

The Spectator in the Breast of Man

Self-regulation and the Decline of Civility

Peter Saunders talks to Theodore Dalrymple



Theodore Dalrymple is probably best known for his weekly columns in *The Spectator* and his essays in the American quarterly *City Journal*. He is a psychiatric doctor working in an inner city area in Britain where he is attached to a large hospital and a prison. His columns report on the lifestyles and ways of thinking of Britain's growing underclass, and in his latest book, *Life at the Bottom*, he warns that this underclass culture is spreading through the whole society. Peter Saunders interviewed him for *Policy*.

Peter Saunders: You've been writing this column in *The Spectator* for 12 years, and now the book has come out. Your essays are very rich descriptively, but what is the basic message that we should take away from reading them?

Theodore Dalrymple: I think it's the idea that people are not billiard balls. They're not impacted on by forces like cold fronts in the weather and react accordingly. They actually think about what they're doing. For example, criminals are conscious of what they're doing and they respond to incentives. And they have a culture—they have beliefs about what they're doing.

PS: But what comes through in your essays is that they themselves talk as though they are billiard balls.

TD: Well, I think they've been taught to speak like that. And you can actually break it down by saying to them, 'Now come on! You didn't burgle that house

because of your bad childhood, you burgled that house because you wanted to take something in it and you didn't know how else to go about getting it because you're unskilled, you have no intention of getting any skills'—and they start laughing! And oddly enough, when I speak with them quite plainly, my relations with them improve.

PS: Has anybody ever hit you?

TD: No, never! I mean there are the true psychopaths who make one's blood run cold because they are untouchable by normal human relationships. But they are relatively few. So my relations with the prisoners are extremely good. To give you another example, drug addicts come in and they spin me a line, and I just won't have it. There's initially friction because I refuse to prescribe for them and one of the things that's very difficult to get across is that withdrawal effects from heroin, for example, are very minor. They're trivial.

PS: Really? That's not the way it's portrayed, is it?

TD: It's not the way it's portrayed but it is actually the truth. I can't tell you how many people I've withdrawn from heroin. You never get any problems with it. It's not like withdrawal from serious drinking which can be, and often is, a medical emergency. From a medical point of view, I'm much more worried in the prison

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when someone tells me he's an alcoholic. I'm much more worried about the physical consequences of his withdrawal because they are really serious, and he can die from them. But nobody ever dies from heroin withdrawal. With the vast majority of them, you just take them aside and say: 'I'm not prescribing anything for you, I will prescribe symptomatic relief if I see you have symptoms, but what you tell me has nothing to do with it, I'm not going to be moved by any of your screaming.' One chap came in and said 'What are you prescribing me?' and I said 'Nothing', and he screamed at me, 'You're a butcher! You're a f***ing butcher', and he screamed and shouted and eventually I said 'Take him away'. Everyone outside heard this, and they were like lambs!

PS: Are you getting respect from these guys because you're being tough? So you're appealing to that macho, tough-guy culture?

TD: I think it's because what I'm saying is true. And because I am prepared to put myself out for them. For example, if they have difficulty contacting their lawyer, which must be very frightening for someone, I will do that kind of thing for them. Plus of course I do my best for them medically. I do what I think is right. And I'm not going to be diverted either by them or by the prison administration, which also tries to get you to do things which are wrong. I've told the officers, with these people you have to play it absolutely straight. You need some kind of moral superiority over them.

PS: And your thesis would be that this is what all institutions ought to be doing—that hospitals, schools, prisons and so on ought to be playing it straight?

TD: Yes. And we've ceased to do this. One of the reasons is that people are very sentimental. When it comes, for example, to dealing with drug addicts, there's no question in my mind that the drug-treating establishment tries to ingratiate itself with the drug takers by seeing everything from their point of view. But I don't see it from their point of view. I see what they're doing as wrong. It's wrong from every point of view and it's wrong for them personally, and I'm not going to tell them anything else. I refuse to use their

argot. I call needles 'needles' and syringes 'syringes'. I absolutely refuse to pretend that I have anything to do with their (I hate to use the word 'culture') way of life.

