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The literature and the science of ‘two cultures’ historiography

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Abstract

This paper discusses the historiography of the ‘two cultures’ controversy. C. P. Snow’s lament about the ‘two cultures’, literary and scientific, has inspired a wide range of comment—much of which begins by citing Snow and his thesis, before going on to discuss very different things. This paper focuses upon one strand of this commentary, the historical analysis of the controversy itself. A ‘historical’ analysis is defined here as one that resists the impulse to enter the argument on behalf of Snow or Leavis, to conceive of their argument in the terms that Snow defined, or to invoke their argument as a precursor to some contemporary issue. Instead, a historical interpretation registers distance between that day and this, takes the controversy itself as its object of study, and explores the tensions and associations that came to be packed into those now familiar terms. As the fiftieth anniversary of Snow’s Rede Lecture nears, this approach—rather than the repetition of clichés about the bridging of cultures—offers both analytical perspective on the controversy and interpretive possibilities for its examination.

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1. Introduction

2009 will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the scientist-turned-novelist C. P. Snow’s Rede Lecture at Cambridge University, *The two cultures and the scientific revolution* (Snow, 1959). Snow argued that intellectual life in Britain and the West was dangerously divided between ‘two cultures’, literary and scientific, and his thesis attracted an extraordinary amount of attention in Britain and beyond (Boyntinck, 1980). 2012, in turn, will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the literary critic F.R. Leavis’s notorious riposte, *Two cultures? The significance of C. P. Snow* (Leavis, 1962). Leavis challenged not the veracity of Snow’s thesis so much

as his standing to advance a thesis at all, and his ferocious polemic transformed the ‘two cultures debate’ into the ‘Snow–Leavis controversy’ (Cornelius & St. Vincent, 1964). That controversy may have subsided, but the dialogue about the ‘two cultures’ has not, and the upcoming anniversaries are certain to inspire further rounds of comment. Indeed, the reconsiderations are already underway: Radio 4 recently broadcast a two-part programme on ‘The new two cultures’ (Lythgoe, 2007), one of several recent discussions of the intellectual dichotomy that has come to be associated with C. P. Snow.¹

A consistent feature of these discussions, past as well as present, is the wide range of causes to which Snow’s thesis

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¹ I am grateful to Nafsika Thalassis for calling this programme to my attention.

has been harnessed. Today the ‘two cultures’ figures in accounts of popular science, public policy, the sociology of knowledge, postwar British history, intellectual history—and much else besides (Overbye, 2003; Council for Science and Technology, 2001; Labinger & Collins, 2001; Sandbrook, 2006; MacLean, 1988). This diversity characterized the debate that first greeted Snow’s lecture (which saw calls not only to teach science to arts students, but also for Britain to enter the space race; Lovell, 1959), and it has remained true in more recent installments (such as the identification of a new ‘two cultures’ divide between science and security after 11 September 2001; Kennedy, 2003).² This dynamic, in which laments about the ‘two cultures’ lead into discussions of very different things, helps to explain both the immediate success and the enduring resonance of Snow’s formulation. Snow’s achievement, that is, was not to inaugurate a discussion about the arts and the sciences (that topic already had a long history of its own), but rather to provide a common point of reference for various conversations about different sorts of things.³

This essay discusses the major contributions to one such conversation, the historical analysis of the Snow–Leavis controversy. Its goal is to mould various assessments into a coherent historiography. One of the challenges in writing recent history is the difficulty of distinguishing historical analysis from contemporary commentary. This is especially true in the case of the ‘two cultures’, since—as we have seen—the discussions that Snow inspired carry on today. Amid these various conversations, however, are historical accounts that offer valuable perspectives as the fiftieth anniversaries approach. The argument of this essay, then, lies in its principle of selection: a ‘historical’ account is understood here as one that resists the impulse to enter the argument on behalf of Snow or Leavis, to conceive of their argument in the terms that Snow himself posited, or to invoke their argument as a precursor to some contemporary dispute. Instead, a historical interpretation is one that takes the ‘two cultures’ controversy itself as its object of study, exploring the tensions and associations that came to be packed into those now familiar terms. The essay that follows does not claim to be comprehensive, but by discussing a half-dozen accounts in one single place it does offer a starting point for subsequent work.⁴

2.

