

Book Review

Terry Eagleton, *Culture*, New Haven and London:
Yale University Press, 2016, pp. viii-ix, 1- 177.

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What is culture? Today the term culture is used so widely and casually that anything seems to be entitled to the name. There is in fact an endless list of “cultures”, such as “police culture”, “MacDonald culture”, “gay culture”, and “karaoke culture”. In this “inflation of culture”, we are no longer sure what culture means.¹⁾

Terry Eagleton’s new book, *Culture* (2016), delves to sort out this contemporary mess. It explores what culture used to be, what it is, and what it ought to be. His idea of culture is inspired by predecessors such as Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1806), Edmund Burke (1729-1797), and his mentor Raymond Williams (1921-1988).

The term culture, he argues, used to mean “a set of values” that opposed the crass materialism of industrial civilization (p. 18). The “idea of culture” was in fact born as “an impassioned revolt” against the Industrial Revolution (p. 10). “The more everyday experience seems soulless and impoverished, the more an ideal of culture is promoted by way of contrast” (p. 10).

This critical stance, however, was not inherited by postmodern commentators on culture. Because of the postmodern “cult of inclusivity”, which celebrates difference and diversity, culture has been degraded into “a neutral term” to “simply mean the way of life” (pp. 36, 18, 19). Eagleton, of course, is not hostile to diversity itself, and even finds some merits in, for instance, racial diversity. However, he warns that “this should not lead us to overlook its role in consumerist ideology” (p. 31). For if diversity is crucial, conflict against crass materialism is diffused, and everything is “to be extolled, whatever its actual content” (p. 31). Now that culture has lost its role as a “critique of modern manufacture”, people have become more susceptible to commercialism (p. 142). It is urgent for culture to restore its critical stance.

Eagleton has had this sense of crisis for some time. *Culture* is in fact his second book on the idea of culture, and develops on a previous work, *The Idea of Culture* (2000). Naturally there are many parts where his arguments overlap. One might wonder why Eagleton needed to publish two similar books within two decades. I believe this is because commercialism, today more than ever, poses a serious threat to university education. In fact, what is added in his new book is a discussion of the commercialization of the university. He says “[t]here is no clearer example of

the way capitalism is intent on assimilating what once seemed its opposite ('culture') than the global decline of the universities" (p. 132). Since anything can be identified as culture (and worth teaching), universities no longer function as "centres of humane critique" (p. 152). Instead they are "increasingly reduced to organs of marketplace" (p. 152).

For those readers familiar with Eagleton's works, there is little unexpected about *Culture*. Since his celebrated *Literary Theory* (1983), he has been coherent in his criticism of postmodernism from a Marxist point of view. However, this does not mean the book is not worth reading. On the contrary, it is highly recommended because it poses important questions to be tackled for a humane life.

Following Raymond Williams, Eagleton divides the concept of culture into two: "culture as art and culture as way of life", or "culture as spiritual and culture as anthropological" (pp. 3, 141).² As Roger Scruton clarifies, the former is the concept advocated by Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) and the latter is the concept formed by Johann Gottfried Herder.³ For Humboldt, culture meant *cultivation*, something (selected) people strive to acquire. Herder, on the other hand, understood the term as customs and habits shared by every member of the society. If Herder's understanding denotes "common culture", Humboldt's signifies "high culture". Intellectuals such as Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) adopted Humboldt's definition, while early anthropologists did Herder's.

As a disciple of Williams who had faith in "common culture", Eagleton too embraces Herder's idea of culture. For him culture is "a matter of wholeness" – this echoes Williams' depiction of culture as "a whole way of life" – and the "fabric of society" (pp. 27, 114).⁴ The role of the masses in culture should not be undermined, because, as in Herder's idea, "popular culture represents collective unconscious" (p. 85). The dynamic of culture is in "the time-honoured customs and convictions" of common people (p. 65). Even high culture such as "the art of Homer, Sophocles, and Shakespeare was nourished by the popular culture of its day" (p. 85).

Because of this anti-elitist stance, Eagleton does not join the likes of Matthew Arnold, who hoped that high culture would function as a spiritual savior in a post-religious age. Eagleton is in fact cynical enough to say that "[t]here was always something mildly risible about the idea that humanity might be saved by studying Shakespeare".⁵ While "[r]eligion is the most powerful, persistent, universal, tenacious, deep-seated form of popular culture", high culture is not (p. 141). Shakespeare cannot replace Christianity because it is too "elitist" to become "a truly popular force".⁶ It is also "too esoteric to do service for grace and redemption" (p. 141). Eagleton would not blame other-worldly traits of high culture as such, but he would its failure to incarnate "this otherworldliness in a practical form" as Christianity once did by combining "absolute values and daily life".⁷

