

COMMON CULTURE AND IDENTITY: ON SURVIVING AS A PEOPLE

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to be successful, at least not as our world understands such terms. We were made to flourish.

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In *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, T.S. Eliot argued that all high culture is in fact common culture, or folk culture, that has been elevated and transformed. Thereby, it has become universal, not by losing its local character but by making its localism universally accessible. As it happens, the more intensely local high culture is, the more universally accessible it is. Consider Shakespeare, whose Englishness is stitched into every word of his marvellous plays and exquisite sonnets, even those whose settings are distant lands or mythical places. It is Shakespeare's utter Englishness that makes his work universally enjoyable—and so it is. The same goes for all the masters of our high cultural canon, from Dante, who is so perfectly Florentine, to Goethe, the archetypal German polymath.

A decade and half before Eliot developed his argument, Ralph Vaughan Williams made a similar case in his *National Music* lectures, published in 1934, in which he argued that all great music was folk music that had been transfigured and raised up for the international arena. We should take note of the arguments of Eliot and Vaughan Williams, for we have a crisis in high culture precisely because we have a crisis in common culture. High culture has largely ceased to be *cultural* at all, and this has occurred because we have substituted our local folk cultures for so-called 'pop culture,' which is no culture at all. Thus, we have a crisis in high culture because we now have little or nothing to transform.

The high culture that we inherited from those who built the civilisation that we are now dismantling, in turn, has increasingly become instrumentalised for the sake of activism. This trajectory is seen in the way we approach our great high cultural achievements, achievements whose content we do not understand and to which we can no longer contribute. Some years ago, my wife and I went to see *Macbeth*, performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company. During the play, one of the three witches departed from the script

in order to deliver several novel lines comparing Macbeth's increasingly tyrannical leadership to the presidency of Donald Trump, to whom the witch referred by name, to the applause of the audience. A few years later, we thought we would give the RSC another chance, and went to see their biographical play about Caravaggio entitled *The Seven Acts of Mercy*, which turned out to be an extended work of propaganda, re-educating us on the 'systemic injustices of a hierarchical society.' I thought we were going to learn about one of the greatest Renaissance masters. I'm afraid not.

Why, I am compelled to ask myself, can we not just enjoy *art*, and relish the brilliance of our high cultural inheritance—which, after all, is our right, since it is *our* inheritance—without being subjected to propaganda and progressivist activism?

We do not know how to cope with high culture now, because we were never inducted into culture *per se* through a locally shared common culture. The essence of high culture, which is *meaning*, and which bridges the local and the universal, cannot be grasped because that from which it is a bridge is not understood or even experienced. In turn, high culture has been instrumentalised for progressive ends and has ceased to be high culture at all.

The recovery of common culture, or folk culture, or low culture—whatever you want to call it—is an absolutely paramount imperative. Common culture is the foremost force that can be communally owned, shared, and advanced, that prevents people from being remade as objects of pure use and reduced to mere cogs in the great machine of modernity. If we want to avoid the new global slavery that is so quickly emerging, we must protect that which is ours, that which is not a means to anything but an end—and that is exactly what culture is. Culture is an *end*, being that for the enjoyment of which we labour. I recently became more aware of this fact via a particular succession of events.

My two older children were in a dance show held on a Saturday afternoon in the auditorium of a local high school. My four-year-old son was dressed in yellow and black stripes and sprang about on the stage with a group of similarly dressed children to Rimsky-Korsakov's *Flight of the Bumblebee*. My six-year-old daughter, with her ballet

group, performed some dances from the coda of *Swan Lake*. (Nobody seemed to mind that it was all, well, rather Russian.) There were sixteen dance performances in total. An enormous amount of effort and work had gone into organising the dancers and looking after the attendees, who were treated with homemade cakes and cups of tea by volunteer caterers at the interval. For what end had this taken place? There is no answer to this question, for the entire event was an *end*. It was just for the sake of itself.