PS: Your thesis is that this 'culture' (in an anthropological sense) extends far beyond the people you're seeing in prison and in hospital. There are chapters in your book where you're venturing into the betting shops and the night clubs.

TD: Yes, the worst of it is, you see, that the people in those night clubs are *not* the underclass. It's widespread. It's people in their 20s, their late 20s, and I don't know if they're ever going to grow out of it. I do meet intelligent people and they come to me and they know that there's something missing in their lives, but they don't know what it is. I tell them that what's lacking is any kind of educational or cultural interest, but they don't seem to be able to acquire one, even though there are of course ways of doing so.

PS: Is this just an exaggerated fashion, a fad that young people go through?

TD: Well, I suppose it's possible for someone at 28 to get educated, but it's difficult. I've often wondered whether, just as if a child doesn't acquire a language by shall we say the age of six, so too if a child hasn't learned to concentrate by the age of 12 or something, if they don't acquire the habit of concentration, then I don't know that it's something they ever learn.

PS: It's interesting that you raise intelligence, because Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein's book about the underclass in America links it very strongly to low intelligence. You don't accept that?

TD: I don't believe that. I dare say that there is a concentration of less intelligent people in the underclass, but I don't think the phenomenon that I've described can be explained in biological terms. After all, the behaviour of the football fans can't be explained like that. If it were true, why is it not true in every country and every place?

PS: Do you see this as peculiarly a British problem?

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TD: It's worse in Britain, but it's not peculiar to it. I understand it's getting worse in countries like France, for very similar reasons. I go to France a fair amount, and one of the things I notice is the increasing French anxiety about their level of education. The same causes are producing the same results.

PS: So it's obviously multi-causal, but you're locating *one* of the causes of this problem in the education system?

TD: Well, it's certainly not helping. I think schools could possibly be one way out for poor people, to give the children an alternative view of life. But there's no attempt to do so. They're enclosed in the world which they already bring to school.

PS: So if the schools are going wrong, then what's the cause of that?

TD: I believe you're a sociologist!?

[*laughs*]. I think ideas eventually have consequences. The people—like sociologists—who have those ideas are actually in positions of responsibility, power and influence.

PS: That's one of the ideas that comes through in the book very strongly—this idea of the treason of the intellectuals and the trickle down of their ideas so that a generation on they appear in the thinking of the lower classes.

TD: Yes, and then the intellectuals refuse to see what they've done. I describe in the book how intellectuals simply refuse to believe what I'm telling them I see. My sample is a selective one, it's true, but I don't think a sample of 50,000 people can be called insignificant. I have no reason to think people coming to my hospital are any different from those at at least two other hospitals in the city—and that's only the ones that come to me. And I ask ordinary people, good solid working class people, completely honest, 'Am I exaggerating? Am I hearing things?', and they say no, absolutely no.

PS: Let's try to pin down in a bit more detail what this culture is and what's bad about it. You're

saying that it's something that's developed since the 1960s—it's come out of the intellectual ferment of that decade, and it's trickled down, and now we're living with the consequences of it. So what is this culture?

TD: First of all I think it's a radical egotism. And self-importance. What one wants oneself becomes all important. At the same time as that egotism, you also have a conception of rights. I suppose you can say it's the libertarian right admixed with an element from the left of a rights-driven agenda.

PS: A lot of people look back on the 1980s—the Thatcher decade—and say that was what really made things a lot worse. The individualism, the money orientation—

TD: —I think there's certainly an element of truth in that because in some ways Mrs Thatcher was a mirror-image Marxist. Everything that Marx abhorred she thought was good, and she thought (or she appeared to think—I'm not sure she gave enough attention to it) that if only we could get the economy right then everything else would follow. But in fact the market can completely destroy social relations if the market is completely uninformed by any kind of vision. If the whole world is treated as a sweet shop, and all you've got to do is choose, then I think that's very wrong. And I don't think Adam Smith would have approved. I suspect that Mrs Thatcher understood that—but I think that when people are in power, they actually lose sight of what is going on. And she also didn't do very much to alter the welfare state.