Any assessment of the ‘two cultures’ controversy requires consideration of its two major protagonists. That

consideration might stress their unexpected similarities, as when the literary critic Lionel Trilling observed, ‘if ever two men were committed to England, Home, and Duty, they are Leavis and Snow ... in this they are as alike as two squares’ (Trilling, 1962, p. 473). Or it might point out their almost comical differences, as when the intellectual historian Stefan Collini remarks, ‘In retrospect, one can only feel that a malevolent deity setting out to design a single figure in whom the largest number of Leavis’s deepest antipathies would find themselves embodied could not have done better than to create Charles Percy Snow’ (Collini, 1993, p. xxxii). Born just ten years apart, and both shaped by their experiences of interwar Cambridge, Snow and Leavis took contradictory lessons from their contrary readings of English history. Snow believed that contemporary English society was the best of all possible worlds, in which social fluidity and material prosperity promised opportunity for the able and abundance for all. Leavis, by contrast, deplored the state of contemporary England, the steady descent of which since the seventeenth century was only being accelerated by the mass civilization of the present. With the ‘two cultures’ controversy acting as catalyst, these long-simmering differences were thrown into stark relief at the dawn of the 1960s.⁵

The rationale for examining Snow’s life has shifted along with his reputation. Literary critical accounts predominated from the 1960s (e.g. Shusterman, 1975), followed by more complete appraisals upon his death in 1980 (P. Snow, 1982; de la Mothe, 1992). Today, the reason for studying Snow is less his stature as a writer than his significance as, in David Cannadine’s phrase, ‘a man who mattered in his day’ (Cannadine, 2005a, p. 113). Cannadine explains, ‘His novels no longer command a broad or appreciative audience, but for anyone interested in certain aspects of British life between the 1920s and the 1960s, they will always remain essential reading’ (ibid.). To put the point another way, Snow matters to historians today because he mattered to contemporaries then.

Cannadine identifies three major phases in Snow’s life, from his birth in 1905 to his death three-quarters of a century later. The first phase consisted of a seemingly inexorable ascent, from Leicester to Cambridge to the House of Lords. Snow, Cannadine observes, was an outsider in more ways than one: ‘geographically (he was provincial), socio-logically (his family background was modest), and educationally (he was a grammar school boy who stayed at home for his first degree)’ (ibid., p. 102). But Percy (as he was known until his marriage to the novelist Pamela

² Thanks to Karl Galle for this reference.

³ This essay focuses on Snow, Leavis, and the ‘two cultures’ controversy in postwar Britain. For consideration of the longer, international tradition of disciplinary tensions, often referred to (misleadingly, I think) under the rubric of ‘two cultures’, see Lepenies (1988) and Rüegg (2003). The relationship between this particular controversy and that general tradition is considered in Trilling (1962) and Collini (1993), both discussed below.

⁴ The major works discussed in this essay, in order of publication, are: Trilling (1962), Collini (1993), Hollinger (1995), MacKillop (1995), Cannadine (2005a), and Edgerton (2005). It will be evident from the inclusion of Trilling’s essay that I understand ‘historical’ as a matter of approach rather than timing.

⁵ On Snow, see also P. Snow (1982), Halperin (1983), and de la Mothe (1992); on Leavis, see Bell (1988, 2000), Samson (1992), and Collini (1998). See also Collini’s introduction to the reprint of *The two cultures* (1993).

Hansford Johnson in 1950) was bright and ambitious, and this first phase of his life was marked by a series of triumphs: a scholarship to Cambridge in 1928, a Ph.D. in physical chemistry in 1930, the publication of the first volume in his *Strangers and brothers* novel sequence in 1940, C.B.E in 1943, knighthood in 1957, and entry into the House of Lords and the Labour government in 1964. His modest beginnings, followed by his subsequent successes, gave Snow a lifelong interest in status and its markers—themes that recur throughout his novels. During the fifteen years after the war, culminating in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Snow achieved an international reputation as one of the most important writers of the day.