Days later, a number of May Day celebrations were taking place nearby. We went along to a local festival. There, Morris dancers performed with their handkerchiefs, sticks, and bells in the midst of a clapping crowd, games and competitions were enjoyed, a great hog roast was served with lashings of apple sauce, young children with ribbons in their hair danced around the Maypole, and a local lass was crowned and adorned with flowers as she was proclaimed “Queen of the May” and paraded around on a wicker throne to the cheers of the multitude. Again, why were we all doing this? We were doing this for the sake of it.

Later in the month of May, we attended a nearby country fair. Youngsters of the Bicester and Whaddon Chase’s pony club—tomorrow’s fox hunters—demonstrated their equestrian competence in a fenced-off arena, the huntsman exhibited his foxhounds alongside foot masters with their beagle pack, and rare breeds of sheep and cattle were shown. Wandering around the markets at the show, we bought some chips, and I tried the local ale. We also struck up a conversation with a beekeeper who was selling large tubs of honey taken from his hives, and he did very well out of us.

A week later, from shore to shore, the country was covered with Union Jacks as Her Majesty’s subjects celebrated her Platinum Jubilee. We drove into town on the Jubilee weekend to witness the jubilations. Army and Navy cadets were firing various kinds of artillery in the main park, BMX stunts were being performed by tattooed youths still suffering the delusion that they’re immortal, and merry-go-rounds and tea-cup rides had been set up on the pedestrianised high street. Near the Market Cross, a singer with a wonderful voice, spectacularly outfitted in a long Union Jack dress, sang old hits—mostly from the 1940s—whilst a local society of swing dancers danced around the square. The crowds were too much for me, so I snuck off to a pub for a pint of the local brewery’s

excellent oatmeal stout while the wife and children listened to the singer. (I was pleased to escape just as an inebriated lady moved into the middle of the square to cut some shapes that no doubt looked wonderful to her, but to her alone.) I was informed later by my wife that the singer, before concluding her performance, sang the national anthem, at which everyone present stood with hand over heart.

All these events were *ends*. A huge amount of hard work went into them, and a great many volunteers were required for each, and all *for the sake of it*. Events like these teach us that we are not human doings, but human beings, and we only *do* that we may *be*. One of the terrible features of modernity is that we measure everything by the criteria of productivity and success. But we were not made to be productive, nor to be successful, at least not as our world understands such terms. We were made to flourish.

Historians believe that the medieval peasant, for all the difficulties he may have faced, laboured for no more than 150 days per year. So, what on earth was he doing for the other 215 days of the year? He was making a culture. He was participating in religious processions, playing instruments, singing songs, having parties, brewing ale, helping to build the local church, competing in games—in short, he was doing that for which he laboured the other 150 days of the year. In other words, he was living.

Computer games and television shows can never substitute for the genuine and wholesome leisure that we need. We need to be together, in community. Such leisure, real leisure, is always local—that is why it arises symbiotically with common culture. Common culture is always local culture, which is why the ‘global community’ cannot have a common culture, and has required the development of an anti-cultural counterfeit called ‘pop culture.’ Since pop culture is for the ‘global community,’ it must appeal to that which is most universally accessible, and therefore available to the lowest common denominator. Were pop culture not to do this, it would undermine its own universality by its moderate exclusionism. Pop culture must, to succeed, appeal to that which is lowest. In turn, pop culture appeals to appetite.

Initially, pop music, for example, was characterised by the simple three-minute song about

fairly innocent feelings of affection for a member of the other sex. These songs were always problematic, as they were short (to cater for short attention spans), they simplified the complex impulses of the heart, they veiled certain moral dangers, they reframed self-realisation in terms of appetitive pursuits (albeit innocently portrayed, at first), and the music itself increasingly privileged rhythm over harmony and melody, thereby prioritising that dimension of music that speaks most to the passions. Now, half a century or so down the road, the vast majority of pop songs are explicitly pornographic in content, and their accompanying videos—with all the bottom-shaking and sticking out of tongues—well correspond to the songs' contents.

