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Dysfunctional Culture: The Inadequacy of Cultural Liberalism as a Guide to Major Challenges of the 21st Century

Sigurd N. Skirbekk

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Review by:

Daniel Gustav Anderson

University of Idaho

“[L]iberal principles, in terms of their impact, are unsuitable for use in eco-systems or for promoting conditions for productive moral regulation” (10)—this is the thrust of Sirgurd Skirbekk’s *Dysfunctional Culture*, which purports to be a critique of the dominant ideology of the contemporary world order. Skirbekk is explicitly motivated by a conservative agenda; he seeks to maintain the integrity of European culture (ambiguously defined) as it, in his view, disintegrates—that is, as what he considers the inherent dysfunction of liberal social forms become increasingly productive of cultural disintegration. To this end, Skirbekk proposes a social program designed to maintain something of the status quo. “For conservative thinkers,” Skirbekk writes, “tradition has always been a term of endearment. This is reflected in the programs of movements whose overriding goal has been to preserve something of historical importance” (43). Such a program is, for Skirbekk, imperative. Skirbekk feels that “[l]iberal freedom in our kind of society has many contemporary victims. Nevertheless, the major victims will be future generations, which also risk losing valuable cultural traditions as well as natural

resources vital to the realization of a satisfactory life” (63). Specifically, Skirbekk is unhappy with the relatively low birth rate in Europe, but he also observes that population growth for those who overconsume (Europe specifically) is also a danger, due to economic restraints on consumption and concomitant pollution. The rates of reproduction and consumption for Skirbekk are negative consequences of liberal ideology. But Skirbekk does not resolve the incoherence by proposing concretely and coherently how Europe can produce more babies while living in a more ecologically sustainable manner nor, for that matter, why immigration is for him an unacceptable solution. Skirbekk’s ecological argument fades away as he tries to explain why he feels it is immediately necessary for Europeans to marry and reproduce. In this context, the ideological nature of Skirbekk’s desire to “understand and control contemporary cultural development” (57) is foregrounded. Control is interest bound, in that any cultural engineering of the sort Skirbekk advocates must serve someone’s interest immediately. This is the point at which many of Skirbekk’s difficulties arise. In short, Skirbekk’s methods and assumptions lead him to wildly speculative positions; his conclusions are by turns incoherent and irresponsible, but consistently and unambiguously racist, sexist, and homophobic—and if pursued to their logical conclusion, Skirbekk’s ideas give an ideological welcome to a certain kind of violence.

Skirbekk assumes that “[c]ulture-based civilizational explanations are of more help to us than those based solely on economic differences, or on the political contrasts between autocratic and liberal societies” (7), dismissing out of hand materialistic methodologies in favor of abstractions, and defining culture as “a collective system of symbols” (15). Skirbekk responds to Orlando Patterson’s concern that, historically, the

interpretation of culture as a symbolic system leads scholars to neglect the people producing culture not with analysis or counterargument, but with a lament: “The understanding of society has far too often been left to people who want to provide an overall explanation of human behavior on the basis of material conditions and individual decisions” (18). Skirbekk proposes a prescriptive, not a descriptive, social analysis. One can infer from this as well as Skirbekk’s musings on gender and race that these symbols to are actually imperatives—not formal pieces in a language game—that are to be taken as abstract and universal truths. In a word, Skirbekk’s “ideals” and abstractions are ideological in nature. Skirbekk is invested in the ideology that abstractions can do real work in a culture without being produced by that culture, as if by the fiat of a *deus ex machina*. For example, when he distinguishes ideology from epistemology (20), he assumes that epistemology is something that is not a function of social conditions or material constraints. These assumptions lead Skirbekk to draw ideologically driven rather than analytically sound interpretations. For example, Skirbekk claims that Islamic terrorism as a conflict with “western ideals” (6) rather than a reaction to specifically American military, economic, and cultural hegemony—the more plausible interpretation, and the one most in keeping with his critique of the neo-liberal social order. There is, according to Skirbekk, “a striking lack of understanding as to why America is the object of so much hatred, in view of the fact that Americans themselves feel they represent universal values of welfare and peace, democracy and tolerance” (7). The feelings of Americans about themselves are irrelevant to the manner in which Americans are represented by others, or how American corporations or the American government necessarily represent themselves in the Middle East. Toppling a democratically-elected

government in Iran in 1953 after the nationalization of Anglo-Iranian Oil and preemptively making war on a neighboring country that was not a direct threat to the U.S. in 2002 are but two examples of a demonstration of American power in spite of idealized “welfare” or “tolerance” or “democracy.” Political, economic, and cultural hegemony—the legacy of the white man’s burden—is a more direct and quantifiable tool for understanding resentment against the U.S. in the Islamic world than a hypothetical disgust with American and European family structures as seen on Arabic-language television. In this instance, Skirbekk’s insistence on ideology at the expense of important historical developments, such as the British Empire, undermines the trajectory of his argument.