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PS: I'll come to the welfare state in a minute if I may. But while we're on politicians, that famous phrase of Blair's—'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime'—at the start of the interview you said you get the respect of criminals by refusing to accept their excuses, and being quite tough with them. Well, that's Blair's message too, isn't it?

TD: Yes, but for purely electoral purposes. I don't think he is tough. Because he wants to be liked by everyone, equally, all the time, it means that he's a man who genuinely doesn't seem able to be disliked. Now I don't mind if people read me and dislike what I say because I believe what I say is true. Obviously there are people who disagree with me about the causes of what I see. But what does make me angry is when people don't see what I see and claim that it doesn't exist, and doesn't exist on a very large scale, when I believe that my perception is accurate. I have enough confidence in myself now to say that.

PS: But most of us aren't living in an inner city and dealing with heroin addicts.

TD: You soon will be if we don't watch out! It's coming to us. I don't believe we can build a wall around ourselves. One of the things that's happened recently is that middle class people are alarmed and shocked when they find themselves victims of the kinds of crimes that I've been writing about. They said I was exaggerating, and to be perfectly honest, I don't think they cared. If they thought it was true, they just thought they were animals—they didn't think these people were people.

PS: Some people argue that it's being drug-driven, don't they?—that the great crime wave has been driven by the need to get money to feed the drug habit. And that of course is the argument for decriminalising hard drugs.

TD: Well that is the argument, but I suspect it is wrong. I think the decision to take heroin in these deeply criminalised sub-cultures is itself part of the criminal mentality. After all, now heroin is so cheap that a person on the minimum wage can be a heroin addict. So effectively you're saying that if you made it free, these people wouldn't commit crime. I don't believe that.

PS: And if we decriminalised it, then presumably this would just be another area that we've given up on.

TD: We just give up—we don't draw the line anywhere. And one has to ask oneself, why do so many people take it? This again is fairly recent. I mean, if somebody said to me, 'Here's some heroin, you can have it free for the next ten years', I wouldn't take it.

PS: Is that something that's trickled down from the intellectuals?

TD: I think it might have in the sense that [they have taught that] nothing is wrong, everything is just a matter of lifestyle, there's nothing to choose between going out to work and lying around in your own vomit.

However, I think there is another point here that perhaps isn't caused by intellectuals. That is that if you take the group of people who inject—and after all, it is a lower class thing to do—it is difficult to see for an uneducated and perhaps not very intelligent person how that person can have any self-respect. He's not a provider for anybody. He's never going to be a provider. If he has children, he has almost certainly abandoned them. So it's difficult to see what you can offer

these people other than this very miserable existence. In places like Zaire, where I've worked, there's a kind of self-respect even amongst the very poor who, for example, although they live in mud and all the rest of it, will turn themselves out on Sunday immaculately. And you can still see that with West Indians in my area in Britain—the older generation on Sunday, they are so beautifully dressed, it's a delight to see.

PS: On the question of race, there's that image one has of the older generation in the West Indian community in Britain trying to maintain respect and standards and so on, but there's also an image of young male West Indians being in the vanguard of a lot of the problems you're talking about. Is that false, or is this a partly racialised problem—in the way that the American underclass clearly is?

TD: I don't think it's racial. It clearly is very widespread among Jamaican males, of that there can be no question whatever, but it is certainly not *just* Jamaican males.

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This is something that exists among the white working class males as well, and increasingly among the Indians too—principally the Muslims, but not the Sikhs. When I started in the prison there were very few prisoners of Indian origin, and now they seem set to overtake West Indians even, but it's only Muslims. There are no Hindus in prison. The rate of imprisonment is six times that of Sikhs which is twice that of Hindus, something like that.

PS: I'd always thought the racial differences—the fact that home ownership rates, for example, are much higher in Britain among Asians than among West Indians, or that educational performance of Asian children now outperforms that of whites while West Indians lag far behind—I'd always thought these differences were due to family structure. Many West Indian families are single parents, yet Asian family structures are very strong. But you seem to be suggesting the differences are due to religious morality?