Indeed, by 1959 Snow had achieved enough stature to be invited to deliver the prestigious Rede Lecture in Cambridge. *The two cultures and the scientific revolution* is central to the second major phase in Snow's life, that of a public figure possessed of the opportunity and confidence to pronounce on all manner of subjects. Cannadine situates Snow's performance of this role within a certain strain of the 1960s in Britain, the modernizing zeitgeist that promised to rejuvenate Britain and better the world. It was in this context that Snow's thoughts about the arts and sciences provided him with a platform to address education, the developing world, the Cold War, and much else besides. 'Here, in the 1960s, was Snow in full blizzard as a public man', Cannadine writes, 'drawing on his own varied experiences, interpreting the arts and the sciences to each other, offering sage advice to young and old alike, and setting Britain's domestic problems in a broader global context' (ibid., p. 109). Snow's ideas found receptive audiences in secondary schools and university curricula, and his spell in government from 1964 to 1966 marked the climax of the moment when his concerns (and his person) figured near the center of public affairs.

The third phase in Snow's life consisted of various disillusionments as the 1960s turned into the 1970s. Wilson's government lost its luster, Snow's novels lost their audience, and that 1960s optimism was replaced by a gloomy sense of despair. For the first extended period in his life, Snow's star was no longer rising: 'Although he had lived his life with the grain of events from 1946 to 1966, this was no longer true thereafter' (ibid., p. 112). Cannadine identifies the prizes that eluded Snow's grasp: the Order of Merit, the Nobel Prize, a Fellowship of the Royal Society. The significance of this story is not merely a matter of one man's dashed hopes, but rather the way that it tracks (and thus enables us to track) the rise and fall of the broader social attitudes to which his reputation had been tied. *The two cultures* came at the crest of those attitudes and the peak of that reputation, so that after their collapse it provides a valuable point of entry into the lost world of them both.

If Snow's biography provides backdrop for analyses of *The two cultures*, Leavis tends to enter the story as an 'intemperate Cambridge don' who functions as the anti-Snow (Sandbrook, 2006, p. 49). This narrative stacks the

deck in favor of Snow, since their argument plays out according to the rules that he set—namely, as a contest between advocates of the arts and the sciences. Leavis rejected that framework altogether, seeking not to dispute Snow's thesis but to challenge his standing. His argument, however, was all-too-easily read as confirmation of the dichotomy that Snow had identified (Huxley, 1963). One way to escape that interpretation, and thus to take Leavis at least as seriously as Snow, is to dislodge Snow from the center of the narrative. Indeed, the 'two cultures' controversy looks very different when viewed through Leavis's eyes rather than Snow's, as in the biography by the late Ian MacKillop (1995).

Leavis was born in 1895 in Cambridge, where he lived and worked for most of his life. This is not to suggest that he was seamlessly incorporated into Cambridge or its university—indeed, Leavis's personal identity and public appeal derived from his oppositional stance towards any sort of establishment. He took a Ph.D. in English in 1924, but did not secure a steady college position until 1935; a university lectureship finally came the next year. By then he and Queenie, his brilliant and indefatigable wife, had been editing the critical journal *Scrutiny* since 1932. *Scrutiny* collected readers throughout the English-speaking world, but Leavis did not attain a position on the Faculty Board in English until 1954. In 1959 he was made Reader, three years before retiring from official teaching duties. From 1965 he accepted a series of visiting positions at other universities, until his death in 1978—the year he was awarded the Companion of Honour (C.H.).

