



LEAVIS AS A CRITIC OF CULTURE: AN ASSESSMENT

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ABSTRACT

Frank Raymond Leavis (1895-1978) shared with many others the disillusionment and the "dying culture" perception characteristic of the Twenties and the Thirties. Leavis's perception of the cultural scene of the time was, in some ways, similar to John Strachey's that "bourgeois civilization is in headlong decline." Leavis's attitude to industrial culture appeared to be at one with young Michael Roberts's characteristically desperate stance that the only alternative for the young intelligentsia of the Thirties was "to renounce that system (i.e., capitalism) now and to live fighting against it." Leavis was greatly concerned about the cultural "plight" of the Twenties and the Thirties and his response to it was sharply critical, even apparently radical. But if one examines his cultural radicalism, one feels that it had elements of compromise, and was not altogether free from conservative pulls. The aim of this article is to examine and evaluate Leavis's cultural position as expressed in his significant writings on culture in the Thirties and in his model of the "English School".

INTRODUCTION

In his very first tract on culture *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (1930) he took serious note of the "desperate plight of culture today" and also painfully realized that "The prospects of culture then are very dark" (EU, p.143, p.169). But what worried Leavis most was that, although most people actually felt that their culture was "at crisis," very few really understood "what the crisis portends." Any serious enquiry into the crisis met with, what

DR. VINOD KUMAR BAIRWA

1P a g e



Leavis called, a characteristic Spenglerian "proud philosophic indifference" or what H.G. Wells had termed "increasing inattention" (EU, p.145).

Dr. Leavis, however, persisted in his cultural enquiry and did his best to show what the crisis actually "portends." He proceeded with the popular assumption that the introduction of the machine had given tremendous fillip to the process of "change in social habit and circumstances of life." The change, according to Leavis, had been "so catastrophic those generations find it hard to adjust themselves with each other" (EU, p.146). Furthermore, the machine had given rise to "mass production and standardization" with serious consequences for "the life of the community." Their "sinister significance" lay in the fact that they were accompanied by "a process of leveling down" and even "overthrow of standards." Newspapers, radio-broadcasting, films, advertisements were the necessary aids to that "destructive" process. Ultimately one was confronted with a "mass civilization" which, he felt, was "antithetical" to "culture" proper (EU, p.164). In Leavis's view culture was the exclusive preserve of a "small minority" capable of "discerning appreciation of art and literature," and of "first-hand judgment by genuine personal response" (EU, p. 143).

Leavis identified culture with language and held that "fine living" vitally depended upon "language, the changing idiom" in whose absence "distinction of spirit is thwarted and incoherent" (UE, p.145). He equated the cultural level of a race with its linguistic ability. Language had always been, according to Leavis, the expression of the living parts of human experiences. In order that language might continue to possess that solemn capacity, it must remain vitally rooted in genuine human experiences. But machine culture was in the process of standardizing sensibility and language, and, in Leavis's view, "standardized sensibility" would lose capacity for "unprompted first-hand genuine responses" and a standardized language for expressing vital experiences. The standardization of language would, ultimately, mean death of a cultural heritage: "Without the living subtlety of the finest idiom... the heritage dies" (EU, p.168).

In an age of increasing manipulation of consciousness through mass-media, standardization of sensibility and language, a "leveling down," and "overthrow" of standards and erosion of "discriminating ability," thought Leavis, were inevitable consequences. He regretted that the process had already affected the "arbiters of taste" of his time. Leavis substantiated this observation with illustrations from the writings of men like Arnold Bennett, C.P. Snow, Hugh Walpole, Max Eastman and others. Bennett, argued Leavis, was so much affected by the advertisement ethos of the mass media that, to project the image of a minor novelist like R.H. Mottram, he bracketted Mottram with James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence and Aldous Huxley. As if bracketting with them were not enough, he added additional emphasis on his creative genius: "R.H. Mottram is a genius. He writes like a genius." In another article Bennett wrote that he "failed to perceive any genuine originality in the method of Mrs. Dalloway" and that D.H.

DR. VINOD KUMAR BAIRWA

2P a g e



Lawrence and R.H. Mottram "more than any other of their contemporaries, continually disclose genuine originality, the two real British geniuses of the new age" (EU, pp.154-55). Time and again, Leavis deplored that popular and academic recognition accorded to Walpole, Snow, Wells, Bennett and many others, was an indication of the cultural "plight" of the time. That simply indicated the "standardization of sensibility," lack of "discriminating ability" and absence of "standards" (EU, pp.160-62).

