

Looking Back

Fifty Years of “Two Cultures”

This spring marks the fiftieth anniversary of C. P. Snow’s “Two Cultures” lecture. Delivered at Cambridge University in May 1959, and reprinted countless times since, the lecture sought to describe a dangerous divide between scientists and humanists.

Snow was well positioned to observe that divide; as an experimental chemist turned novelist, he was a member of both the scientific community and the British intellectual elite. Scientists and humanists, he argued, read different books, began from different premises, had different habits of mind, and almost spoke different languages. Most of the scientists he knew had not read Shakespeare and did not see why they should. The intellectuals, meanwhile, did not know the first thing about science. And the two groups viewed each other with hostility. “The non-scientists,” Snow said, “have a rooted impression that the scientists are shallowly optimistic, unaware of man’s condition.” Meanwhile, the scientists viewed the intellectuals as “totally lacking in foresight” and closed-minded.

As a result, he argued, the intellectuals who exercised great influence over politics and policy failed to grasp the importance of science for the future of the West, and the scientists were unable to make the case for themselves in terms the larger culture could appreciate. Science was crucial to the future, Snow contended, because in the Cold War struggle between East and West, victory would go to the side that best secured the material advantages science made possible—the side that produced the best and ablest scientists. The failure of Britain’s governing elites to understand this could spell disaster.

Snow’s lecture was in this respect an artifact of the Cold War to a degree that we often now forget. It is remembered as having described the tensions between science and the larger society. But in fact it offered mostly a sharp critique of the “traditional culture,” which he thought was inadequate to the challenges of the day.

For all the insight offered by the lecture, Snow was mistaken on this crucial point. Britain and America did not follow his advice, and did not prioritize science education to the extent the Soviets did, but the West did win the Cold War. Snow believed the fate of a society would be determined by the character and quality of its scientific education. But in fact, the fate of the combatants in the Cold War turned on their sensitivity to human freedom and dignity—that is, by the character of their politics.

That is a lesson we would do well to remember today as we contemplate the profound challenges of our own time, including the challenge of bridging the gap between science and the larger society.