TD: Well, I'm not quite sure. As far as I can tell, the Muslim family structure is extremely oppressive, amongst the groups I see at any rate—genuinely oppressive. So while I'm all in favour of intact families, I think there is some kind of happy medium! You need to disaggregate racial groups. West Africans in Britain, for example, are doing very well, but that never gets published or publicised because of course it automatically destroys the idea that racism is the problem. The whole apparatus of anti-race-discrimination should be dismantled because it's quite unnecessary. It makes things worse, it makes people paranoid. I believe it to be deeply pernicious—and I don't even believe that prejudice is necessarily a harmful thing for the person who suffers it (within reason), because it can actually be a spur to achievement—obviously within reason.

I don't think you can police private feelings. And there's a danger if you have a complete disjunction between public policy and private feeling. I can conceive of a genuine fascist backlash in Britain. When I see the football crowds, which are overwhelmingly white, I think, my God, if somebody organised these people, I wouldn't want to be around when it happened. And they're obviously deeply resentful about something.

Now, one of the things is that we've lost all sense of cultural confidence. If you have cultural confidence, the sense that you have something worthwhile, you can easily absorb these people, but if you are constantly going on and saying how terrible we are and how there's nothing in our culture that is worthwhile, then eventually it becomes true. I can't see anything worthwhile in British culture now—there isn't anything. There are of course worthwhile people, but the overwhelming majority of it is charmless, worthless.

PS: Living as I do now in Australia, it strikes me that Australia is much more nationalistic, in a positive way, than Britain is. There's a pride in Australia. And it is of course a very multi-ethnic, multicultural country, and is seemingly very successful in getting different groups to live side by side without knocking the stuffing out of each other.

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TD: But I think Australians could destroy it by over-emphasising the harmfulness of their colonial past. What we're actually seeing here is the culture, which I suppose is still fundamentally British, the political culture, is actually an achievement of world historical importance. It is one of the most attractive cultures that man has produced—the Anglophone inheritance. That's why immigrants come here, for God's sake! Nobody

wants to emigrate to China. So there's something good about it, and what is good is of course the inheritance—the democratic structure, the open culture, the relatively open economy, a relative lack of corruption, freedom of association, freedom from fear of the knock on the door at midnight—these are all tremendous achievements. The idea that there's a political opposition that doesn't get shot. And of course we have one of the greatest literary cultures in man's history, in which Australia can take part positively.

PS: I came across research showing that the most individualistic country in the world is the United States, second is Australia, third Britain and fourth Canada—so you've got the Anglophone countries as the most individualistic cultures. The list you just rattled off, the positive virtues of that British inheritance, these are all virtues associated with individualism. But perhaps what you're mapping in your book is the reverse

side of that—maybe the price we pay for a culture that's dynamic and open and that respects individual diversity is that we're loathe to impose collective moral rules on people—and that the result is social fragmentation?

TD: Well yes, if that freedom is taken to extremes, but there was an inherited understanding that freedom is only of value if people have some kind of virtue. Roger Kimball in one of his books quotes a judge from the last century who said that if people lose their sense of obedience to the unenforceable rules, then civilisation itself is in danger. He said that people should not think that because it is legally permissible to do something that it is permissible in any other sense. Obviously we do not want a law telling us to stand there and not stand there—but we have no internal sense that we don't actually push in front of one another, or bash people aside, and that our rights have to be tempered by respect for other people's rights—that is what seems to have changed.

In Britain, for example, I speak with people on housing estates and they tell me that one of the worst things imaginable is having a neighbour who insists on playing music at three in the morning extremely loudly. It sounds like a trivial thing, but it isn't trivial if it goes on night after night and if you know that if you draw attention to it you're likely to be greeted with an angrily-wielded baseball bat because that person who's wielding it thinks that you're infringing his liberties. I think at one time everyone would have understood without it having to be explained that your right to your privacy and pleasures is tempered by my similar rights. But I think we've lost that sense.

PS: But what's caused that? You've mentioned the education system, and the radical egoism of the 1960s, and we've talked about the Thatcher inheritance too, and we said we would come back to the welfare state. Is the welfare state culpable?

