

RESEARCH NOTE

Literature and Political Economy: An Invitation

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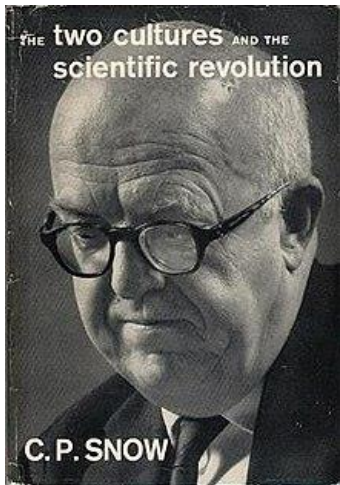


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1. The Two Cultures

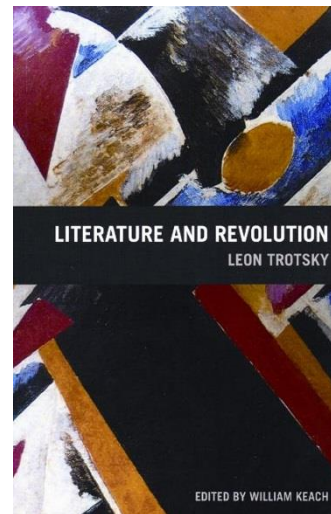
Most people think of science and literature as distinct human endeavours. According to received convention, science is mostly about ‘mind’, whereas literature is largely about ‘heart’. Science, goes the argument, is by and large rational, literature primarily emotional. Science is about thinking, literature about feeling.

The practical implication of this duality is that many who consider themselves scientists – particularly in the so-called ‘social sciences’ and especially in ‘economics’ – pay little or no attention to *belles-lettres*. As far as they are concerned, fiction, poetry and drama are diversions from serious academic work. Occasionally, when going on vacation or to an academic conference, they’ll throw a few cheap thrills into their handbag for ‘relaxation’. They’ll use them instead of sleeping pills after they are done surfing their phones and zapping their telescreen’s channels.



Now, it is true that the line between creative *belles-lettres* and capitalized cheap thrills has blurred in recent decades – so much so that it’s sometimes difficult to tell them apart. And it is also true that as the number of new novels exploded, their average quality plummeted.

But these shifting patterns are secondary. There is no need to read Leon Trotsky’s path-breaking book on *Literature and Revolution* (1925) or C.P. Snow’s warning on *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (1959) to realize that literature in general and novels in particular remain crucial for understanding – and occasionally affecting – the socio-scientific history of humanity.



2. From Disciplined Science to Creative Bisociation

One key reason for literature’s crucial importance is that, unlike formal science, it is not straight-jacketed by rigid disciplinary boundaries, and this flexibility allows it to offer insights that science as such finds elusive.

The inter-disciplinary fractures of science are well known. Chemists rarely publish papers that rely on psychology – just as economists seldom base their arguments on astronomy, or mathematicians on anthropology. Intra-disciplinary barriers, although less apparent, are equally disabling; just try to imagine materialist Descartes endorsing Newton’s action at a distance, France’s Bourbaki promoting Mandelbrot’s fractals, or the neoclassical *Journal of Political Economy* warming up to Marxist theory.

These restrictions are rarely present in *belles-lettres*. Fashion and style aside, there are few if any inter- and intra-disciplinary bounds to speak of, and authors are free to imagine and create their own structures.

This freedom – and here we come to the key point – allows literary writers to engage with the things that matter most: the *in-betweens*.

The act of creation, argues Arthur Koestler (1964), tends to emerge through ‘bisociation’. Creativity in science, art and humour, he says, springs from attempts to metaphorically juxtapose, relate and synthesize – or bisociate – seemingly unrelated mental matrices. Scientific disciplines and subdisciplines are examples of such matrices. To work within these matrices is to engage in what Thomas Kuhn (1970) would later call normal science – i.e., to reproduce and critique the ‘knowns’. By contrast, to invent something new, says Koestler, requires that we think not only outside the matrix, but *between the matrices*.

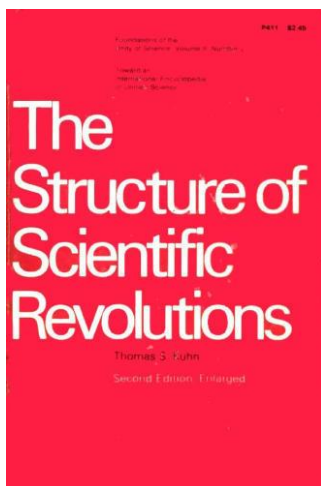
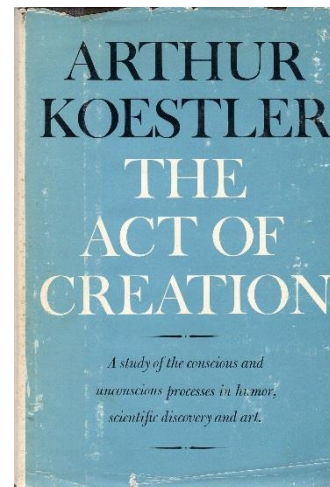
And indeed, the greatest scientific breakthroughs, or ‘revolutions’, as Kuhn famously called them, tend to occur not inside disciplines, and not even outside disciplines, but *across* disciplines. These breakthroughs and revolutions are created not by adhering to or critiquing one’s own mental matrix, but by *bisociating it with other matrices*.

Unlike organized science, whose academic bureaucracy, tribal bickering and disciplinary funding tend to inhibit bisociation, literature, by its very nature, constantly generates it. No novel – not even the lousiest cheap thrill – can be disciplined into a single box. And good novels attract and mesmerize us largely because they biosociate different boxes. Not only do they interlace different facets of the world and the ways in which we know it, they also *entice us, the readers*, to do the very same.

Looking back, we can see that many of our own ideas and hypotheses about political economy – from our critiques of theoretical orthodoxy and conventional histories to our notions of capital as power, dominant capital and differential accumulation – were ignited, at least in part, by bisociating political economy with the novels we read.

3. Invitation

Since very few scientists, natural or social, bring novels into their research and teaching, we thought it might a good idea to use the [Capital as Power Forum](#) as a virtual space in which free spirits like you can creatively bisociate literature and science.



We are particularly interested in the bisociation of *literature* and *political economy* – although relevant links between literature and other sciences are also welcome.

The subject and form of your posts are open-ended. You might wish to focus on the literary manifestations of a given aspect of political economy, or on the political-economic insights offered by a specific novel; you can write general analyses and broad-brush impressions or concentrate on a single point; and you can post short pieces as well as longer ones. Whatever you do, try to be concise, precise and, most importantly, interesting!

Post your entries here: <http://www.capitalaspower.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=4&t=504>

References

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