

Two Cultures and the Freedom of Speech

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Many years ago C.P. Snow, an English chemist and novelist, a don at Cambridge, in his 1959 Rede Lecture “The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution” , argued that his university and so far as he could tell the intellectual life of the whole of western society, was divided into two distinct cultures: a scientific culture and the culture of the humanities or arts. These cultures neither associated with one another nor understood one another so far as he could judge. This separation, he argued, was a major hindrance to the solving of the world’s problems as such problems spanned both cultures and so must their solutions.

Every year every university of my acquaintance invites speakers to their graduation ceremonies and often offers them a doctoral degree who are expected to be controversial. For example the University of Oxford some years ago invited the Dalai Lama to speak at such a ceremony and made him an honorary Doctor of Laws. The streets of Oxford were lined with Chinese citizens living in England wearing Saffron robes and booing him, ordered to do so by their Embassy in London. Overtures were made to the university authorities to reconsider both his speech and his honorary degree.

Another earlier example occurred when in 1947 the then president of the United States, Harry Truman, was similarly offered a chance to speak and given an honorary Doctor of Laws degree at Oxford. At that time, led by the university philosophy lecturer Elizabeth Anscombe, there was a movement to silence his speech and not be granted the degree because he was a “mass murderer” who had ordered the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki using nuclear weapons, a bombing that ended the horrific war with Japan. Both ceremonies proceeded in spite of the protests.

More recently following a series of similar incidents at the University of Chicago in 2014 where students at various schools sought to prevent controversial commencement speakers from performing, the Committee of Freedom of Expression at the University of Chicago was formed and charged by the President, Robert J. Simmer and the Provost Eric D. Isaacs in July 2014 to draft a statement that would articulate the University of Chicago’s commitment to free, robust and

uninhibited debate among all members of the University's community (Wikipedia, Chicago Principles). The "Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression" became known as the Chicago Principles and it was adopted by many universities across the United States in recent years. At the present time the new government of the province of Alberta is pressuring the universities of Alberta to adopt its principles, perhaps because of the vocal opposition at universities to the denial of global warming that many provincial governments in Canada are supporting.

The cutting edge of much of the disagreement in thought and expression within universities, and in the wider society as a consequence, often does arise due to the difference of traditions between what Snow identified as "the two cultures". For example a well meaning Roman Catholic medical scientist developed a birth control pill that could be used to prevent conception thinking that the Church would welcome it as an alternative to abstinence. He was a scientist thinking of a practical solution to a practical problem. But his church was on the other side of the two cultures divide and argued that artificial birth control was against God's will for mankind. There are still difficult and often forbidden discussions on the topic within his church. The Chicago Principles would have encouraged him to state his case publicly and his opponents to do so equally publicly without rancour. But of course this is a locus of rancour in public discussion even to day. Even more rancorous are discussions of abortion in our time. And often these lead to danger for doctors performing such abortions and even for the welfare of the pregnant woman seeking one. Paradoxically those arguing that abortion is murder do not always stop at murder in opposing abortion.

It is 60 years since Snow's Rede Lecture. To what degree are the "two cultures" still extant or thriving? So far as I can judge, one of the cultures is undoubtedly dominant. The scientific culture so far as it includes the faculties of medicine, engineering, and the multitude of the sciences utterly dominate the budget of the universities in our time. In my own institution the faculty of medicine alone has over half the budget of the university which is about a billion and a half dollars these days. The humanities and the arts are a very tiny part of a university budget and are a very limited part of the effort of the university generally. Perhaps one measure of the state of affairs is the choice of Rhodes' Scholars. For example, the universities of western Canada have four of these annually to give out. Almost all of the scholars are chosen from medical, engineering or scientific backgrounds. Oddly, in the 1960's shortly after the Rede lecture most

of the Canadian Rhodes scholars came from the humanities.

Are there still serious debates to which all university members might participate in? Most of the genuine debates are not technical ones but rather ethical ones relating to the advance of science and engineering in our time on the one hand and on the obvious problems that we face as human being on the other. For example we have all noted the general warming trend in Canada, particularly in our Arctic regions. We have also noted increases in tornadoes, out of control wildfires, unusual and devastating floods and the like. On the medical front opioid related deaths and addictions are at record levels. All of these things require not only expert understanding but public debate and discussion. Are we to conclude that only one of the “two cultures” can participate in the discussions? Or are these things to which we all in principles have something to say? What about questions relating to the future arrangements for population in a space as large as Canada? Should we have immigration from anywhere and everywhere? Or are there principles of immigration to which we ought to adhere? Should numbers be restricted or should they be widened? Should we encourage populations presently at risk in their own countries, such as central and South America, due to changing climate affecting the possibility for farmers to produce enough food for the population, to come to Canada as a matter of course and with our help? Or should we have preferred sources of new immigrants? All of these questions should, one supposes, be subjected to the widest and deepest unranorous public debate. And are the answers to be derived from scientific knowledge? Or from philosophical or ethical principles? Again, only discussion and agreement in the end can resolve such questions.

Our educational system from top to bottom is in the process of being stressed as we cannot begin the freedom of discussion only at the university level. But just what to do and how to do it is as yet something we are unable to resolve. How are the “two cultures” to find their way throughout our educational system so that our discussions are not only informed with facts but also with insight and understanding? At the moment I have no easy answers to offer.

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Editor