Mr. Eric Newsone

WESTERN CULTURE IN RELATION TO THE THIRD WORLD

I

The history of hunmankind is essentially the record of man's action on external nature, his increasing control and modification of natural forces and his development of material production. It is of course within and as a result of such action and of such development that man also modifies himself through the extended application and strengthening of his faculties. And it is through this process, the development of human faculties in the context of material production, that human culture arises and takes distinctive form.

Every society elaborates its own specific culture, which is more or less advanced insofar as the particular society is more or less developed economically. But whatever characteristic forms or manifestations a specific culture may take, culture has always to be considered in relation to two major functions. The first of these is of course the material function: culture consists of everthing that men have built or adapted as distinct from the raw materials of nature. In other words, culture includes buildings, weapons, machines, tools and all forms of equipment. It is from these aspects of culture that we obtain our environment, our way of life, our economic power. Culture in its material sense grows out of man's struggle with nature, first for bare existence and then for improvements in the conditions of human life.

Yet in the course of that struggle and the necessary development of material culture, man himself develops and experiences modification. He becomes conscious of himself as a subject, as an actor, in confronting nature and in confronting, or co-operating with, other men or groups of men. In transforming nature men also transform themselves. Their tastes, ideas and aspirations change in accordance with changes in the condition of their lives; and at the same time their aspirations, their tastes and their ideas act upon their lives to produce a still further change.

We can therefore consider culture in two distinct ways: the material and the intellectual, culture as an skill and culture as idea, as technical advance and as creative achievement. Each of course penetrates and influences the other: printing, photography and sound recording are obvious enough examples of this process. The growth of technique advances creative culture, which in turn makes new technical demands on material culture or leads to new applications. A striking and very recent illustration of the way in which material and creative culture are inseparably intertwined is provided by a surprising yet very close connection between two activities

that might at first sight seem wholly disparate-the popular cinema and military training.

A demand by western audiences for greater levels of visual realism and increasingly exciting special effects in modern adventure thrillers (specifically, films glorifying the adventures of a fictitious imperialist agent) led during the 1970s to the development of new and elaborate devices capable of simulating fire, explosions, crashes, bomb attacks and all the characteristics of a modern battle in a completely authentic and convincing way-yet without causing the slightest harm to actors or film crew. This technical facility, initiated in order to increase the profit accruing from commercial entertainment, has now (1983) been utilized and extended by the British army as a new and significant element in its military training programme. Thus the creative, or at least the commercial, requirements of cinema initiate an advance in technical progress; and the outcome subsequently finds additional and previously undreamed- of application in an entirely different field or sphere of action.

The close connection of material and creative culture can thus be seen as incontestable. Yet the word 'culture', even the phrase 'creative culture', remains indistinct and inadequately defined. To speak of 'culture' loosely and unthinkingly in accordance with much contemporary western usage, to utilize the phrase 'creative culture' merely as signifying an elevated or superior style, as a refined form of music or literature, as referring to levels of professional excellence or amateur leisure activity, is to limit and debase its meaning. If we wish to do more than merely invoke it more or less vaguely, more or less glibly, -if in fact we wish to understand what we actually mean by 'creative culture', we must abandon any idea of culture as a simple and monolithic concept and instead seek to examine it more analytically.

We may think of culture in terms of objects and artefacts which we find desirable because they seem to us to be aesthetically attractive: the physically beautiful.

We may apply the term to objects and appliances which are especially efficient and effective because they are closely adapted to a specific use or purpose: the functionally beautiful.

We may wish to signify a quality in an individual man which we consider noble, virtuous or heroic: the morally beautiful.

Or we may wish to praise an individual, or a group, dedicated to his own community or more generally to public service: the socially or the politically beautiful.

All these different strands are implicit in creative culture. They may be, and in complex modern societies they now frequently are, considered as separate functions unconnected with each other; yet they should ideally be fused as indivisible elements of the virtue and excellence to which every

man ought to aspire.