TD: I think it's a necessary condition, but not a sufficient one—or perhaps it's not even necessary. I don't think the welfare state is solely responsible. It certainly makes some things possible—for example, it makes the breakdown of the family possible; but I don't

think it makes it inevitable. The people who first experienced the welfare state did not start to behave badly immediately—'Oh, now we've got the welfare state so we can have children out of wedlock, or we can divorce one another, and we can be violent with impunity.' I believe, for example, if you look at New Zealand, the welfare state is older in New Zealand than in Britain, and the crime rate started going up some time later than in Britain.

PS: So if it wasn't the welfare state that caused it, what was it?

TD: I think it's modern culture. And modern ideas. The idea that human relationships can be freed of all social obligation and contractual obligation and that then the full, beautiful human personality comes out—well, it's romantic drivel.

PS: You've identified a very worrying problem, and you've identified the shift in the intellectual climate that lies behind it, and the pernicious effect that has had as it's trickled down the class system. So how do you start to reverse it? Is there anything government can do?

TD: I think there are things. You can restore the financial fiscal benefits of marriage—say that there will be allowances for certain people and not for other people. That the state will

support certain forms of human association and not others.

PS: So government should start sending out some unambiguous moral messages?

TD: Signals. Yes. I don't think that's oppressive because you're not saying that if you want a child out of wedlock you can't have one, you're going to be publicly stoned to death in the town square or anything like that—it's just saying that we are not going to pay for it and if you do it you've got to do it on your own.

PS: OK, there's tax incentives in family policy. What else?

TD: I certainly think that we need more repression. I mean we need our police to be able to say, 'You will

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not be drunk in the street, and if you are drunk in the street you will be taken to court, and if you're taken to court you will be punished, and the punishment will hurt, and if you do it again the punishment will hurt even more.'

PS: This is the 'broken windows' theory—that if you clamp down on small incivilities, you will stop the bigger crimes too?

TD: Yes. I'll give you a small example. I live in a very nice square of Victorian houses, and around the square is a grass garden, and when I look out from my windows it's really very beautiful. So if I see litter I go and collect it, because I know that if I don't collect it, people will see it and say, 'Nobody cares here'—and if you've got a million pieces of litter, dropping another piece of litter doesn't really make any difference. So I'm quite prepared to go out and clean up litter—I don't want to do it, of course, but I'm prepared to do it, and I've noticed other people do it as well.

PS: Isn't this finger-in-the-dyke stuff? Your book says you have prostitutes soliciting on the corner where you live, there's drug pushers over the way, and there's you picking up litter. It's commendable, but there's a great wave of crime out there.

TD: Yes of course it's a very small thing. And I've no desire to be a litter-picker! It's not my ambition in life. But if I don't do it—if I took the view that I pay 1200 pounds local taxes a year so I'm bloody well not going to do it, then I'd be cutting off my nose to spite my face. It's true, it's a small thing, but the world is full of small things. Maybe even the prostitutes will treat the place with slightly more respect than they would if it was dirty. If you do disregard signs of public disorder, then they will just multiply.

PS: You used the word 'repression' just now. I suppose you really mean 'authority', based on the rule of law?

TD: Well it is repression because if you remove the

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repression, you get that kind of behaviour again. Now of course I'd much prefer it if people would internalise this, if they realised that appearing in public with a bottle in your hand, absolutely dead drunk, vomiting in the street, means that you have no self-respect—apart from being unpleasant. I would much prefer that we had a well-ordered society rather than one, like Singapore, where the moment you step out of line someone jumps on you. The fact is that I could go and drink on the street like everybody else but I'm not going to do it, and that's because I believe it to be wrong to do so. But unfortunately I think we've reached the stage where many people think that if it's not actually forbidden, then it's alright to do it.

PS: Let me be slightly mischievous. You talk in the book about tattooing and body piercing and studs through the navel. When I was 16 and came home with a pair of Cuban-heel boots my father said 'I'm not having them in the house, they're common!' You're now saying that navel-piercing is 'common'. But I wonder if some of what you are picking up on is harmless fads and fashions? Maybe you're just being a bit crusty?