MacKillop situates the Richmond Lecture of 1962 in the 'retirement phase' of Leavis's career (ibid., p. 301). In this period Leavis focused upon securing his legacy at Downing and in Cambridge, efforts that lasted from 1960, when he first addressed his college's Governing Body on the future of English in Downing, until 1966, when his relationship with Cambridge English was finally ended. MacKillop's narrative of this period follows two connected strains: a local one, in which Leavis battled to control his succession in Downing, and a national one, in which he campaigned to raise awareness of—and opposition to—the dilution of the university by a complacent intelligentsia. The Richmond Lecture of February 1962 provided the opportunity to advance both of these programs at once, and in order to do so Leavis took as his foil the pundit and novelist C. P. Snow.

Why Snow? MacKillop identifies numerous ways that Snow was pressed to the fore of Leavis's attention at this time. Himself an undergraduate at Downing during this period, MacKillop recalls an exchange in the undergraduate magazine *Delta* when Morris Shapira, Leavis's 'lieutenant' at Downing, challenged the association between the realism admired by Leavis and that practised by Snow. 'There was a danger of Leavis and Snow being merged into a single "complex"', he concludes. 'Shapira showed Leavis that Snow was a figure from whom he had to dissociate himself' (ibid., p. 314). He then identifies two additional

occasions when the plain prose of Snow was associated with the stringent criticism of Leavis: first by Angus Wilson in *The New York Times*, and then by S. Gorley Putt in *Essays and studies* (Wilson, 1961; Putt, 1961). Those pieces were published in 1961, the same summer that Leavis picked up a copy of *The two cultures* in a bookshop in Cambridge. Snow's text was already in its ninth impression, and Leavis had become aware of it through the essays of scholarship applicants. Later that year, when the undergraduates of Downing College invited their revered don to deliver the annual Richmond Lecture, Leavis seized the opportunity to advance his vision for literary studies and the university against an intellectual establishment that he associated with Snow.

MacKillop's account of the Richmond Lecture demolishes the notion that Leavis was animated by opposition to 'science' as such. This is not to suggest that Leavis's argument was somehow sympathetic to science, merely that 'science' was marginal to Leavis's driving concerns.⁶ He intended his assault on Snow's novels and lecture to reveal the poverty of a society that could treat them both with such gravity. The title of his lecture—*Two cultures? The significance of C. P. Snow*—was thus not primarily ironic: his point was not that Snow was insignificant, but that Snow's stature was very significant indeed. MacKillop proceeds to discuss the major facets of Leavis's argument: his commitment to language, his critique of industrialism, and his pessimistic interpretation of history. He concludes with the assessment, 'It was wrong to depict the conflict between Snow and Leavis as one between the scientific and the literary. It was a conflict over history, in which Leavis was increasingly interested in the 1960s' (MacKillop, 1995, p. 325). In MacKillop's handling, the 'two cultures' controversy looks less like a conflict between science and literature, and more like a collision between contrary interpretations of the past, present, and future. By displacing Snow from the center of the story, MacKillop draws attention to this alternative dimension of the controversy.

3.

Amid the insults and indignation that attended publication of Leavis's lecture, one contemporary account stood out for its elegance and its analysis. Viewing the controversy from Columbia University in New York, Lionel Trilling published his reading of the 'Leavis–Snow controversy' in *Commentary* magazine in June 1962 (Trilling, 1962). Trilling respected Leavis and was friendly with Snow, and he deeply regretted this outbreak of hostilities between them. His contribution consisted not of merely another entry in the dispute, but rather of the effort to understand how that dispute had come about in the first place. He began by rejecting the notion that it was primarily a tussle about education or knowledge: 'we must be aware that we

are not addressing ourselves to a question of educational theory, or to an abstract contention as to what kind of knowledge has the truest affinity with the human soul. We approach these matters only to pass through them. What we address ourselves to is politics' (ibid., p. 462). Trilling thus adopted a historicist perspective that remains compelling to this day.