To do the useful thing, to say the courageous thing, to contemplate the beautiful thing: that is enough for one man's life.[1]

The man who can say this of himself, or of whom it can be said by others, is truly a cultured man - one who not only experiences culture but who also in some form transmits it. Culture, we may assert, is not a matter of luxury articles to be consumed only by the rich. It is not a stylish and elegant way of life to be enjoyed only by the rich. It is not some abstract, disembodied process of thought or feeling, which springs out of the psychology of a privileged individual functioning in isolation, and which then simply exists in order to be admired by others.

On the contrary: culture is a function of man in society, of man anchored in his environment and acting upon it.

II

In transforming nature men transform themselves, thus giving rise to material and creative culture. This process takes place in all societies. Yet it does so not only to a more or less elaborated and complicated extent; it also manifests itself in very different ways. Biological equality and genetic uniformity do not result in the production of a single human culture but of many distinct cultures, many different levels of achievement and performance. Different peoples, equally endowed in genetic and biological terms, tread separate paths towards differentiated goals, and in so doing construct and create cultures that take very varied forms. The fact that they confront different configurations of economic possibilities and problems is of course a sufficient explanation of this.

Thus every society, from its own particular economic and material base, formulates its own intellectual and creative universe, its own specific and distinctive culture, with forms that may be more or less advanced than those of others but which are above all more or less closely appropriate to its own needs.

Why then should any one society pay attention to the culture of another? Clearly any society utilizes a huge legacy of skill and knowledge which it has itself accumulated over a long period of time. Yet in constructing its own creative and intellectual framework, the particular pattern that constitutes its distinctive culture, each society does so in a highly selective way.

The cultural pattern of any civilization makes use of a certain segment of the great arc of potential human purposes and motivations. The great arc along which all the possible human behaviours are distributed is far too

---

(1) T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry* (1967; originally, 1932), p. 13.

immense and too full of contradiction for any one culture to utilize even any considerable portion of it. Selection is the first requirement. Without selection no culture could even achieve intelligibility.(1)

Freedom to select is of course in some ways limited, and cultural diversity is sometimes more apparent than real. All human beings have identical biological needs, and all human societies have to cope with certain basic functions. Yet the necessity of selection, together with economic differences, explain the existence of differing qualities and characteristics in one culture as distinct from those which may be present in another. It is for these reasons that European perceptions of what constitutes either aesthetic or moral beauty may often be strongly at variance with those esteemed in eastern or third world countries. And it is for these reasons too that there are very considerable disparities in both functional and social culture.

The functionally beautiful is unarguably embodied at its highest level of development in advanced western technology. There are some important points to be made about this fact.

— Because advanced technology is an outcome of western culture, it occurs to many people in the West that they are justified in feelings of pride and in a sense of superiority. Yet if they would care to consider the centuries of oppression and exploitation, the resources sucked remorselessly out of so many other countries, that have gone to the creating of this technology, they would perhaps realise that the pride is false, the superiority wholly unjustified.
— Feelings of guilt, a sense of shame, would be a more relevant response.
— Feelings of true generosity, a desire for equality, would be more practically useful and therefore more appropriate.

Because advanced technology is an enormous resource, it occurs to many people both in East and West to prize it very highly. Up to a certain point they are of course right to do so. Yet we must always seek to remain humanly in control of this resource. We must manage and handle the technology with great care. Technology can cease to be a promise or an aid and become instead a threat or an injury. It can dehumanise men, turning them into nothing other than objects amid an intense and mindless proliferation of objects.

If we judge western culture in terms of its own technological performance we are unlikely to be deceived by any parading of humanitarianism, any show of false generosity, any alleged concern with the mind or the spirit. The celebrated Cartesian formula *Je pense, donc je suis,* I think therefore. I'm, has been translated into a wholly different reality: to be is to consume; to be is to possess; to be is to multiply possessions through a sy-

(1) Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (1967; originally, 1935), p. 171.

stematic exploitation of others.