In another, Skirbekk takes an abstract “philosophy of racism” as his enemy, and culture as a function of race. According to Skirbekk’s diagnosis, “little has emerged in the way of radical right-wing arguments in favor of cultural elitism or conscious selection in order to keep culture on an even keel” (52), and he makes some suggestions in keeping with this reactionary ideology. In doing so, Skirbekk implies that advances in science along racist lines will be a kind of Copernican revolution in social theory: “We have reason to believe that the contemporary use of the term ‘racism’ has much in common with the use of the word ‘heretic’ three hundred years ago” in theological invective against scientific developments that undermined religious authority (165-166).

According to Skirbekk, “the assumption that all ethnic groups, statistically speaking, must have the same mental aptitude, or that some groups must be intellectually superior to others by every standard of measurement, is a highly dubious proposition” (155). This line of argument is in keeping with Skirbekk’s attack on the liberal ideology of equality,

in that “it would be foolhardy to presume that future research will confirm full equality of mental aptitude in all populations, in linking all assumptions about human value to a notion of equality” (Skirbekk 155). In this context, Skirbekk observes that “[f]ew have discussed the possibility that race could also speak for different types of immigration, as a “genetic upgrading” of a population” (156). Skirbekk attributes resistance to his pronouncements on race to “a new and expanded philosophy of racism, in which anything that might lead to a social discrimination of people from other cultures is perceived as racism” (157). Skirbekk ignores the history of race in America when he fails to see the seeds of this change in perception as a positive development in his assertion that the “premise of anti-racism must imply something other than science” (158). Here Skirbekk is correct but in a way he clearly does not anticipate. Immanuel Levinas among the most prominent theorist who formulates ethics as the proper field for understanding alterity, and he is certainly not alone in taking this view. Skirbekk does not see that anti-racism is best understood as a function of his most prominent preoccupation, morality.

Scholars in the field of gender studies and human sexuality will have much to say about Skirbekk’s speculations on gender, reproduction, and marriage. Skirbekk’s premise is that a well-organized society cannot tolerate men and women who do not or cannot perform their prescribed gender roles. To Skirbekk, nuclear families are essential for this reason: “A father is a man who has a specific relationship with a specific woman. A mother is a woman who has a specific relationship with a specific man. This implies role models that differ from those derived from identification with a man only or a woman only, which explains why homosexuals and unmarried people do not enjoy the

same functional status in adoption cases as do opposite-sex couples” (127). Skirbekk assumes, with Dolf Zillmann, that “[a] couple consisting of a man and a woman constitutes the core of a family” (119) and that, implicitly, sexuality is a learned behavior, and a controllable one. Skirbekk speculates, “if the majority still chooses to live together outside the bounds of formalized families, it is probably because they find it unnecessary to institutionalize their relationship” (104)—or illegal in much of the world, as in the case of same-sex couples. Skirbekk’s views on gender give some insight into why he would feel that institutional marriage should, effectively, be compulsory. According to Skirbekk, “one could argue that civilizing male urges requires institutional frameworks” (131). Skirbekk does not elaborate on the nature of these urges or their role in male heterosexual subjectivity, but he does insist on the means of control: sexuality should be put “into a functional context, as a reward for contributing to the preservation of the family and the continuation of society” (107). Skirbekk’s discussion of femininity is predicated on this essentialist view of masculine heterosexuality in need of “civilizing.” According to Skirbekk, “[s]pecific lifestyles and behavior, which are considered enlightened, or preferably modern and liberated” (134) constitute “the emancipation of women, “ which Skirbekk reduces to “an adjustment to a market-oriented organization of sex” (136), characterized by the freedom to dress in a sexually provocative manner (135)—in short, a response to the “male urges” Skirbekk hypothesizes, which may in fact be a strategy for seeking the “reward” of institutional marriage (assuming as Skirbekk does that gender and sexuality are learned behaviors). Two consequences come of this. First, Skirbekk introduces the possibility that the cultural imperatives he advocates , such as mother-father gender roles for everyone, may lead to the behaviors in women he

