

IDENTITY. CULTURAL ARTIFACTS & EDUCATION

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What I intend to do in this paper is to present arguments and examples to counter what I take to be an influential, but over simple picture of the relationship between individuals and the cultures they inhabit. The picture is to be found in McIntyre (1981) the work of philosophers such as Taylor (1979) and Sandel (1982) and it, very roughly, depicts culture as a given for individuals that both forms the material out of which self-identity can be created and, at the same time, conditions the choices that individuals might make. In other words, it is the culture which decides which selves are possible and which are not.

I want to examine this claim on two levels. Firstly, with regard to a broad definition of 'culture' and secondly with a narrower definition. The broad definition might be called the anthropological definition and it defines 'culture' in terms of all the attitudes, practices and values of a given society (I don't think anything important turns on the elements of this definition). The second definition is that usually thought relevant to education, and here, culture, is the intellectual and artistic attitudes, practices and values of a given society.

Working with the first definition, let us see what we can make of the claim that our identity is given by culture in this sense. It is certainly true that we are born and educated within a given culture and that in some necessary sense this constrains the possibilities we have for seeking a notion of ourselves. As Williams has pointed out, none of us, no matter what we wish, could choose to be a Teutonic knight simply because the cultural structures which might give meaning to such a choice no longer obtain. (But, he has also pointed out that such identities somehow become more appealing the more unavailable they are). But if this is what we can't do given our cultural structures, is there anything that we must do?

One way of examining this question is to take elements of our culture and see what constraints those place upon us. Let us say, for example, we inhabit a culture which contains football and opera. What must this mean for us. Well, and again roughly, it seems that we have three choices for each of these cultural elements. We can be for them, against them, or indifferent to them. So given the two elements we have a matrix of nine possibilities concerning our

possible attitudes. Any one of these possibilities - but only any one of these - must form part of our identity.

This may be true but it is terribly uninteresting. It is rather like reporting that if someone is going to buy something in a market that they must choose something available in the market, which is true, but trivially so. The only interesting thing here depends upon extrapolation. Given a culture with the normal amount of things on offer (100's? 1000's?) and given even my set of restricted attitudes to these things, notions of identity are going to be extremely complicated. So much so, that any straightforward reading of identity from culture must be impossible.

Of course, the above uninteresting claim is not the one made by those I am arguing with. Their claim both seems to be much stronger and much more interesting. Thus, Taylor holds that it is communal values and practices which function as 'authoritative horizons' which 'set goals for us' (Taylor (1979) pp.157-159). Sandel believes that communal goals define peoples' identities, that their shared pursuit is 'not a relationship they choose (as in a voluntary association) but an attachment they discover, not merely an attitude but a constituent of their identity.' (Sandel (1982) p.150). MacIntyre writes 'we all approach our own circumstances as bearers of particular social identities. I am someone's son or daughter, someone else's cousin or uncle; I am a citizen of this or that city; a member of this or that guild or profession; I belong to this clan, that tribe, this nation. Hence, what is good for me has to be the good for one who inhabits these values.' (MacIntyre (1981) pp 204-5).

The question to ask with all of these views is, I think, a simple one. Like many good philosophical questions it seems to verge on the naive. It is this: the culture we inhabit supposed to determine all of our goals and practices; or most of them or some of them? It certainly determines all in the sense that it determines what is on offer. But this restating the limiting case we started with, that is, that you can only buy what is for sale. If the all here means something different to this, for instance that all the individuals' goals and practices must be identical with all the goals and practices of the given society, then the suggestion is not merely false, it is, almost certainly, incoherent.

Given an even moderately complex society the goals and practices exemplified by people within that society - and it is always worth bearing in mind that is people not societies, which have goals and who take part in practices - are liable to conflict. Thus, such a society might have football hooligans and people utterly indifferent to football; it might contain people wedded to a contemplative way of life and people dedicated to action; it might contain the religious bigot and the atheist. Given such a picture - and it is a picture which fits most of the societies with which we are familiar, the demand that the individuals' goals simply reflect societies goals simply cannot be met.

What about the less stringent demand that most of the individuals' goals and practices

must reflect most of the goals and practices on offer? Again this threatens to run into incoherence unless the contents of both sets are chosen with care because any random sample of such things in a society is liable to turn-up incompatible pairs. However, even if we avoid this possibility, what seems to be demanded here not only seems unlikely to be true, but also seems profoundly insulting to the individuals concerned. This demand seems to be that individuals identify with the goals and practices that are typical of their society. Thus, someone from England should be ignorant and uncaring when it comes to food and drink; be distrustful of any intellectual activity; be profoundly interested in football and cricket but uninterested in the fine arts and be, at all times, reserved and unapproachable. It may be the case - with a certain amount of licence - that such traits do typify English culture but it would be certainly unwise to assume that they are present in any individual English person and, as I said above, I for one, would be deeply insulted should someone assume that they were true of me. But if the first two possibilities are - at the very least - not true then we are left with the third: that the elements that constitute an individual's identity are taken from some of the things that are on offer in the culture concerned. But with this claim we are back to something that must be true but which is totally uninteresting.