Of course no society can remain static. Its progress must be maintained and whenever possible accelerated. When we consider culture in its material aspect and in terms of the functionally beautiful, culture as skill or as technique, then, however cautiosly it may be approached, there are very obvious advantages for a third world society to utilize on its own terms and for its own benefit the technical advances made by the West. The essentials here, surely, are avoidance of the detritus that accompanies technology in the West -and avoidance of any confusion concerning the difference between modernisation and development, of any doubt as to whom the benefit accrues.

In our contemporary world access to advanced technology, however it may subsequently be applied, is usually a matter controlled by government or by commerical policy as dictated by the West. Specialist technical skill, even when it is not shackled by considerations of politics or security, is not made generously available but is almost always considered as a commodity and almost always carries an espensive price-tag.

Yet even in the modern world the spread and availability of technical culture can occasionally be subject to illogicality. Some decades ago, in a gesture of false generosity which was designed as a contribution to the spreading of western culture in Japan, the British Council despatched to Tokyo vast quantities of musty Victorian literature which were surplus to requirements in Britain. With them, rather curiously, went some copies of a technical manual giving detailed instructions in motor mechanics. The Japanese pepole, whatever interest they may or may not have taken in minor Victorian novels, studied these manuals with exemplary diligence. A year later some Japanese businessmen arranged a visit to Britain and asked to be taked on a tour of car assembly plants. And a year or two after that the first Japanese cars were ready for export.

Such an example of the dissemination of technology by simply giving it away is perhaps rare: but it neatly illustrates the advantage to the third world of studying English as a foreign language, if only for technical purposes.

III

The socially and politically beautiful, in contrast, is not embodied in advanced western societies; and in this vital area of human culture there is no such thing as western superiority. If we consider the greed, the waste, the obsession with material success that shape and dominate the western world, we must surely conclude that these things do not constitute freedom and indeed are not compatible with it. In social terms there are two simple yet overwhelming facts that daily proclaim themselves. The western world

contains millions who own property, eat well, receive an education, enjoy holidays abroad, go to the theatre, listen to Mozart. But in the third world while there are some societies working progressively, there are many more millions who own little or nothing except the rags that cover their underfed bodies, who do not recive enough food and enough education, who rarely go far from their own village and who have no access to even simple forms of recreation and stimulus. The plight of Sri Lankan workers on tea plantations owned by British and American companies is only one example of this.

Technology divorced from social and political vision does not prepare the way to freedom. America proclaims itself as the land of liberty. But this is not liberty. It is a devastation. And from Vietnam to Grenada, or to Palestine and Lebanon, it continues to oppress.

We do not accept America's logic while America refuses to let us live as free people. Dialogue with America is like dialogue with the deaf. It is useless.(1)

How can it be otherwise? Where great wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few, deprivation suffocates the many - and the moral and social vision of the whole society is blinded. The liberty so loudly trumpeted, so powerfully defended, by the White House, is liberty only for a minority. That is to say, it is no freedom at all. The Statue of Liberty is a grandiose deception. The Liberty Bell is hopelessly cracked. The reality is oppression backed up by Awacs.

We will not find social and political vision in a society that glorifies the consumer of the object. To locate this category of culture we must therefore look elsewhere. To find the strength, the courage, the progressive will capable of transforming the social and economic relationships of men we must turn to peoples who have developed these qualities in the course of centuries of exploitation by others, and who have marched towards freedom through fires of suffering and struggle. They are the former slaves who have themselves broken the chains. They have not been set free by the generous and loving hands of others but have achieved their own liberation from the status of object, of non-person, of unfree. They, more fully than any others, know what dialogue means, what collective effort means, what the socially and politically beautiful means.

It is therefore in the third world, and not in the West, that the prospect of a fuller, richer, more progressive life, both individually and collectively, can be found.

