

Practising Cultural Literacy

Presentation to the Centre for Literacy Research

October 16th 2018

'Among those not included in [the] 'knowledge economy' vision of progress, an individual is more likely to be an object of expert scrutiny than an agent of it. As cultural and economic advantage becomes increasingly concentrated around big cities and universities, expert knowledge is something the privileged do to the less privileged'

William Davies (2018) p.86

The above quotation is clearly a provocation. It is intended as such. It is taken from the superb commentary on the present state of western civilisation published earlier this month (October 2018) by William Davies: *Nervous States: How Feeling took over the World*. Amongst other things, Davies explores the reasons why the power of experts should have become an object of suspicion and deep-seated conflict in contemporary society. This suspicion undoubtedly extends to institutions of higher education, as it does to politicians, political advisors, journalists and the denizens of think tanks, public or private. If universities rather than the press are the last bastions of scientific respectability in the post-truth era, there a few terrains more prone to self-destruction than cultural literacy. Even to attempt to define what cultural literacy means or to which group in society it should most immediately be applied leaves the aspiring liberal-minded doctoral researcher dangerously vulnerable to cross-fire, whether that be from the partisans of nationally regulated core curricula or the paradoxically intolerant avatars of identity politics.

Most would take issue with the disingenuous naivety of E.D.Hirsch when he produced the now notorious list of the thousand or more facts 'Every American needs to know'. Yet the subsequent co-authored dictionary, like his original 1988 publication is still a huge best-seller. If the reviews are to be believed, even the forthcoming blockbuster by Francis Fukuyama apparently argues for the need to identify a minimal cultural consensus if the ethnic and religious divisions between the different sectors of the world's population are to approach a makeshift resolution. But what the content of that consensus should consist of, how it should be acquired and by whom remains strictly for the birds. It could be wrong even to think in those terms. It might be assumed in most societies that to survive in the modern world, a degree of learning is a good thing as is a set of skills and personal attributes. Yet even that proposition is questioned by those committed to fundamental received beliefs. In short, cultural literacy is a can of worms to which it would be foolish to pretend to have the key... As with Brexit, there are too many pretenders out there already. Nevertheless, what cultural literacy means in practice for different populations and the social principles relating to it remain of the profoundest relevance in a world governed by economic self-interest, division and uncertainty.

Rather than offering teleological solutions to intractable problems, I would invite you to look at a short extract from a rather beautiful 2010 documentary film directed by Dora Grafova and Ekaterina Moskalenko in collaboration with the producer Eléonore de

Montesquiou. The film concerns the fate of what in 1857 was the biggest textile factory in the world. The factory buildings, known as Kreenholm, are in Narva, the third city of Estonia, situated on the river of the same name which marks the now heavily guarded border with Russia. Originally ratified in 1918 as the limit of Russian occupation after World War I, the frontier was restored in 1991 when Estonia was recognised as an independent member state of the EU, having been overrun by the German *Wehrmacht* and then reintegrated into The Soviet Union in 1945.

Established with the help of machinery, engineers and managers from Manchester and Oldham, Kreenholm was described in 1890 as 'a bit of England on Russian Ground'. The factory, which fuelled the explosion of the clothing industries of Central and Eastern Europe, became the primary supplier of textiles to Moscow, St. Petersburg and the cities of Imperial Russia, surviving the crises of the two world wars thanks to sustained support from the newly created Soviet State. At its peaks in the 1880s, 1920s and early 1950s, the factories employed between and 10,000 and 12,000 workers of whom a large proportion were women. But as the soviet market declined, so did Kreenholm's profitability. Following its purchase by a Swedish company in 1986, leading to successive takeovers and the progressive reductions in personnel, the firm finally went bankrupt in 2010. The machinery was sold and the factory definitively closed in 2012. Its closure left an empty shell and a mournful city of the unemployed living in a post-Stalinist time warp. The film captures a moment in that history of urban renewal and decline. Today, more than 80% of the inhabitants of Narva still speak Russian as their first language, notwithstanding the strenuous efforts of the Estonian government to integrate the city into its national constituency. Across the river, only 70 kilometres from Saint Petersburg, the dark medieval fortifications signal the brooding yet impenetrable omnipresence of the Russian State. The development of Kreenholm and Narva since Estonian became independent in 1991 provides a unique combination of factors when considering a working definition of Cultural Literacy in Europe and its implications for politicians, citizens and researchers alike. This is what I would like us to consider.