

Introduction: Culture and Tyranny

Jacques Barzun

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When our children ask us, twenty years from now, “What did you accomplish in those days?” we shall perhaps be glad to answer, like the French revolutionist after the Terror, “I survived.” Those who look about them today are inclined to despair – to despair of accomplishment, of civilization, of life itself. Any five or ten years seem an eternity when they are years filled with hatred, poisoned faith, and unspeakable violence. Yet by an effort of the will over the impressionable senses it is possible to see in those same years – whether five or twenty-five – the emergence of a great lesson that we have fairly bought with the lives of others and the anguish of our own deepest selves.

Amid all the distractions of the contemporary chaos we have learned that the things worth living for, the things we lump together under the name of culture and civilization, have to be defended at first hand. Our old belief that by doing something else in the name of an ideal – usually something violent – we could at one stroke achieve an all-round felicity has once more proved an illusion. The events in Russia, Spain, China, Italy, Germany, India, Africa have made it perfectly clear that the absolute dogmas and authoritarian systems which bid for our admiration and support not only are not doing what is claimed for them but are doing just the opposite.

The governmental efficiency that kills, jails, or expels the men of science and art is not efficiency; the social revolution that makes life more uncertain, that turns moral independence into a capital crime and espionage into the chief of the liberal arts, is not social and not revolution. The scientific methods and philosophic creeds that make men less and less thinking creatures and more and more gullible automata are not scientific and philosophic, but pseudo-scientific and sophistical. They do not lead to ends, but to the forgetting of ends in the application of means. They narcotize the intelligent and mean death to the articulate.

In the United States as in every other democratic country, the need today is for a searching of the heart to discover what democracy really wants and how it can insure the fulfillment of its choice. It may choose death for itself and others; it may choose life on certain terms or unconditionally. Life without conditions can be achieved very simply by giving up and waiting – sitting and perishing in due course. Life under certain conditions of civilization means a fighting faith training its critical guns on what is daily offered us in the guise of government, education, science, art, dogma, cures, and creeds.

The necessity for this faith and this critical war in our own culture is the great lesson of the recent past. It is not so much a new discovery as the rediscovery of a forgotten truth. And with the rediscovery we have learned the reason of our forgetfulness: we had become weary and lazy; we wanted short cuts to happiness and peace; we hoped to find rules of thumb that would answer every purpose; we were willing to join a party, sign a pledge, even enlist in an army, provided it was guaranteed to bring about the end of our troubles, by which we really meant make the last claim on our intelligence. The “distrust of intelligence,” the “retreat from reason,” were names given in alarm to what was thought to be a movement and was after all only a desertion.

But if, as every symptom warns us, civilized life is the strenuous goal of democracy, if a diversified and vigilant culture is at once the source and the product of successful democracy, then our duty is to go over the common assumptions about familiar things, scrape the rust off our habitual opinions and see if there is any bright metal beneath, or only an oxidized mass of crumbling prejudices.

The first of these prejudices is to believe that our choice is a political one when it is, as a matter of fact, cultural. We think that we can deal with matters that involve our life and liberty by acting as partisans, whereas the very thing we want can only be achieved by acting as artisans. I mean by this, taking and rejecting in the light of purpose, regardless of groups, labels, and the mock scrimmage of politics. I shall develop the point in my next chapter, but a single example now will make my meaning clear. People who

appreciate the importance of education in a democracy often ask me whether I am for or against John Dewey and Progressive Education. The form of the question is political; it is a bid for a party vote, to which I return the cultural answer: I work *for* individualized teaching, *for* the breakdown of artificial divisions between school subjects, but *against* amateur psychiatry in the classroom and *against* the failure to teach the three R's. My interlocutor sometimes insists: "But are you for it as a whole, Yes or No? Don't sit on the fence!" As well ask, am I for the Atlantic Ocean? I swim in it with pleasure, but deplore tidal waves and fail to see a fence in the distinction.

The fence is of course as imaginary as the possibility of voting about the ocean. Education of any kind is not a whole. It is a name for a series of practices, some of which are absurd and some admirable. Why anyone should relinquish his sacred right of criticism and blind his judgment of concrete particulars by either endorsing or rejecting the abstract "whole" would be inexplicable, were it not for the presence of the political-minded among us who see fences everywhere, too often across the path of those who are attending to their cultural business by reenforcing what they approve and combating what they deplore.

No doubt there are emergencies when we cannot take time to distinguish: we must leave a ship not wholly rotten and take to a dinghy not wholly sound, but creating false emergencies of this kind within a going culture is a form of sabotage which leads straight to the evils we would avoid. The all-or-none policy is the retreat from reason. It is the dueler's false heroism which risks two lives on a Yes or No. And the habit of giving and taking the challenge, which masquerades as Choice, prepares our minds for tyranny – tyranny being nothing but the forcing and accepting of a single answer to a diversity of problems. It is a blind, deaf, and dumb machine that repeats the same operation in all circumstances and regardless of what material is thrown to it.