We may wish to argue, therefore, that it is only at the level of technology, only in terms of the functional, that third world societies should ap-

---

(1) Muammar Al-Gadhafi, *Speech on the occasion of the fourteenth anniversary of the great First -of- September Revolution*, p. 10.

proach the West. When we turn from technical and material culture to the social and political sphere, we can see that there is nothing to be learned from the West. Similarly, when we consider creativity the advantages of western culture may not seem especially relevant or important. They may not even appear evident at all.

Again in very general terms we may ask why any one society should pay particular attention to the culture of another people very different in its way of life. Why, to be more specific, should people living and struggling in a developing or third world country concern themselves in any way with the creative expressions of a region that is materially advanced but in other terms crucially deficient? What benefit can such a concern conceivably confer upon them? What can western culture mean to the third world?

It is possible to suggest that in the interests of survival and of self-defence it is wise to know an enemy, whether actual or potential, as fully as possible. But there are of course wider perspectives than that. All cultures are constructed and created selectively and in response to varying economic factors. It follows, therefore, that no one culture could be described accurately as fully responsive to all human potential - that no one culture constitutes a Utopia. Thus any one culture is always, in theory, capable of receiving from as well as donating to another.

The different goals that different cultures pursue, the different aims that are reflected in their distinctive forms and institutions, are essential data for an understanding of alternative, and sometimes confronting socio-cultural orders. Such understanding can be presented as being inherently desirable. More importantly, however, it can be said that through knowing others more fully we also more fully know ourselves.

We may train ourselves to pass judgement upon the dominant traits of our own civilization. It is difficult enough for anyone brought up under their power to recognize them. It is still more difficult to discount, upon necessity, our predilection for them. They are as familiar as an old loved homestead. Any world in which they do not appear seems to us cheerless and untenable. Just at the very point where there is greatest likelihood of the need of criticism, we are bound to be least critical.[1]

It is all too easy for any one of us to overlook our own shortcomings or fail to discern where we go wrong. But the study of another culture, and especially of one that is in some ways richly elaborated, should -in theory- help us to know our own more completely, to evaluate it more objectively, and thus to assist us in the task of strengthening and extending it.

In more traditional terms we may wish to argue that it is futile to limit either aesthetic or intellectual study to the work of one individual artist or

---

(1). Ruth Benedict, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

thinker, even if the man in question is a genius; and that it is equally foolish and blinkered to confine ourselves to the creative output of one society or of one pepole only. We may wish to contrast forms of local narrow-mindedness with forms of international dialogue. Yet such propositions, however correct they may in theory seem, are too vague and too generalised to be of much use. In practice we all know perfectly well that total cultural isolation is scarcely possible; and we may, as internationalists and progressives, assert that such isolation would in any case be damaging and undesirable. But the reality is in practice often a very different matter. Thus, in order to develop this theme at all fully, it becomes necessary to consider ways in which one culture can and in fact does act upon and influence others.

There are of course more ways than one.

IV

Differences in culture frequently operate as symbolic borderlines that strengthen the frontiers thrown up by race and politics. This has however not always been the case. In the ancinnt Mediterranean world, however great its faults and deficiencies, skin colour was not considered important. In the great racial and cultural melting-pot of the Roman Empire, social and economic divisions, great though they were, did not correspond to ethnic categories. Such flexibility is rare. Cultural, political and ethnic frontiers have usually combined to crect formidable barriers separating a group known as 'us' from other groups known as 'them'.

The concept of cultural if not of racial superiority is in fact extremely long- standing, and it can be traced at least as far back as the classical Greeks.

If you did not speak Greek you were a 'barbarian', whether you belonged to some wild Thracian tribe or to one of the luxurious cities of the East, or to Egypt, which, as the Greeks well know, had been a stable and civilized country many centuries before Greece existed.(1)

The split between East and West, the western assumption of its own inherent and inevitable superiority, thus stretches far back in time. The Greek historian Herodotus, whether describing Babylonians, Egyptians, or any other people, always considered them as irrevocably alien and inferior simply because they were culturally different.