Eagleton's criticism of high culture is also to do with its lack of a "self-critical spirit" (p. 159). In fact he finds similarities between high culture and its enemy postmodernism for their inertia towards the commercialization of culture. One would refute this by saying that, unlike high culture, identity politics and multiculturalism are political and radical. But according to Eagleton, they "are not for the most part revolutionary ones", as they are often "thwarted" from real political issues such as poverty (p. 160). To that extent, they are much like high culture. (This is where he admires Edmund Burke: for, in Burke's view, "culture and politics are to be neither divided nor conflated" (p. 74).) Moreover, high culture also shares unsavory (at least for Eagleton) qualities with its other enemy "mass culture" – by "mass culture" Eagleton means "commodified" popular culture (p. 142). He notes:

"With its fake immediacy and fantasy solutions, a good deal of mass culture offered its consumers a form of false utopia; but so, too, did some high art, which may not have provided reconciliation in its disenchanting content, but which often enough sought to do so in its unifying form" (p. 143).

One exception is Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), who was able to turn high culture and "its distance from everyday life to political advantage" (p. 145). What detaches Wilde from Matthew Arnold (and his followers) is that "he is concerned with the material conditions which would need to prevail for as many people as possible to become free spirits" (p. 110). In this sense Wilde is "a socialist" – Eagleton calls his "The Soul of Man" (1891) "the work of a socialist" – in the way Karl Marx (1818-1883) and William Morris (1834-1896) are (p. 109). For they all "inquire into the question of what material conditions would be necessary for social life to prove more fulfilling, and find an answer to their query in abolition of capitalism" (p. 123).

The real trouble with high culture, according to Eagleton, is that "because culture is generally grasped as opposite of material matters" it stays aloof from material concerns (p. 110). Concern with material conditions, however, "would need to prevail for as many people as possible to become free spirits" (p. 110). The solution for him is to adopt Marxism, which "looks to a time when men and women will be able to live largely by culture, free of the goad of material necessity".⁸⁾

There is some truth in this negative depiction of high culture: high culture at its worst can be an aristocratic indulgence in art when ordinary people are starving. It is too aloof to be "a truly popular force" as Christianity once was (though it can be popularized to some extent by means of media such as the film-adaptation of literary classics). It is also true that in the society of advanced capitalism, "everything was to be plastic, provisional, mutable, malleable, [and] disposable" (p. 38). Since there is little room for the fulfillment of the human soul, one could find some (or perhaps great) merits in liberating people from material concerns.

Still, it is hard to take seriously Eagleton's idea that Marxism would create more humane life. If the late capitalist society is neglectful of the human soul, so were (and are) communist societies. Not only that, in communist societies, high culture and religion were even banned, and those who wanted to protect them had to do so (sometimes) at the cost of their lives.⁹⁾ Eagleton, of course, is aware of these vices of communist regimes, but he seems to avoid discussing what went wrong with the humane ideals of Marxism in these societies.¹⁰⁾

Perhaps we may have to think of a third solution: how can we improve our capitalist society in such a way that people can, and would, voluntarily value the question of the human soul and regain culture as "a matter of wholeness"? The answer is, of course, not easy, but the first step seems to lie in how university academics define culture and how it affects the curriculum.

Fin.

Notes

- 1) Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, p. 40.
- 2) Williams uses the word culture "to mean a whole way of life – the common meanings: to mean the arts and learning – the special process of discovery and creative effort". Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary" (1958), in Raymond Williams (Robin Gable ed.), *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*, London and New York: Verso, 1989, pp. 3-18, at p. 4.
- 3) Roger Scruton's *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Culture*, London: Duckworth, 1998, illuminates these two ideas better than Eagleton or Raymond Williams.
- 4) Williams says "culture is a whole way of life, and the arts are part of a social organization which economic change clearly radically affects". Williams, "Culture is Ordinary", p. 7. Also see Raymond Williams, "The Idea of a Common Culture" (1968), in Williams, *Resources of Hope*, pp. 32-38.
- 5) Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*, p. 69.
- 6) Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*, p. 69.
- 7) Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*, p. 69.
- 8) Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*, p. 108.
- 9) Scruton is actually a living witness to this: he was involved in underground activities in Czechoslovakia under the communist regime, and met passionate dissenters who strived to read prohibited texts such as Kafka, Dostoevsky, and the bible in order to stay humane. This part of history is highlighted in his novel, *Notes from Underground*. See Roger Scruton, *Notes from Underground*, New York: Beaufort Books, 2014.
- 10) In the discussion of the importance of solidarity, Eagleton notes, "[i]t was not diversity that brought the apartheid system in South Africa to its knees, or plurality that toppled the neo-Stalinist regimes of Eastern Europe" (p. 31).

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