Mass Civilization and Minority Culture was extremely significant for two reasons: first, it was Leavis's first major statement on the critical state of machine culture; and, second, it set the terms of reference against which he subsequently judged the state of health of a culture. When Leavis co-authored Culture and Environment (1933)⁴ with Denys Thompson the tenor and terms of his cultural argument largely remained those of Mass Civilization and Minority Culture. Culture and Environment broke no fresh ground except that it brought into focus the pre-industrial "organic communities" as a contrast to emphasize the "terrifying" nature of the social changes brought about since the Industrial Revolution.

In Education and the University (1943), too, Leavis regretted that "the centre" had been "lost in the process of disintegration." He still stuck to the view that "the process could be discussed in terms of rapid change, mass-production, levelling-down, and...specialization" (EU, p. 25). Here an additional dimension-the dimension of "specialization"-was added as one of the indicators of the crisis of culture. Leavis also referred to the "complexity" of the whole cultural situation. The complex machinery of industrial civilization tended to destroy those very things which, if left safe, could "control" its pincer movement.

Leavis's critical perception of the industrial culture was somewhat problematic. Limitations were obvious and critics were quick to point them out. Some of the limitations which appear pertinent to my context may briefly be discussed here.

First, Leavis's critique of the industrial culture entirely in terms of the "organic communities" had obvious pitfalls: (i) his obsession with those communities made him judge all social changes since the Industrial Revolution in utterly negative terms. For Leavis all the changes since then had been utter failure in both human and cultural terms. He abstracted a few negative aspects of the industrial culture and projected them as if they were the only aspects to be taken note of. He ignored the material and cultural opportunities the Industrial Revolution had provided to larger and larger sections of the population. In the words of Raymond Williams, Leavis took "aspects for wholes."¹⁰ In his "Fore- word" to Culture and Society Williams noted with concern that the intellectuals critical of the industrial culture were rather prone to reject what in reality demanded serious attention and understanding (p.12). (ii) The obsession with the "organic communities" lent a conservative strain to Leavis's critical perspective. He thought more about the organic relationships and values of

DR. VINOD KUMAR BAIRWA

3P a g e



the feudal past (altogether ignoring their negative aspects) than about the possibilities of the future. At best he was culturally defending the remnants of the humane English tradition against the stalking dangers of the machine civilization. His "minority" had its centre in the "tradition." It never occurred to Dr Leavis that industrial society was also organic in its own ways. In that respect, Leavis showed an unfortunate lack of the sense of the dialectics involved in social changes. (iii) Leavis's critical perspective gave a romantic vein to his entire cultural critique. There was an element of "surrender" to the typically urban nostalgia for medieval values (Williams, p.252) whose "revivals," Leavis himself knew, could not be taken "seriously" (CE, p.2, see also p.96).

Second, Leavis's idea of the "minority" was tenuous. Raymond Williams referred to it as "minority culture' dogma" and thought of it as "no more than a defensive system against the general dangers." Williams also pointed out that Leavis's idea of the "minority" was incompatible with his democratic concerns and that it smacked of "pseudo- aristocratic authoritarianism" (Williams, pp.254-256). One is also tempted to think that Leavis's "minority" was too literary and sophisti- cated, even "insulated," to be of any practical use in the area of active politics where decisions about the possible directions of social changes are effectively taken. All its values were rooted in the English literary tradition and thus it was largely uninformed about other aspects and possibilities of human experience.

Third, Dr Leavis in his writings on culture quite frequently implied some polar dichotomies like "mass"/"minority," "organic community"/ "machine culture," machine/man, culture/science, culture/environment, even "university"/"education" etc. Such dichotomies, however, exist only in abstraction and not in social practice. Dr Leavis could not appreciate that even in industrial society "minority" derived its material and intellectual sustenance from the masses through a variety of interactive stimulus-response mechanism. It did not strike him that machine/man dichotomy did not exist in social practice. Machine conceived of as an aspect of "human reality...the reality of his own essential powers"¹¹ would project altogether a different perspective. Similarly, culture/ science dichotomy exposed Leavis's un- dimensionality of approach. Science could have been conceived of as an expression of some creative potential of man. Leavis identified machine with science and consequently his cultural humanism was characterised by, what Mulhern called, "obdurate anti-scientism."¹² In an important sense, Dr Leavis remained largely a cultural Luddite. All the aforesaid antithetical categories exist in dialectical relationship.

Fourth, despite his apparently radical stance in his criticism of culture, Dr Leavis remained tied down to the bourgeois mode of thinking. Terry Eagleton characterised Scrutiny's critical position as "liberal humanist" characteristic of the petty bourgeois.¹⁵ Leavis, as a moving spirit behind Scrutiny's critical efforts, was not above this general characterisation. In a very searching study of the Scrutiny group of intellectuals, Mulhern pointed out that Leavis's

DR. VINOD KUMAR BAIRWA

4P a g e



cultural radicalism was only a "moralist revolt from within the given culture" and that was why, said Mulhern, Leavis failed to offer any "alternative" propositions (Mulhern, p.332).