The culture of classical Greece thus developed as a cohesive, selfcontained and deliberately exclusive entity. In a verey similar way the relatively numerous Europeans who went on pilgrimage to the Near East in mediaeval times expresed virtually no interest in the societies through which they

(1) H.D.F. Kitto, *The Greeks* (1958), p. 3.

travelled and the cultural vitality which they encountered. In political terms such travellers functioned as an element of an invasion. In any other way they remained hermetically sealed in their own traditions; they failed to take the opportunity to enlarge their experience or their perceptions through an initiation of dialogue with others.(1)

The greeks were self-conscously impervious to other cultures, the mediaeval pilgrims perhaps unwittingly so. Such self-sufficiency is however unusual; and in the modern unstable world such total rigidity is not possible.

The relationships of societies and the interaction of cultures can be explained in part by objective conditions such as the relative economic wealth and / or military power of the peoples in question. Other, more subjective factors are however also operative. Thus, at the onset of Greek history, although the military machine of Mycaenae was capable of supplanting the mercantile and political supremacy of Crete, Mycaenaean culture was dominated by Cretan forms of expression, which survived catastrophe and defeat to exercise great influence upon the new conquerors.

In general of course, when a dominat people confronts the culture of a weaker one which it oppresses and exploits, attitudes to the subjected culture are likely to be conditioned by ignorance, incomprehension or attitudes of unquestioning superiority. Thus the anthropologists and explorers who set out from Victorian Britain viewed the cultures of oppressed peoples throughout the world with extremely limited vision, distorting and patronising them by terming them 'primitive'. Thus British settlers in colonial India frequntly developed a passion for curry as well as for wealth and power -but rarely if indeed ever, considered individual Indians as anything more than good servants. And in a remarkably similar way properous white Americans first patronised and then appropriated and absorbed the jazz rhythms of black music - while continuing to profit from racial divisions within their society.(2)

Faced with such facts as these the vague liberal notions that cultural exchanges, like travel, broaden the mind in some undefined way, breaks down completely. Other peoples can be conquered and controlled by imperialist oppressors; and the cultural artefacts of other societies can be viewed merely as objects of appropriation.

No colonial system draws its justification from the fact that the terri-

---

(1) *cf* M.T. Hogden, 'Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, in *Philology* (1946), p. 179 ff.

(2) Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans, C. Farrington (1969; originally, 1961), p. 95-96.

tories it dominates are culturally non-existant. You will never make colonialism blush for shame by spreading out little-known cultural treasures under its eyes.[1]

The contents of the British Museum, that monument to organised theft which is crammed with treasures pillaged and looted from all parts of the world, offer an especially blatant illustration of this fact.

The oppressor consciousness that gave rise to colonialism has survived direct colonial domination. But it has ruthlessly retained all that it was able to acquire, and it is still at work. Nothing is exempt from it.

The oppressor consciousness tends to transform everything surrounding it into an object of its domination. The earth, property, production, the creations of men, men themselves, time - everything is reduced to the status of objects at its disposal.[2]

It is therefore not surprising to find that aesthetic modes and styles, like objects, like men themselves, can be cynically manipulated and abused. This process is exemplified architecturally in the Royal Pavilion at Brighton, a glittering and bogus concoction in which Indian, Chinese and Turkish designs were dizzily amalgamated in order to amuse and titillate royal and aristocratic taste at the end of the 18th cenury.

The same process can be located in the work of western poets, dramatists and more recently film-makers, attracted to superficial and spurious eastern settings, who have dreamed up presentations of 'oriental' themes and styles that are wholly mythical, cynical, false. The descriptive phrase 'set in the fabulous Orient' has become a cliche advertisement of plays and films offering a type of fantasy and escapism -*Kismet* or *Chu Chin Chow, The Thief of Baghdad* or *The Sheikh of Araby*- combinations of sex and melodrama in richly coloured settings that are utterly fictitious. For it is indeed a fabulous Orient that such entertainments seek to construct: one that has never actually existed.