It might be objected to my account so far that its plausibility is bought at the expense of any attempt at depth. That items such as football and opera simply are too superficial to serve in creation of identities that my opponents desire. This call for greater depth may have a point - although I am tempted to simply issue an *ad hominem* challenge here - but, if it does, it needs to be provided with some content.

Such content may be purchased by attempting to culturally particularise certain modes of thought such as logic and science. I am sure that this is not what most of my opponents are getting at, but it may be the case that some e.g. Rorty are. If this is the argument then I believe it to be false but I have no space to argue its falseness here. As far as such a move is concerned I believe with philosophers such as Nagel (1998) that although logic and science may arise in particular cultural contexts they are, in fact, transcultural i.e. they are ways of thinking which are discovered rather than invented.

More likely the notion of depth may refer not to such things but to the language of the culture concerned. Certainly, it is with language that Taylor is essentially concerned in his influential paper 'The politics of recognition' (1995) which uses the problems of French speaking Canada as a central example. My feeling is that this example, although interesting, obscures many of the problems inherent in language choice.

Whatever one thinks of equality between cultures i.e. whether it is possible to talk of cultures being unequal in some way, this is hardly likely to be an issue with English and French cultures. Both are well established; both culturally rich and both, very importantly, reach out in diverse ways to other cultures. So whichever is chosen there can be no real question of cultural loss, (which might not be the case, for instance, if the choice was between a scientific

and pre-scientific culture). Secondly, Taylor poses the problem in terms of procedural liberalism as against cultural survival. However, he does not really go into what might be at stake, in this particular instance, with the latter. So, for instance, one would think that if enough of the French speaking Canadians were concerned with the survival of their particular cultural heritage then they would have little problem in protecting it through voluntary associations and a freely chosen schooling system. However, if it has to be protected by coercion this really does seem to be a protection that actually offends against peoples freely chosen cultural interests and its only defence would be an appeal to the deeply dubious notion from Rousseau of 'forcing people to be *free*'. Thirdly, it is striking that Taylor, whilst he seems to endorse something like this, offers no arguments for it (See p.248).

Of course in a monolingualistic community there can be no such problems, if that is all that is on offer, then it is. (Although what to teach as a second language may be a real problem).

In communities where language choice is a real possibility then very hard choices will have to be made, but it is not at all clear that such choices should endorse, in any simple way, what might be thought of as the mother tongue. One may see this by thinking a moment about local dialects. A majority of people in Britain, I suspect, spend their early years speaking a local dialect (I certainly did). But such dialects are not endorsed by the education system and by adulthood most people are proficient, more or less, with standard English. What remains of the dialect is likely to be a regional accent. One might regard this as an affront to the local and particular but I don't think that it is, in anyway, necessary to do so. Where what is at stake is language choice rather than dialect choice the same may obtain. I recently did some work on the West Indian island of St.Lucia. A case could be made - although not, I think, a very strong one - that the mother tongue of St.Lucia is a French based patois. Recently, for the first time this patois has been provided with a phonetically based alphabet. One can envisage a situation where cultural particularists came to power in St. Lucia and insisted that this was the language of instruction in schools. This would, I think, be an enormously retrograde step. Firstly, because it would ignore the linguistic preferences in practice of most of the people on the island. Secondly, because it would effectively cut-off the St.Lucians from that large part of their cultural heritage that is British. Thirdly, because of the way in which the alphabet has been created, it would also cut-off the St.Lucians from French culture. Such particularism is bought at an enormous cost. In many ways, if we consider 'culture' in the second way that I wish to discuss, it buys adherence to a language at the cost of a loss of culture.

The second definition of culture that I wish to try and work into this discussion, is, as I said at the begin~ing of this paper, concerns the artistic and intellectual life of any given society. My contention is that given this notion of culture - and, as I also said at the start this is the notion usually thought relevant for education - things become even more complicated.

I would like to begin my discussion by offering, as an example of a cultural artifact in this sense something that - perhaps with a degree of exaggeration- typifies some of the points

I want to make. The example is the novel by the Nigerian writer, Wole Soyinka *The Interpreters*. This novel was written in Nigeria, although Soyinka now lives in exile - it was written in English - although a large part of the Nigerian population either do not speak English or speak it as a second language - its form, as a novel, inhabits a European rather than an African tradition and its content, although set in Nigeria, refers to a post-colonial Nigeria and therefore to more than one culture.

The question I want to ask is: to what culture does this novel belong? The answer to this question is certainly not straightforward and it may be impossible to answer. It would be difficult to claim, for instance, that awareness of the novel is a given for Nigerians in the same way that their mother tongue is a given. Such awareness, in any real sense, has to be achieved rather than just accepted. But, as an achievement, it is open not simply to Nigerians but to anyone. Indeed, because of the language it may be more accessible to some non-Nigerians than it is to some Nigerians.