Trilling's essay unfolded in his characteristic style. It opened with a series of telling observations, proceeded to peel back layer after layer of meaning, and eventually arrived at an interpretation that was penetrating, original, and a little confusing. He began by relating the argument between Snow and Leavis to the exchange in the 1880s between Thomas Huxley and Matthew Arnold (Huxley, 1880; Arnold, 1882). Trilling did not reduce their argument to an imitation of that original, but rather allowed that 'the new power of science perhaps justifies a contemporary revival of the Victorian question' (ibid.). He then approached Snow's Rede Lecture by moving backward in time: first distancing himself from the 'miasma of personality-mongering' that marred the letters pages of the *Spectator*, then pausing over Leavis's lecture long enough to register his disapproval of its 'impermissible tone' (ibid., pp. 463–464). These introductory remarks were followed by sustained attention to *The two cultures* itself. Snow's initially even-handed lament, Trilling observed, actually advanced a moral indictment of literature that was intellectually indefensible; Snow's claim that the traditional culture managed the Western world was grossly mistaken; and Snow's faith in international cooperation between scientists betrayed a naive denial of geo-political realities. Leavis, of all people, should have been up to the challenge of justifying the moral function of literature against Snow's reductive assault, but for all its venom his response failed to confront Snow's actual premises.

Trilling took Leavis's uncharacteristic failure of criticism as an invitation to consider how much these two rivals actually shared in common. He pointed to their shared commitments to the creation of a new social class, one based upon taste rather than privilege. Yet in what Trilling called the modern age—'an age dominated by advertising'—this commitment to taste revealed the limitations of 'culture' as a foundation of judgment: 'In our more depressed moments', he explained, 'we might be led to ask whether there is a real difference between being The Person Who defines himself by his commitment to one or another idea of morality, politics, literature, or city-planning, and being The Person Who defines himself by wearing trousers without pleats' (ibid., p. 476). In this perspective, Snow's preference for the lifestyles of scientists, Leavis's preference for the writing of D. H. Lawrence, and the *Spectator* readers' preference for Leavis or Snow all became evidence of the extent, but also of the limitations, of this 'cultural mode of thought' (ibid., p. 477).

⁶ For further development of this point, see my 'F. R. Leavis, science, and the abiding crisis of modern civilization' (Ortolano, 2005).

Trilling suggested that the limitations of that mode, as revealed by this affair, suggested the need for an alternative basis of judgment—one neither defined nor constrained by the vagaries of time and place, and that he referred to instead as ‘the idea of Mind’ (ibid., p. 476). Even though the controversy raged at the moment he was writing, Trilling had managed both to situate the argument between Snow and Leavis in a longer tradition, and to identify the deeper stakes that animated this particular installment. In so doing, he established the criteria—and set the standard—for subsequent analyses of the ‘two cultures’ controversy.

A generation later, the successor to Trilling’s essay is Stefan Collini’s introduction to Cambridge University Press’s reprint of *The two cultures* (Collini, 1993). Like Trilling, Collini begins his essay at the dawn of the 1960s, situates *The two cultures* in historical perspective, analyzes Snow and Leavis in turn, and carries his analysis forward to the present. More importantly, and again like Trilling, Collini registers his distance from the categories offered by Snow: ‘It is fatally easy’, he warns, ‘in discussing this theme, to slip into dealing with “science” and “literature” as stable entities, frozen at one moment in time (usually the moment when our own views were first formed)’ (ibid., p. lxv). Instead of adopting Snow’s categories, Collini attends to their shifting meanings and associations. He relates *The two cultures* to a pair of historical contexts: the emergence of ‘science’ as a professional pursuit in the nineteenth century, and the enthusiasm for ‘modernization’ in British society and culture after the Second World War. Snow—born in 1905, educated in the 1920s, and at the peak of his reputation in the 1950s—figured as a product of the former and an advocate of the latter, and Collini’s essay is especially good at identifying the ways in which his views of science and society were forged in the Cambridge of the 1930s.⁷