These works can only be taken as debased forms of mythology in which clear observation of reality and honest response to it are stifled by imperialist oppression. The distortion of oriental aesthetics merely to gratify European consumers is as much an aspect of domination as is the appropriation of objects or the exploitation of men: culture is reduced, by western predators, to just another means of control, just another expression of power.

V

In view of such facts as these, the realities of the West's relationship to

---

(1) *ibid*, p. 179-80.

(2) Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. M.B. Romos (1982), p. 34.

the third world, it would seem to require an impossibly wild act of faith to argue that inter-cultural relationships are or can be anything more than a hopeless and self-deluding pursuit. And it may be objected that any serious concern with creative culture is, in the contemporary world, redundant and regressive. The world that we inhabit is one increasingly dominated by science, an objective, cognitive mode of enquiry which can give us secure and reliable knowledge that is guaranteed as constituting reality. This, it may be asserted, is the only kind of knowledge that can be trusted; and in that case, we have little if any need of our own creative culture and still less of the creative efforts of other people living in other societies.

Such a view -leaving aside considerable reservations as to the neutrality or value-free status of science- must surely be rejected as one that would impose crucially damaging limitations on human progress. The present condition of materialist and consumerist culture in the West in itself constitutes a dismissal of this view. Of course there are tasks that science and technology alone can accomplish; and these tasks, leading to enhanced material development, are of urgent importane to us all. Yet there are other tasks, no less urgently and certainly no less important, tasks related to whatever is or ought to become socially and politically beautiful, with which science and technology are powerless to deal. Science can chart and describe what is objectively real. Technology can master and apply what is objectively real. But these are not the only forms of knowledge that men can create, and they do not satisfy all our needs. When it comes to discussing what is possible, or to formulaing what is desirable, or to determining what is humanly valid, science and technology are silent.

We cannot hope to continue making progress socially without obtaining better answers to our questions. Yet the prospect of obtaining better answers is tied to the possibility of formulating more searching questions. This is the point at which creative culture other than the scientific becomes vital.

It is through creativity that man becomes capable of controlling his existence in the world. Through his own personal creativity, and through access to the creative efforts of others, each of us is enabled to assimilate, to forge links, to enlarge his own critical capacity and consciousness. Through enrichment of his own self-awareness and of the awareness of others, man can achieve and increase the ability to act constructively and progressively.

Thus creative culture is that facet of human knowledge and enquiry in which objective reality is fused with social and political wisdom, with human interests and with human needs for progress. If we consider science as the relationship between knowledge and objective reality, we can consider other forms of culture as the relationship between questioning and both objective and subjective reality -as taking for its subject matter not only

what does actually exist and is known, but also whatever is possible, desirable, longed for. It is through creative culture that men are able to challenge their reality, to demand a deeper level of meaning, to demand justice and freedom, and to explore the individual and collective forms that justice and freedom might validly take.

Creative culture can therefore be seen as challenge; as springboard to progressive action within a coherent framework; as the way in which we interpret the world and the way in which we seek to transform it. It is a powerful tool to be used in the service of progress.

Each of us therefore has considerable need of his own personal creativity and of the creative endeavours and achievements of his own people. To some this may already seem almost too much to deal with. To others it will probably seem amply sufficient. But since no man is an island, is cultural self-sufficiency any longer a viable and satisfactory condition of progressive life? Is it any longer wholly justified?

VI

To reject the possibilities present in the cultural forms and achievements of others, or to abuse them consciously and cynically as the West has so often done, amounts to nothing more than a negative assertion based on a falseconcept of permanent stability and of lasting superiority. It is a declaration that there exists a group called 'us' which is wholly different from all other groups, which is in every way far more advanced than all other groups, and which will endure unchangingly within its own geographical, political and cultural enclave.

