death with the extraordinary popularity of his work.

Culturist villains are more difficult to identify than heroes. The most obvious villains are unreal, and the most real are not individuals at all but intangible social forces. There are those who are overtly against culture. Marinetti, in the *Manifesto* of the Italian futurist movement exhorted: "Let the good incendiaries with charred fingers come. Here they are! Heap up the fire to the shelves of the libraries! Divert the canals to flood the museums! Let the glorious canvasses swim ashore! Take the picks and hammers! Undermine the foundations of venerable towns."

But this self-conscious enmity toward culture is

rare. The real enemies are short-sightedness, apathy and a structure of decision-making which effectively gives priority to comfort and the short run, over culture and the long run. Barker found that two thirds of the amenity groups which he surveyed could identify no "opponents" at all; most prominent among those which could be identified were firms (including property developers) and the local chamber of trade: 17 per cent of respondents. Certainly, representatives of these groups are the only vociferous opponents of the amenity movement. In the evidence submitted to the House of Commons Select Committee on Expenditure for its 1976-77 report on the working of the planning system, a number of developers roundly denounced the amenity movement as representing a selfish and privileged minority.

Frankly, I find this image of the property developer as the true friend of the underprivileged laughable. But the opposite caricature of the greedy and short-sighted developer is only slightly less realistic. In many cases, as Roy Gregory pointed out in *The Price of Amenity*, even the most destructive developers are often privately concerned with cultural values, but they have their jobs to do. The gap between what people value and the decisions which they make is even wider in America. I never met a single individual in the San Francisco Bay area who did not think that it would be good to preserve the foothills of the Santa Cruz mountains from development, but the legal, commercial and political processes of decision make such preservation impossible.

Earlier, I suggested that John Mackintosh had stumbled on a half-truth. His half-error was in seeing the conflict between culturism and commercialism as a struggle between groups or classes, in attempting to fit it into the orthodox stereotypes of mainstream politics. This orthodoxy—to use Lasswell's established cliché—is that politics is about "who gets what, when and how." But culturist politics is not about the distribution of benefits; it is about the kind of benefits which are going to be available to everyone.

The active culturist movement is certainly "middle class": Barker found that only a small minority (20 per cent) of amenity societies claimed to have more than one third of their membership from manual workers, with a slightly higher percentage in London and rural areas. But working class people react more passionately, if anything, to the destruction of their communities and environment. Their reaction is later, however, not so wellorganised and more hopeless. Recent researchers have suggested that, sadly, the National Front is the chief beneficiary of this reaction.

Plaid Cymru defends the culture of Wales because it defends the Welsh language and literature which define that culture. English culture is less easy to defend, because less easy to define. Superficially, it is prospering: cricket and Shakespeare are not subject to the same threats as the Welsh language and the Eisteddfod. The dangers to English culture are from over-extension and dilution, rather than eradication. But the defence must and does go on.

To parody Marinetti and offer a culturist manifesto: "Join the organisations which oppose harmful modernisation and development. Do it thoughtfully but with determination. Protect your communities. Learn ancient skills. Renovate old houses. Defend quality, whether of beer or of landscape; the substitutes rarely satisfy. In doing so you will reward not merely yourself, but your society."

Grunwick: has America got the answer?

Moira Hart

Should we again consider a more precise legal framework for the unions? US experience is that more law can merely lead to more litigation.

Writers on industrial relations in Britain often protest at the lack of a precise legal code governing the behaviour of trade unions. Traditionally, the law in this country has done little to regulate union activities, and has allowed considerable freedom within specified areas of immunity. The critics regard this as far too privileged a position.

Such arguments have intensified since the Grunwick dispute. The mass picketing provoked shrill demands that trade unions should be brought "within the law." Some even suggested such involvement would be in the unions' own interests by helping avoid the difficulties experienced by APEX (the Association of Professional, Executive, Clerical and Computer Staff) in obtaining recognition from Grunwick. This was underlined by the House of Lords judgment last December which made void the recommendation of ACAS (the Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service) that the company should recognise APEX, on the grounds that ACAS had been unable to find out the views of those employees who continued working.

For most commentators, the lesson taken and proclaimed was the need for more precise and logical regulation of recognition procedures and enforcement of ACAS decisions. They planted the "blame" for the Law Lords' decision squarely on the shoulders of the trade unions for shying away from such an intimate relationship with the law when they were involved in drafting the recognition provisions of the Employment Protection Act. Unions adhered to the British tradition in relying largely on employers' voluntary cooperation with ACAS during the act's procedures of conciliation, inquiry and recommendation. If this relationship had been less flirtatious, and if the law clearly stated that it was illegal to deny union recognition in specified circumstances and gave ACAS power to demand cooperation in its investigations while requiring it to base its recommendations on codified principles, then (according to Joe Rogaly in his Penguin Special, *Grunwick*, for example), "none of the arguments between the company and [ACAS] could have taken place."

Now, of course, there is a private member's bill in the Commons which seeks, with government backing, to make ACAS's task less onerous in such cases. But this is unlikely to prevent writers and politicians referring to American labour law as a model for Britain. A closer look at the operation of the American system demonstrates that the law—which meets all of the prescriptions in the preceding paragraph—can do little to achieve the essential objective of forcing an employer to bargain with a trade union if he is determined not to do so. In addition, there are many protracted and costly battles over union recognition.

Over 40 years ago Congress declared, in the National Labor Relations Act that it was national policy to encourage the practice and procedure of

collective bargaining and to protect the exercise of workers of full freedom of association, self-organisation, and designation of representatives of their own choosing. The act established the National Labor Relations Board to administer the procedures to effect this policy.

The procedures for union recognition are clear. If a trade union cannot gain the voluntary agreement of an employer to represent a group of employees, it may petition the NLRB to hold a ballot. If the employer contests any terms of the petition, the board will conduct a hearing to determine questions like which workers should be included in the bargaining unit. If the NLRB regional director decides a ballot should be held, this will be conducted by board officers. If the union secures the majority of votes cast, it will be certified as bargaining representative. If the employer subsequently refuse to bargain in "good faith" with the union, unfair labour practice charges may be brought, and the board may request the Court of Appeals to enforce its order. Further defiance will be contempt of court, and fines may be imposed.

The US act also recognises that certain actions by employers, such as dismissing union protagonists, may deter other employees from either joining or voting for a union. An employee discriminated against in any respect on the grounds of union membership may complain to the NLRB. If the complaint appears justified, the regional director will order a hearing which may result in a dismissed employee being awarded back pay and reinstatement. If such dismissal takes place close to a representation ballot, the ballot may be postponed. If it's already been held, its results may be set aside.

During the early years of the act's operation, trade unions in the newly formed CIO (Congress of Industrial Organisations) effectively breached many previously unorganised manufacturing industries, such as automobiles and steel. Peak union membership was reached in America in the early 1950s. But since then, the predominant pattern has been one of steady decline. Today it stands at about 25 per cent of the working population. This is one of the lowest for all western industrialised countries.

Some explanations suggested for this decline have been the growth of white collar employment, and the general affluence and individualist predilections of American society. But equally important is the concerted stance that many employers have taken against the development of unionisation. In this, they have astutely used the legislation originally designed for the opposite purpose, or have defied it outright. Indeed, concern over the way the intention of the act was being frustrated and impeded has prompted four Congressional investigations since 1959.

During the most recent hearings, in 1975 and 1976, the general counsel for the United Automobile Workers was moved to comment that the

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