Collini then shows Leavis the same attention and sympathy that distinguishes his discussion of Snow. Where others have read Leavis’s denunciation of Snow’s lecture as the product of personal pique, Collini situates this *ad hominem* quality within a mode of literary criticism that does not distinguish between ideas and their expression (ibid., p. xxxvi). He then goes on to identify a series of issues that characterized and charged the early 1960s, connecting the debate to ideas and anxieties about Sputnik, social class, meritocracy, university expansion, and Harold Wilson’s ‘white heat’. Collini and Trilling thus both identify and discuss the ways in which the ‘two cultures’ controversy was at once specific to its moment and informed by history. Indeed, it is precisely this tension that enables Collini to explain the apparent surfeit of emotion generated by the lectures: ‘The “Leavis–Snow controversy” can obviously be seen as a re-enactment of a familiar clash in English cultural history—the Romantic versus the Utilitarian, Cole-

ridge versus Bentham, Arnold versus Huxley, and other less celebrated examples’, he writes. ‘And in this kind of cultural civil war, each fresh engagement is freighted with the weight of past defeats, past atrocities; for this reason there is always more at stake than the ostensible cause of the current dispute’ (ibid., p. xxxv).

4.

With regard to Trilling, Collini notes ‘the sense of perspective which cultural distance brings’ (ibid., p. xxxix), and the same could be said of the contribution to ‘two cultures’ historiography by the American intellectual historian David Hollinger (1995). Hollinger’s interpretation of *The two cultures* arrives at the end of an argument about American intellectual history in the mid twentieth century. The title of his paper gives a sense of its subject: ‘Science as a weapon in *Kulturkämpfe* in the United States during and after World War II’. Hollinger identifies the deployment of various ‘scientific’ values—including cosmopolitanism, disinterestedness, honesty, tolerance, democracy, and secularism—by liberal intellectuals in a series of campaigns from the 1940s to the 1960s. These intellectuals harnessed ‘scientific’ values against their cultural and political rivals, including advocates of (and apologists for) fascism, Catholicism, anti-Semitism, totalitarianism, communism, and McCarthyism. Hollinger draws particular attention to the novelty and contingency of this cosmopolitan program, charting not only its advance in the formation of a ‘scientific public culture’ after the war, but also the challenges it met in the form of postmodern critique beginning in the 1970s (ibid., pp. 451, 453).

Snow enters this story, rather unexpectedly, as another in this series of liberal intellectuals wielding the values associated with ‘science’ against their political rivals. In this account, however, Snow figures as more of an innovator than in those that focus on the British story alone: his depiction of a progressive and democratic scientific culture fits into the program that Hollinger depicts, but Snow located his political opponents in an unexpected place: ‘the English department’ (ibid., p. 448). Hollinger explains that Snow lodged *political* charges against a *humanist* professoriate—specifically, against what he depicted as the reactionary defenders of literary modernism. ‘Snow accused the literati of perpetuating and celebrating a mythology of blood and history that had politically reactionary consequences’, he writes. ‘The modernists were basically cryptofascists’ (ibid.). Snow’s intervention was significant in two ways. First, it pushed an implicit rivalry between rival secular programs—one scientific, the other artistic—into the open; and second, it did so precisely at the moment that literary intellectuals were beginning to reconsider their own commitment to modernism. Although they were unlikely to rally around a scientific propagandist

⁷ Another account of Snow and *The two cultures* that considers the importance of social status is Porter (1994).

and inferior novelist such as Snow, Hollinger suggests that these intellectuals eventually advanced their own criticisms of modernism through a postmodernist politics associated with Foucault.

Collini and Hollinger both demonstrate, then, how contextualization of the ‘two cultures’ episode opens new possibilities for interpretation. Collini places Snow and Leavis within what we might think of as a *vertical* narrative: they emerge as inheritors of a conflict with nineteenth-century origins, one that adopts particular inflections after the Second World War. Hollinger, by contrast, situates Snow and Leavis in a *horizontal* perspective, relating Snow and Leavis not to their predecessors Huxley and Arnold but to their contemporaries Robert Merton and James Conant. In both accounts, however, *The two cultures* figures as a particular articulation of a broader tradition; and in both accounts, Snow and Leavis are shown to have been participants in something larger than the ‘arts-versus-sciences’ rivalry posited at the time.