If we take this view we can permit no-one to enter from outside. No concepts, no approaches, no possibilities other than those we create for ourselves must ever be allowed space in which to flourish. We are declaring that if you are not a Greek you can only be barbarian -or, in more contemporary terms, that the world is divided up between Albania and The Rest.

Few societies would hold such a view at such an extreme of isolation; yet all societies hold it to a certain extent. It is of course easy to see why. At a subjective level most people fear loss of identity or any change in their sense of identity. And such attitudes are highly resistant to development that modifies whatever is already known and felt. All too frequently they are impervious to logic, to new or additional information, even to experience that contradicts them or shows them to be false. Subjective attitudes may, in the light of external and objective reality, become demonstrably untenable: yet each of us possesses a capacity for clinging tenaciously to them, like limpets clinging mindlessly but tenaciously to a rock that crumbles a little more each day.

Yet progressive change, for all of us, is essential. Progressive change, for all of us, is the only possible way to achieve that fusion of the functionally beautiful with the socially and politically beautiful which can finally bring us to full liberation.

The obstacles that separate us from complete liberation as free men are in part material and objective. But some of them must be located within our own consciousness both as individuals and as members of groups. It is easy to make declarations of principle of statements of good intent, but much more difficult to apply them practically. Beneath the diversities of cultures we may wish to point to the universality of needs, capacities, enjoyments and productive powers, to equality of ability, to identical potentiality. But differences in technical development are mirrored, in reverse, by differences in social and political development. Oppression remains. Exploitation remains. And to the Arab or African student, or indeed to any third world man, the forms and creations of oppressive and exploitationist western culture may seem so wholly alien as to be pointless, so far removed from his own life and needs as to constitute an area of knowledge and enquiry that is useless and superfluous.

To people of the third world, conscious of history and keenly alive to the present, aware of the effects of domination, knowing the kinds of outcome to which cultural invasion and appropriation have aften led, western culture may very well seem nothing more than the work of conquerors. In the heat and dust of a village the qualities and achievements of imperialist culture -as exemplified in, for example, the ruins of a Roman city or the beauties of English literature- are likely to seem wholly irrelevant. Is there indeed any rational basis for censure or criticism of such a response? Even today, in many countries, e.g. South Africa or the states of Latin America, a village, a small town, a workers' quarter in a large city, is still a world without freedom and justice, a place where it does not matter to those in the West how people live or how people die -or even whether they live or die.

The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light .. a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire.(1)

The imperialists may have withdrawn their troops and dismantled their bases; but in some countries they still control and crush as powerful creditors.

The exploitation of man by man and the possession by some individuals of more of the general wealth than they need is a manifest departure from natural law and the beginning of distortion and corruption in the life

---

(1) Fanon, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

of the human community. It is the beginning of the emergence of the society of exploitation.[1]

This society of exploitation, localized in a number of countries, is known collectively as the West.

And those who are still oppressed, still exploited, still struggling, know very well why their village, their town, their country, goes on existing in such conditions, why their lives are spent in chains. They are poor because they are not western -and they can never pass as equal to western because they are poor. What can the West be to them? Only oppression and exploitation. What can western culture be to them? Only an expression of a system of values that is protected by oppression and exploitation; that is upheld by violence; that proclaims itself the defender of freedom, dignity and equality but systematically denies them to others. Western culture, whether material or creative, is something that the third world cannot easily enjoy or benefit from: yet the third world continues, in many ways, to help in paying for it.

The world is not only divided culturally. It is split by a terrible chasm, divided between the exploiters together with their beneficiaries and allies, and the poor, who reside in the third world. This poverty has few friends. Apart from them it knows only its own despair and its own anger until it discovers that it also has strength. It knows that it must go on dwelling in stinking shadows and shanty towns, must go on from day to day cowering bebore the rich and the mighty -until its strength can burst into flames of freedom and the revolutionary beginning of liberation.