disapproves of, and the sexual objectification of women he laments (136). Second, Skirbekk forecloses any discussion of gender and sexuality in terms of agency, subjectivity, or opportunity, which leads him to some remarkable positions on issues such as rape. Skirbekk writes that “[r]elationships based solely on emotions were supposed to lead to greater reciprocity. This is the background for attempts to legitimize all mutual consent and to define all sexual relationships lacking mutual consent as rape” (132). What is consent or reciprocity for that matter if not agency? Skirbekk gives the reader plenty of material with which to unpack this curious statement.

Skirbekk treats morality exclusively in this context of sexuality and family structure, with no meaningful treatment of any other moral issue such as honesty, kindness, fairness, or—especially relevant to his comment on mutual consent—nonviolence. Morality, functionally a cipher for normative heterosexual family structures for Skirbekk, is the main concern of *Dysfunctional Culture*. Skirbekk insists: “a family-oriented and functionally-based sexual morality must be defined in terms of marriage as an institution” (90). In the main, this is because married couples produce more children than “couples belonging to more informal units” (127), implying that reproduction is the measure of morality *par excellence*. For this reason, Skirbekk claims to be able to quantify “moral development in a specific western country” (83)—not an analysis of violent crime data, nor of political corruption, nor an analysis of charitable giving or other philanthropic work, but by recourse to marriage, divorce, and birth records. And on this basis, Skirbekk identifies Norwegian culture at the beginning of the twentieth century as a particularly moral one: “Most people got married; families were stable, with a high rate of childbirth, and many were determined to pass their moral

convictions on to future generations” (86). Here, Skirbekk gestures at what he finds of value in Western culture: the custom of carrying on with custom, particularly those imperatives traditionally ascribed to divine command. “[T]he defense of family morals was closely linked to a general defense of tradition and to the moral derivatives of a theologically-based faith” (Skirbekk 86). Skirbekk’s vagueness—“*a* theologically-based faith”—leads the reader to ask *which* one, and from it what “moral derivatives”? Skirbekk leaves the door open to violence made moral by means of ideologically-distorted religious rhetoric when he states, “[a]n uncritical acceptance of those whose lifestyles are immoral could promote moral decay” (62). Historically, these lifestyles have included left-handedness, gap-toothedness, Jewishness, and interracial marriage, depending on the religious ideology that had chanced into a means of control in a given community. John Stuart Mill called this the tyranny of the majority. “Morality has been viewed,” Skirbekk opines, “as the direct opposite of an individual’s happiness” (91)—and in many contexts, the view Skirbekk disparages is most accurate, if one defines happiness as freedom from the risk of being lynched, for example.

In a related secondary argument, Skirbekk attempts to demonstrate the superiority of man-woman marriage over any form of cohabitation by claiming that marriage is safer for women than cohabitation with men—that married men are less violent toward the women in their lives (ignoring violence toward homosexual men and women in the process). According to Skirbekk, “data suggests that marriage, in general, diminishes the spread of domestic violence toward women” (131). This analysis is limited at best, in that Skirbekk uses a rather small data set, and does not account for unreported incidents of domestic violence or if there is a difference in the rate of reporting of such incidents

that is a function of marital status. Skirbekk juxtaposes this assertion on the relative safety of marriage for women against “[t]he increase in registered sexual offenses [...] which can be explained most naturally as the unintended effects of a new form of development, legitimized as sexual liberation, not as a by-product of conditions of the past” (101). Skirbekk assumes that sexual violence is an expression of sexuality, not of violence; further, he does not recognize the likelihood that an increase in reported cases of sexual abuse generally may be a consequence of an increased willingness on the part of the abused to speak up and report these crimes, or that a culture of violence (and not one of “liberty”) may also play a role, as an ideology of moral superiority comforting or even motivating those who abuse might. This incoherence comes to the forefront when Skirbekk claims that an undefined “traditional morality” is good for women, but then observes that “Women have traditionally been condemned in stricter terms than men when marital norms have been violated” (112), suggesting that Skirbekk’s vision of “traditional morality” really isn’t so fair to women. If Skirbekk’s goal is to reduce violence, he should make *this* the moral imperative of his program and his cultural critique. Instead, he is providing an ideological means for certain kinds of violence.