No less provocative a reinterpretation is offered by David Edgerton (2005).⁸ Indeed, Edgerton’s analysis is even more iconoclastic than Hollinger’s: rather than identifying a different context in which to situate *The two cultures*, Edgerton reads *The two cultures* so as to revise our understanding of the British context itself. Although he is critical of Snow, Edgerton would not agree with the assessment of Dominic Sandbrook when he declares, ‘Snow’s rather fatuous argument would probably have been forgotten had it not been for the furious response of F. R. Leavis’ (Sandbrook, 2006, p. 49). To the contrary, Edgerton takes the status of Snow and the reception of *The two cultures* to be very significant indeed: ‘In the real Britain’, he reminds us, ‘it is Snow who makes Leavis famous for most of the lay population’ (Edgerton, 2005, p. 194). Edgerton’s approach is not to deny Snow’s significance, but rather—like Leavis nearly a half century ago, and like Cannadine more recently—to *read* that status for what it can reveal about postwar British society and culture more generally.

Edgerton’s argument is part of his revisionist interpretation of British culture and the state in the twentieth century, an argument developed most fully in *Warfare state: Britain, 1920–1970* (Edgerton, 2006).⁹ Broadly speaking, Edgerton’s objective in this work is two-fold: to demon-

strate the importance of science, technology, expertise, and the military to the modern British state, but also to explain how the fact of this ‘warfare state’ came to be marginalized in the historical record. The disjuncture between reality and ideology is central to this project—as Edgerton explains, ‘we should not confuse particular arguments about the nature of the state’s policies for research, with the state’s actual policies. There was, putting it mildly, a gap between the commentary of the scientific intellectuals and the practices of the state’ (Edgerton, 2005, p. 201). Snow’s biography as a recruiter of scientific and technical personnel during and after the Second World War, and as a spokesman for the new Ministry of Technology from 1964–1966, makes him significant to the first of these arguments: the very existence of such a career, Edgerton suggests, contradicts Snow’s own claims about the marginal status of science and technology to the modern British state. But it is the second of his arguments, regarding the process by which this history came to be erased, that pushes Snow and *The two cultures* to the center of Edgerton’s attention.

The title of Edgerton’s essay identifies the key elements of his analysis: ‘C. P. Snow as anti-historian of British science: Revisiting the technocratic moment, 1959–1964’. The ‘technocratic moment’ refers to the window when a technocratic critique of British culture and institutions flourished. This critique was aligned with anxieties about Britain’s supposed economic decline, which it explained as the result of mistakes that could have been avoided by a more technocratic establishment, but its most lasting achievement lay in its influence on subsequent analyses of culture and the state.¹⁰ Yet the assertion that science and technology were marginalized in British culture is, in Edgerton’s analysis, contradicted not least by the enthusiastic reception that greeted this critique—a reception that testified not to the marginal status of science and technology, but rather to a widespread commitment to them both.¹¹ The ‘technocratic moment’ figures as the moment when the commitment to science and technology fed—and was fed by—laments about their absence, and ‘anti-history’ is Edgerton’s term for this curious spiral of denial when read backward into history. ‘Anti-histories’, that is, are historical accounts that erase their own subjects, and *The two cultures* figures as

⁸ Edgerton’s article is part of a special issue of *History of Science* entitled, ‘Two cultures?’ This issue includes an introduction by Theodore Porter and analyses of various historical episodes by Paul White, Anna-K. Mayer, and myself (Edgerton, 2005; Porter, 2005; White, 2005; Mayer, 2005; Ortolano, 2005). The issue thus offers a model of how conflicts between fields can profitably be analyzed: not as the trans-historical identification of tensions between cultures, but rather as a diverse collection of episodes that somehow fit within, even as they problematize, that general tradition.

⁹ This article is an excerpted version of Chapter 5 of *Warfare state*. The full chapter includes an analysis of P. M. S. Blackett alongside its reading of Snow and *The two cultures*.