The oppressive record of the past is undeniable. The exploitationist reality of the present is equally undeniable for milions of the earth's people. In the face of such a record, of such a reality, what authentic claim can possibly be made for western culture? Writers, philosophers, historians, frequently celebate the West's descent from Greek and Roman civilization. But let us clearly understand that the Greeks owned slaves to whom the Parthenon must always have seemed an incomprehensible shell. Let us clearly understand that the Romans were among the world's most effective conquerors and imperialists. Let us clearly understand that slavery and imperialism, for a period of many centuries, constituted the base upon which the West's complex modern superstructure was erected.

There is no shortgge of fine phrases written in praise of western culture, in praise of the freedom and dignity of the individual. Yet reality compels us to suggest that the phrases, however fine, are false and futile: that the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* must for most men amount to nothing more than scented mouthwash.

---

(1) Muammar Al-Gadhafi, *The Green Book*, Part two, p. 8.

VII

It is above all in those countries which constitute the progressive force and the progressive leadership of the third world that we may locate the possibility of putting advanced technology to the service of authentic and liberating objectives -the possibility of uniting the functional and the political. This possibility does not exist anywhere in the West.

The advantages of computer technology, telecommunications, engineering, of access to all areas of material and scientific advancement through command of the English language, are obvious. Much of what passes for civilization and creativity in the West is however nothing more than corrupt consumerism. However seductively it may be packaged, however stylishly it may be presented, much of what is offerred is fundamentally useless because it amounts to nothing more than a gratifiction either of the sensual or the sentimental.

But the millions who work hard, who do not dream of the sorrows of violets or the deaths of butterflies[1], who do not meet with freedom and justice except in their imagination or who struggle to defend their cause against powerful and determined enemies, have needs that are more profound than the sentimental and that are stronger than the sensual. Their needs must largely be met as a result of their own progressive efforts to transform the objective realities of their existence and to intensify their own consciousness. At the same time, however, they can and should legitimately take hold of anything that can assist them, from whatever source it may spring. And their needs can sometimes receive sustenance from aspects of western culture -those that explore and exspress ideas which are consciously progressive or at least incipiently so.

Ideas alone cannot transform a people or a society. They require a leadership capable of giving them practical force and application through the united efforts of the whole people and the whole society. Ideas in the first place, begin to lead us forward from the known, the established, the unthinkingly directed, in the direction of further progress.

Where such ideas can be taken or adapted from western culture and used by other peoples seriously and searchingly in order to extend themselves, this usage is legitimate. Where such ideas can be taken from the oppressor consciousness and used in order to expose it or to confront it, this usage is authentic.

Perhaps this point can be illustrated by an example of justified adaptation and extension of western culture. A new and startlingly original

---

(1) *cf* Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayati, 'The Sorrows of Violets', in *Ash'ar fi'l Manfa* (1964) -translated in *Modern Arab Poets,* ed. I.J. Boullata (1976), p. 15.

production of *Hamlet* was given in 1982 by a group of Arab students. The major themes of this play - ideas of revenge, the struggle for power, the individual torn by conflict between ideas, emotions and the need for actionwere explored in Arabic through the expressive medium of African tribal ritual. In this production Hamlet himself became a warrior chief seeking to comprehend both the traditional and the new, and struggling to transform himself with spear and shield as well as with ideas; while the ghost of his murdered father emerged from a chorus of witch doctors as an embodiment ot the past.

Shakespeare performed in Arabic and in an African setting: here could be seen three distinctive and different cultures brought together in a new and creative way to generate additional perspectives of the strength, the weakness and the potentiality of men growing conscious of injustice and beginning to stand against it.

The debris of the imperialist past, and the detrirus of the corrupt and greedy present, should be resolutely rejected. But the extent to which western culture is capable of progressive application is, surely, the precise extent to which it can and should be used freely by all peoples.