The human mind at its best works in precisely the opposite way: in art, in science, in a truly progressive education or democratic society, it seeks to distinguish differences and to deal with each appropriately. Freedom is in this sense native to the human mind; but being difficult to establish in

a world full of conflicting minds, it generates the institutions of political democracy. Democracy is thus the result and not the cause of our deep-seated desire for diversity, freedom, and tolerance. It follows – and this is the twofold thesis of this book – that culture must be free if men’s bodies are to be free; and culture perishes if we think and act like absolutists. Tyranny, like its opposite, Charity, begins at home, but unlike it, alas, does not stay there. Before I go on to elaborate this point of view and warn of dangers by studying certain elements of present-day American culture a word or two must be said about the term “culture” as it should be understood in this book.

For some people culture has acquired a bad name owing to its association with advertisements of five-foot shelves and quick methods for addressing the waiter in French. For others, who read sociology and anthropology, culture has come to mean all the ways of thinking and behaving in a given society. Between these two extremes there is a meaning which it is important to rescue from oblivion. In this sense culture means consciousness as opposed to brute fact, the pictures in our minds as opposed to measurable economic, political, or physical reality. This use of the word “culture” bestows no honorific title: the newspaper is culture as well as the obscurest poem; jazz is culture as well as the symphony. Culture naturally has roots in hard, unyielding, measurable things, but these do not infallibly determine it. Consequently freedom is possible and diversity inevitable. The material fact that transatlantic jet service is now commonplace may make us think of Europe as nearer or of ourselves as better than our ancestors, of scientists as demigods or of the capitalist system as justified by its fruits. The basic fact begins to take effect only when we have made some such inference from it, or, more often, when we have wrapped up the fact and the inference in a single image which is our “opinion” on the subject, so that if a discussion of science or progress or capitalism comes up, we say, “Take, for example, the fact that yesterday at this time I was in,” etc. . . .

Opinion, we all instinctively feel, is vastly important for freedom. Nothing brings tyranny home to us so vividly as the stifling of opinion, and all the great political prisoners of history, from the Prisoner of Chillon down,

have always boasted that their bodies might be in chains but their minds were free. That fact marks the superiority of a dungeon in the past over “liberty” in a modern totalitarian state. The new millennium promises the better life, but it turns ordinary men into suspicious, terrified, and cruel beasts, in whom the possibility of political democracy has died, because the cultural source of freedom has been quenched. In other words, the great fields of opinion in a culture are also fields of practice, for it is our beliefs that make us act as we do; it is through our acts that our opinions make a difference.

For us to-day, as I contend, the great difference running through all our activities and all our thoughts is that between absolutism and relativism; between uniformity and many-sidedness; between the rigid and the appropriate. To establish the thesis that men’s bodies cannot long be free if their culture is shot through with absolutism, I shall try to unmask and to discredit on grounds of theory and practical reason the main forms of cultural absolutism. I shall begin by developing the point just made that Democracy is simply an age-old desire for a free culture; then go on to discover whether democratic culture is indeed decadent; analyze the effects of hostile tyrannies upon the modern artistic forms of that culture; and suggest an answer to the problem, What can a democracy expect from its people in the way of great social-minded art? I must next consider the way our minds and our desires create not only culture with a capital C but what we call reality with a capital R, and show how we can handle and change that reality without giving ourselves up to the irrational, to activism and violence.

Such a discussion necessarily leads us to examine the function of science, which is supposed to discover reality, and of social science, which is supposed to help improve it. On the borderline between the two grows superstition, to which attention must be paid in the form of race belief and the supposed “tyranny of words” which breeds propaganda. Opposing truth to propaganda, and persuasion to coercion, raises the question of education in all its forms: how to transmit a democratic culture unimpaired to the young without torturing or crippling them in the process. Lastly, if abandoning violent creeds we rely on education as a means of improving the future, we

must recognize the limitations of that improvement while refining on the directions it can take. This itinerary, if rightly drawn, should bring us back to the faith that democracy is a way of living and thinking which is prerequisite to all the other freedoms we want to attain.

But these landmarks along our journey are not the landscape itself. The journey through it will, I think, be found less abstract, richer in particulars. For the ideas and conduct of men engaged in the four great divisions of our cultural life – art, science, education, and government – will have to be shown in either their democratic or their absolutist guise. The teacher, the critic, the scientist and social scientist, the artist and the patron of the arts, the psychoanalyst, and the “statist” (as Bacon’s contemporaries neatly termed the thinking politician) will be considered as they foster or mar the sum total of democratic life we enjoy. Our dealings with them will be critical and historical in method, but always contemporary in purpose. We accordingly turn the page and begin our consideration of democracy as a culture.