¹⁰ Most influentially, Martin Wiener’s *English culture and the decline of the industrial spirit* (Wiener, 1981). In the preface to the recent second edition, Wiener explicitly connects the context out of which his argument emerged to the concerns of what Edgerton labels the ‘technocratic moment’—for instance, Arthur Koestler’s ‘Suicide of a nation?’ collection of 1963 (Wiener, 2004, p. xiii; Koestler 1963). For discussion of the relations between ‘Suicide of a nation?’, economic ‘decline’, and British historiography, see Tomlinson (2000), Edgerton (2006), and my own “Decline” as a weapon in cultural politics’ (Ortolano, 2008).

¹¹ On the importance of science and technology in postwar Britain, Cannadine lends support to Edgerton: ‘The scientists still complained that they had insufficient influence and inadequate resources, but in the age of Todd and Blackett and Mott they had far more than they had ever dreamed of in the age of Rutherford or Thomson or Rayleigh’ (Cannadine, 2005b, p. 210). He also suggests that, if indeed there were two cultures in 1960s Britain, it was science rather than the arts that boasted influence in government.

anti-history *par excellence*.¹² Snow's Rede Lecture, Edgerton shows, was an influential anti-history of British science and technology, an account of science and technology that despaired of their absence: 'Snow's was an extreme form of anti-history in which he managed to erase the history of the development of British science and technology from the historical record' (Edgerton, 2005, p. 193). And while *The two cultures* may have been exemplary in its impact, it is also representative of the kinds of accounts that flourished during the 'technocratic moment'. The force of Edgerton's interpretation of *The two cultures*, then, is to read this familiar text in an unfamiliar way, one that forces reconsideration at once of its argument, its context, and its legacy.

5. Conclusion

From the moment that C. P. Snow concluded his Rede Lecture in May 1959, discussions about the 'two cultures' have proliferated steadily. This essay began by observing that a consistent feature of these discussions has been the range of concerns to which the 'two cultures' has been yoked. This pattern is likely to be repeated in the coming few years, as we approach the fiftieth anniversary first of Snow's lecture and then of Leavis's response. Yet the ability of commentators to adapt the 'two cultures' to various ends has ensured that many of these discussions tend to recycle their claims. It is thus all too common to read that the 'two cultures' are converging, or that some new development promises to bridge them, or that present circumstances render their continued separation intolerable, or that there is, after all, only one culture (Dimock & Wald, 2002). The circulation of such clichés results from the multiplicity of conversations taking the 'two cultures' as their touchstone: they may share a common point of departure, but they lack a common body of knowledge.

In order to facilitate subsequent analysis, and in hopes of informing subsequent discussion, this essay has identified and discussed the historiography of the 'two cultures' controversy. Despite their differences of intent and focus, the works discussed here share a skeptical stance towards the terms of the debate as defined by its contemporaries. In the biographical analyses of Cannadine and MacKillop, the historical perspectives of Trilling and Collini, and the revisionist interpretations of Hollinger and Edgerton, the argument between Snow and Leavis figures as something more than either a personal dispute or an ongoing conversation. Instead—in different ways, and for different reasons—these accounts are attentive to the particularities that distinguish the argument from the confines of its tradition. With the sharpening of analysis that comes with the passage of time, the argument between Snow and Leavis may finally be escaping what has been called the 'murky

limbo' between present and past (Collini, 1993, p. ix). The 'two cultures' controversy, that is, is taking its place squarely *within* history: not as part of an ongoing discussion about our world, but rather as a revealing point of entry into another.

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* denotes work under discussion

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¹² There is a suggestive parallel between Edgerton on scientists' accounts of scientists, and Collini on intellectuals' accounts of intellectuals: they both discuss familiar historical narratives that deny the existence of their objects of study (Collini, 2006). Together these books represent an important development in twentieth-century British history, as it shifts towards explaining, rather than adopting, interpretations that have been inherited from past actors.

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