Skirbekk points to this problem unintentionally when he observes that “[t]he political preferences of the masses are not necessarily the acme of moral discernment” (82). But cultural traditions, including the tradition of arbitrarily defending tradition, are necessarily communal and typically popular in nature. Skirbekk also demonstrates this with an example; he disapproves of pornography, which he takes to be of an exclusively sexual nature. It could be argued that the most popular (or inescapable) forms of pornography produced by the American cultural machine are much more explicitly

violent than sexual in nature, including many forms of religious and political discourse as well as the most excessive of erotic pornography. Mel Gibson's 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ* is the most popular and profitable work of pornography ever released, an orgy of blood and abuse and structurally a snuff film, grossing over \$370 million in box office revenues. The Sunday-morning ritual landgrabblings of televised American football, and the nightly landgrabblings of televised "regime change" on the news, or the verbal abuse of right-wing talk radio, the power of which is evoked powerfully in the 2004 film *Hotel Rwanda* and in the Two Minute's Hate in George Orwell's novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, demonstrate an ideology that celebrates violence as a means *and* an end. Proposing a program of compulsory reproductive sexuality, ideologically, serves to defend and procreate this tradition of violence. This is the ideological work of one loyal to a despotic regime; as Skirbekk notes, "[o]ne distinguishing feature of despotic governments has always been how violence was rewarded" (110)—and regulated. Skirbekk observes that "all known societies have found the regulation of sexuality necessary" (87). The same is true of violence; these regimes of control are analogous. According to Walter Benjamin, in "Critique of Violence," the state claims a monopoly on violence; for Deleuze and Guattari, the monopoly on violence is held by a "war machine" that per its own interests may or may not be allied with the institutional state. This is not to suggest that Skirbekk explicitly advocates violence, or that mainstream Christianity is in my view an agent of violence. However, when elaborated to their conclusion, Skirbekk's proposals are proven to be ideologically allied with interests that are hardly "the acme of moral discernment."

The specifics of Skirbekk's research methods at times further undermine his credibility. In some instances, self-contradictions ensue. Skirbekk is not above constructing "culturally radical journalists" as straw men (46), nor citing reactionary social commentary by unnamed "British and American researchers" in a 1995 "bulletin" from the Reuters news agency as if it is scholarship (77), when either gesture is convenient for his immediate purpose. Meanwhile, Skirbekk refuses or neglects to engage in canonical studies appropriate to the task he sets himself with some frequency; for example, Skirbekk effectively ignores Foucault's three-volume *History of Sexuality* when summarizing the history of sexuality in Europe in favor of Allan Bloom's less relevant *The Closing of the American Mind*, and disregards Laclau and Mouffe's groundbreaking study *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) and all of Zizek's contributions to the field in his survey of positions on ideology. Parenthetically, the latter directly contradicts Skirbekk's assertion that "[n]either liberal nor Marxist socialistic ideology has included environmental limits in their theories on people's rights to exploit modern technology to serve their own interests" (63). Finally, this reader has no explanation for Skirbekk's use of *The Encyclopedia Britannica* as an authoritative reference in defining the word racism (153), rather than the conventional academic tool for that purpose, the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Skirbekk emphasizes that in his views that "migration cannot provide a steady influx of help from countries with high birth rates and [...] reproduction based on immigration levels can stymie efforts to maintain key values in western civilization" (147), taking as his counterargument the position that "no matter which population groups happen to constitute a majority in future western societies, they will all be an

integral part of the human race, with most people sharing in our dreams and values” (178). In short, white people need to reproduce or risk leaving the world to non-Europeans. Skirbekk does not recognize that there is no guarantee that children born to white parents will not favor Sanskrit to Latin, or aikido to ice hockey. Children raised in Lutheran families do convert to Buddhism and Islam; many of them are, in fact, committed to long-term same-sex relationships, and not infrequently raise happy and well-adjusted children in such families. The manufacture of white babies does not ensure Europe’s cultural integrity, as Skirbekk assumes it does, and assuming such a thing exists to begin with. This represents the most striking question Skirbekk leaves unanswered: what is left of value in the European tradition once all vestiges of the liberal tradition—inclusive of every religious, social, political, cultural, economic, and familial institution as inherited by Europe’s children now—are cut away? The postapocalyptic England represented in the 2006 film *V for Vendetta* yields an answer that Skirbekk and his readers should consider.