The novel is not, in the present situation, an unthinking focus for celebration in Nigeria, despite Soyinka's Nobel prize - given his political disagreements with the present regime, it could be the case that outside Nigeria it stands as a monument to Nigerian culture whilst inside it is ignored. Its content - Look what *they* have done to *us!* - is of obvious relevance to the Nigerian 'us' it refers to but it is also of relevance to the British 'they' as well and to understand it, is to understand both sides of the equation.

What we have here is a case of cultural ambiguity but such ambiguity is not an oddity but is in fact, typical of many of the artifacts which we often, unthinkingly, locate within cultures. So, for instance, tourists visiting England and looking at the castles and cathedrals which typify English mediaeval culture they are looking at the work of the Norman French. The architectural glories of, say, Bath cannot be understood without an understanding of the work of the Italian architect Palladio. The influences, on that most English of painters, Turner, include very high on the list, the French painter Claude Lorraine and Turner's influence is probably best seen in the work of Monet and the Impressionists. One can duplicate such examples almost endlessly, not only with regard to English culture but with regard to any developed culture.

But what of artifacts that do not seem to exhibit such ambiguity? Surely, there are cases, like Chaucer and Shakespeare, which reside centrally and solely within one culture. Perhaps, in a sense, although even here anyone who has tried to teach the work of such figures to English children will realise the difficulty of getting such children to grasp that which is supposed to be central and given to their culture (and I have heard Sierra Leonian children reciting *Macbeth*, line by line, whilst watching a production). Certainly, it cannot be assumed that the English, simply because they are English, have more rapport, grasp, understanding of these texts than anyone else. But nor can it be assumed that the English - or anyone else - are trapped within their cultural orbit.

If I were asked, for instance, to name the greatest works of literature I have read, most would be works - in translation - from other cultures. The same is true of painting, sculpture, music and architecture. Cultural position does not, and cannot, determine cultural understanding or adherence in this particular sense. Whether my understanding of and care for, say, Aeschylus, is better than the average Greeks, is something to be settled, I would submit, empirically and not by assumptions about our respective cultural locations.

How do the above issues connect with the questions of identity with which I began this paper and the questions about education with which this conference is concerned? I think these two sets of questions connect in very interesting ways.

Education must, I think, begin with what is given in any particular cultural context. If it did not then it is difficult to see how it could connect with the young children that have knowledge of very little else but this given. But the role of education is not merely to reassert the parochial and the familiar (if it was, why would we need any formal education beyond the ages of, say, eight or ten?). Rather, any education worth its name quickly begins to undermine and challenge the things that are given. In the early years of education it does this in subtle ways. By processes of socialisation which introduce the child to different models and mores than those it meets at home or in the street. But also by making the familiar strange. So, for instance, by learning about dinosaurs the child begins to see the world in a different way.

By the time the processes of education have reached the type of artifact I talk about in the second part of this paper, this challenge to the accepted and familiar, has greatly increased its level of acceleration. What pupils are now presented with - or, perhaps I should say, should be presented with - is a totally different way of seeing these things that formed their beginnings. The process is nicely caught in a saying of Russell's; "Naive realism leads to science and science proves naive realism false. So, naive realism is false."

But naive realism is where we have to begin, it is, literally what we take to be given. Nevertheless, it would be a terrible mistake to believe that we always arrive back at our starting point. Education, by its very nature, leads us on journeys where we quickly lose sight of such starting points. And in being introduced, not to the culture of Portugal or England, but rather to the culture of science, of paintings, of books, of buildings, of music, we become introduced to totally different ways of seeing ourselves and the cultures we started from and, in some ways, remain part of. So, for instance, the child who becomes a scientist does not simply do Portuguese or English science (whatever this might mean) but rather does science as a Portuguese or Englishman. The nationality and its culture come to take a back-seat. The child who comes to write novels by so doing, enters a culture of writers which simply transcends the barriers of space and time. And even if the focus of such novels is a small part of their own culture, the place they view this from is not, simply, encapsulated within that culture.

Education, by introducing us to vistas which we once never knew existed, provides us with the possibility of choosing or creating identities which would, at one time seemed both opaque to us and impossible for us. Identities which are made not simply by the cultures we are born into but by the cultures we come to inhabit because of these things which, through education, we come to care about and identify with. Education, in a very real sense, changes who we are and who we can be. The wonder of this is nicely caught by Robert Nozick at the beginning of *Philosophical Explanation*.

Isn't it ludicrous for someone just one generation from the *shtetl*, a *pisher* from Brownsville and East Flatbush in Brooklyn, even to touch on the topics of the monumental thinkers? of course it is! Yet it was ludicrous for them to. We are all just a few years past something or other, if only childhood. Even the monuments themselves, so serenely in command of culture and intellect, must have been children once, and adolescents - so they too are immigrants to the realm of thought.

Education, or rather, a proper education changes everything. And to talk of cultural protectionism in such a context sounds dangerously like an attempt to restrict what should be the liberating effects of education and, at the same time, to purge the 'protected' culture of all those inconvenient, but culturally vital, artifacts that either resist cultural placement or come from that dangerous place 'the outside.'

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