

Our Culture, What's Left of It: The Mandarins and the Masses

Theodore Dalrymple

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Only man placed values in things to preserve himself—he alone created a meaning for things, a human meaning. Therefore he calls himself 'man', which means: the esteemer... Through esteeming alone is there value: and without esteeming, the nut of existence would be hollow.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

In an age of non-judgementalism, Theodore Dalrymple is the most eloquent of heretics. Writing under his mildly pompous yet endearing *nom de plume*, British psychiatrist and prison doctor Anthony Daniels continues to puncture the post-modern pretensions of Britain's politically correct elites. His latest anthology, drawn from the Manhattan Institute's *City Journal*, surpasses its predecessor, *Life at the Bottom*, in its sparkling erudition and underlying humanity.

The first half of the volume is devoted to Western literature and art, charting their decline into a charmless celebration of vulgarity and sensationalism. For this phenomenon, Dalrymple blames the liberal intelligentsia's embrace of cultural relativism and aversion to value judgements.

He explains how narcissistic liberals of the artistic and literary world, driven by a desire to appear virtuously open-minded, praise disingenuously the most sordid and degraded aspects of slum culture as triumphant declarations of non-conformity and working class authenticity. Thus, in Dalrymple's view, have they condemned the British underclass to continued economic, social and intellectual deprivation by destroying its sense of aspiration.

The barren wasteland of modern British culture is compared unfavourably with its former depth and vibrancy, a theme illustrated by Dalrymple's application of Shakespeare to the modern world, which demonstrates the timeless nature of the Bard's works.

By contrast, Dalrymple derides the sensationalism of modern pop culture, tracing its ancestry through the 20th century. Of D.H. Lawrence, Dalrymple thinks little: 'The radical humourlessness of this passage ... is indicative of a profound moral defect, insofar as a sense of humour requires a sense of proportion'. Of Virginia Woolf he thinks less: 'Had Mrs. Woolf survived to our time, she would at least have had the satisfaction of observing that her cast of mind—shallow, dishonest, resentful, envious, snobbish, self-absorbed, trivial, philistine and ultimately brutal—had triumphed among the elites of the Western world'.

If this anthology were to be faulted, it would be on the basis that the selection of essays on high culture rather belabours the point. The paeans to Shakespeare and the ruthless demolitions of Lawrence and Woolf are refreshing and entertaining, but by the time we reach Dalrymple's critique of Miro and his reflections on Gillray, the essays begin to feel a little predictable.

The second half of the volume suffers from no such defect. Dalrymple analyses a wide range of modern social problems including drugs, criminality, malnutrition of the British underclass and, most timely, forced ethnic marriages and the dysfunctional nature of Islam in the West. Eschewing the theoretical abstractions of the top-down Continental approach to social analysis, Dalrymple epitomises the British tradition of building his ideas on the solid foundations of empirical evidence. The essays draw on a host of anecdotes from Dalrymple's medical practice to illustrate his points. The two halves of the book are two sides of the same coin, demonstrating how the pollution of elite thinking and culture with liberal falsehoods has filtered down to the slums, where the poison proves infinitely more lethal. For instance, Dalrymple explains how the practical application of fashionable sociological and psychological theories, which absolve criminals of responsibility for their actions, has seen those theories escape the confines of Notting Hill dinner parties to form a basis for even the most ill-educated criminal's internal justification of his crimes.

Well-travelled and well-read, Dalrymple draws on disparate fields of knowledge to construct a series of thought-provoking arguments consistent with an overall thesis which, as an anti-theorist, he never deigns to state explicitly. There are two common threads: a disdain for the conspicuous

and counterproductive compassion of liberal elites; and a belief that even society's most hopeless cases deserve to be accorded respect as human beings, not treated as billiard balls in some social theorist's model, nor subjected to what George W. Bush terms, 'the soft bigotry of low expectations'.

Dalrymple is a classical conservative: ever conscious of the imperfectability of human nature and the need for external restraints on human behaviour; condemning the culture of rights while emphasising the importance of individual responsibility. Exposed daily to the gritty reality of life in the slums, Dalrymple casts down the shibboleths of political correctness with brutal frankness. His work is the ultimate rejoinder to Tony Blair's 'Cool Britannia' and the entire neo-socialist project of the 'Third Way', with its racial sensitivity training and rush from judgement.

Of fundamentalist Muslims, Dalrymple writes, 'If they were content to exist in a seventh-century backwater, secure in a quietist philosophy, there would be no problem for them or for us; their problem, and ours, is that they want the power that free inquiry confers, without either the free inquiry or the philosophy and institutions that guarantee that free inquiry'.

While most of the essays focus on Britain, Dalrymple proves a perceptive travel writer further afield. Of particular interest is the essay entitled *The Barbarians at the Gates of Paris*, which paints a grim picture of the Islamic ghettos that surround major French cities. Anyone who has tramped the streets of Paris outside the Peripherique, or the dormitory housing estates of Lyon, will annotate their memories afresh. The final essay, *After Empire*, draws on Dalrymple's time in Zimbabwe to explain the African dilemma in terms which will be as unwelcome to apologists for European imperialism as to misguided Live Aid enthusiasts.

The essays in this volume are, without exception, subtly but elegantly crafted. Dalrymple's pellucid style, refreshingly free from jargon, is itself an implicit reproach to the insular priesthood of experts and academics who have sought, through the terminology of post-modernism, to exclude outsiders from the field of social analysis.

My only reservation in recommending the purchase of this book is the observation that its constituent essays are freely available on the Internet. It is, nonetheless, an impressive compilation of Dalrymple's very best. For both newcomers to Dalrymple and old fans, this is a book worth owning—and lending to friends who work at the ABC.

Reviewed by Alan Anderson