It is important to understand this trajectory, because the global monoculture of *pop* has been promoted for a new global community by the *globalists*—all for a reason. Those who want you to be a slave will enslave you first by way of your appetites. It is very difficult to control a man who already governs himself. It is very easy to control a man who is a slave to his own appetites—he has already fettered himself. Joseph de Maistre explained this in *Du Pape*, arguing that societal slavery follows interior slavery. Maistre claimed that slavery always existed because it is *natural*, and the only way to get rid of slavery is to make it *unnecessary* by the accomplishment of personal self-government among the citizenry. The choice is before us. Pop culture is appetitive and will facilitate universal enslavement; common culture is wholesome and will foster local liberties.

It has been widely noted by conservative commentators that we are rapidly moving into a value-based political and cultural discourse. Everything from the success of Brexit to the rise of 'woke' indicates that the discourse of the coming epoch will centre not on the economy, or property rights, or any other talking point of the 1980s and '90s, but on *values*. Essentially, the emerging discourse will be shaped by what John Vervaeke, Professor of cognitive science at the University of Toronto, calls the "meaning crisis." At bottom, this means that the emerging discourse will focus on *ends*.

What do we want from our shared civic life together? What is our culture? What is our identity? Who are we? What do we believe? These are the questions now tormenting the West, and they are not going to go away. Whether we are enslaved or emancipated

depends on what answers we give to these questions, and what practical measures follow from such answers. This is why the local events which I described above are of such importance. They may sound quaint and twee to the modern reader, but they are exactly the things that teach us who we are as a people. It is out of such communal activity, enjoyed as an end and not for the sake of anything else, that what Roger Scruton called 'the first-person plural' of a people emerges.

Let's take stock for a moment.

Much suggests that the dollar is about to crash. Our food industry is probably on the brink of collapse. We are currently witnessing the fall of the American empire, which probably has less than a decade left. Other economies, partly due to the astoundingly imprudent response to COVID, are set to never recover. We are watching the emergence of new imperial and colonising powers, none of which appear to have civilising motives. Our governments have no coherent vision and remain utterly ill-equipped to offer a moral and practical vision for their nations. The same governments are ramping up the control of their citizens and are using highly technologized—and in many cases unlawful—means for greater control. We only have a shadow of a society, given that marriage and the family have been almost completely corrupted. Children and young adults are queuing up to have their genitalia mutilated, and their guardians are not only not protecting them but encouraging them. The leading cause of death in the West for people between ages 5-34 is suicide. There has never been such distrust between the sexes. We are undergoing such a radical demographic decline that Europe's settled peoples will hardly exist in half a century. Great Britain is successfully keeping its numbers up by having almost no effective immigration policy, allowing an intake of around 100,000 immigrants per year of people who largely do not understand the ancient constitution and culture of this little island, nor want to. Our ecclesiastical institutions, which should be the first to successfully engage in the emerging value-based discourse, are rotting cesspits of moral and financial corruption, filled with faithless and self-serving clerics who are falling over each other to appease the world and its prince. Our leaders are ceasing to lead. Our universities are ceasing to teach. Our courts are ceasing to apply the law. Our Churches are ceasing to sanctify.

We are completely unready for what is coming. And the oft-suggested formation of 'parallel communities' is not a solution. It is into your society that you were born; it is to that society that you have obligations; it is that society that must be redeemed; it is to that society that you have a mission. Of course, it isn't clear how we will weather the coming storm, but it *is* clear that we'll have to weather it *together*. No society, no survival. So, how do we survive as a society? Well, for now, gathering as local communities for the sake of wholesome festivities isn't a bad place to start. It may seem like a small thing, but without such small things you cannot even know who you are. And the question of *who we are* is fast becoming the chief question.