This was the typically British liberal position. The very idea of the "breakdown" of the capitalist "machinery" has always been a red rag to the British liberal bull. No wonder, at critical moments of history the liberal has generally found himself supporting the "machinery" in practice which he has ruthlessly criticized in theory. It is significant that Leavis never raised the question of the ownership of machine and mass media even though he unequivocally criticized their competitive use against humane ends. Looked at from this angle, his cultural radicalism was at best of the Luddite variety.

Fifth, Leavis's educational model, although valuable, had its own problems. Dr Leavis was a literary intellectual and, therefore, it was natural for him to set too much store by the training of sensibility and intellect. The "English School" was supposed to "meet the present crisis of civilization" (EU, p.24). The literary-critical ideal Leavis had so much insisted upon was "widely imitated and followed" (Raymond Williams, p.250). But Leavis's expectations went wrong. The "bent of civilization of our time" could not be resisted, as he had earlier expected. At one point Leavis himself had serious doubts about its success on the ground that the "School" had to function "in and with the machinery" it was supposed to alter ("The Literary Mind," p.31). But such insights were occasional. Leavis was an idealist. He believed in unchanging "human nature" and recognized the primacy of the thought processes over the material processes of life. The "English School" was the result of this idealism. The assumptions behind it betrayed an utter lack of understanding of the complex working of the "machinery" he was out to reform. He treated culture as a "metasocial" category. This was, according to Mulhern, the position of the Scrutiny group as a whole : The mission of the intellectual was to serve a transcendental culture or humanity.. Ever 'above' and beyond politics itself, culture was a permanent metaphysical sanction, the tribunal before which all politics stood judged, in the name of the 'human' (Mulhern, pp.98-99).

In the face of the intransigent facts of life the fate of Leavis's literary- critical ideal was doomed in advance. It was too narrowly literary in its scope to leave any decisive impact on the direction of social change.

Still it is difficult to ignore Leavis's impressive contribution towards the criticism of the industrial culture, Leavis inherited a great English tradition comprising Carlyle, Arnold, Ruskin and William Morris and enlarged and enriched the tradition by concrete literary-critical and literary. Cultural practice. Second, Leavis's idea of "the organic communities" as a suggestive cultural metaphor, in spite of all its conservative implications, set some objective norms against which one might judge any culture. Even Marx's critique of "civil society" was largely in terms of the pre- industrial organic communities and his vision of the communist

DR. VINOD KUMAR BAIRWA

5P a g e



society was an effort to restore, at a higher level, the organic relationships, natural rhythm of life and work etc., of those communities. With Leavis difficulties lay in the fact that he had no identifiable vision of the future. But that did not affect Leavis's idea of the "organic community" as a normative critical metaphor to use a concept of Lukacs, in "critical-realist" debates on our contemporary culture. Third, Leavis's idea of "the educated man" seen against the background of increasing non-communicative "specialisms" of our time was really fruitful. Leavis held the view that even "half-a-dozen specialisms" could not make an "educated mind." Thus Leavis's idea of the universities functioning as "centres" for effective communication between various "specialisms" with a view to making them all aware of the various possibilities of and dangers to humane existence, was really laudable.

Leavis was also in favour of "some form of economic communism."¹⁸ Obviously, his "minority," even though "small" and "insulated," would not join Mr Wyndham Lewis's "party of genius" to defend reactionary interests under the gloss of neutrality and art,¹⁹ For Leavis, "understanding" was "not merely a grasp of intricacies but a perceptive wisdom about ends," and Leavis's ends were always "humane" ends, rather than purely aesthetic ones. His "minority" was not merely "unscrupulously sensitive" but also capable of "enterprising use of intelligence." It was supposed to "apply itself to the problems of civilization" (EU, p.59). One cannot help feeling that any good society shall always be in need of such a "responsive" and "responsible" "minority," With the two following amendments Leavis's concept of the "minority" could be made fruitful and relevant to modern requirements: (a) it should be understood in reciprocity with the ordinary life of the masses so that it might be saved from empty abstractionism, and the ordinary life from gross materiality; and (b) in place of its centrality or rootedness in "tradition"-which undeniably gives it some conservative pull-it should be reoriented towards the future so that it might remain critical, explorative and visionary. Leavis's "minority" was already supposed to be in "communication with the future" (EU, p.171) and so there is obvious scope for adding a progressive dimension to it.

In this way, Leavis remains, after all, a formidable figure in the liberal tradition of the critics of bourgeois culture. He lent dignity to literary criticism by treating it on a par with cultural criticism, and concreteness to cultural criticism by relating it to the first-hand experience of literature. In his writings the two disciplines were always in healthy interaction.

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DR. VINOD KUMAR BAIRWA

6P a g e



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