TD: It would be harmless if people understood that it is just fashion, and that it belongs in its place. But they understand it as a right, so now, for example, in my hospital ward there's a male nurse, he's actually a nice chap. But he insists on having his face full of ironmongery, he

has 17 earrings in his ear, and it's probably not very hygienic. Anyway, eventually the hospital administration, which is far from repressive, said 'Look, you can't come to work like that', and his attitude was, 'If I've got a right to do it, I've got a right to do it anywhere.' So there's no limitation. Neither is there any acceptance that if you've got 'F*** Off' tattooed on your forehead, that means you can't really serve in a shop! They say, 'You can't discriminate against me.' So nobody's prepared to accept the consequences of their eccentricities or of what they do. If we lived in a culture where you accept that, if you have a ring through your

nose, you can't get a job in a merchant bank, that would be fine. But the demand now is that nobody should be allowed to draw any inferences from anything.

PS: The sort of concerns you are expressing are often popularly associated with being 'right-wing', or even 'extreme right-wing'. Do you think of yourself as 'a man of the right', and do you think that the right has an exclusive claim over these kinds of concerns?

TD: I don't think of myself as 'right', let alone 'far right'. I'm culturally conservative in that I do feel cross about people who constantly claim to discover wrong in the past as if there's nothing good about it. I'm strongly aware of the enormous effort it has taken for people to make the discoveries that we now take for granted, so that is one of the lessons that we should be teaching in history. So I'm conservative in that sense. I don't think it's particularly right-wing, or even exclusively right wing, as I think it's perfectly possible for people to be economically left-wing and culturally conservative. Poor people need social rules much more than rich people. Their life is much worse if they don't have those rules. So what I object to is the cultural liberal's view that they are being kind to the poor when actually they are making their lives hell.

PS: How long have you been working with people like the ones you write about?

TD: All my life. I have never worked in medicine anywhere in the world with better-off people!

PS: So are you some kind of masochist? How on Earth do you keep going? It must be absolutely dispiriting being confronted every day with evidence of the worst side of human nature.

TD: I think if I didn't write about it I couldn't do it. I'd explode if I didn't communicate this. It's very important that people should know this is going on. It seems to me that they don't know partly because they don't look, and they don't really want to know. I want them to know whether they want to know or not, because I think it's very important. But I don't think I could do it for a day if I didn't think I could write about it.

PS: And you write about it in such a humorous way. Is the humour a shield—if you don't laugh you cry?

TD: But it is actually very funny! Many times, I mean I don't laugh in front of the patient, but many times what they say *is* very funny. But it's an uncomfortable kind of funniness because it's also so terrible. As I said, I don't really know whether to throw myself off the roof or to roll about with laughter.

PS: And humour is also one of the best political tools. It's such a sharp way of getting people on your side.

TD: Yes, I'm surprised I haven't really been attacked much more than I have been.

PS: Is that because you're tucked away in *The Spectator* which only right-wing people read?

TD: I suppose really I should be writing for *The Guardian*. I think one of the reasons I'm not attacked is because you can't read what I'm saying for very long without realising that what I'm saying is true. People might disagree with the causes or solutions, but they can't just say 'No, he's lying, he's making it up.'

PS: In the book you end one of the chapters by saying, 'There are more votes in vulgarity than in the denunciation of it. Does that mean it is destined to be ever victorious?' So let me ask you that: Do you end up profoundly pessimistic or is there a note of optimism?

TD: There's a chapter in the book about religion. I think there's a distinct possibility there. I'm not religious—I used to be anti-religious but I'm not any longer. The other thing I do find slightly encouraging is when I talk to people in a straightforward way I tell them what I think is right and wrong, and they acknowledge it as being true. They say, 'Yes, I think you're right.'

PS: Are the intellectuals beginning to recognise that you're right too?

TD: No, I think there's more hope in the people themselves. You would think that if I talk straight to people and I say: 'You behave in this nasty fashion and

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actually you are unhappy because every choice you've made in your entire life has been not only wrong but also stupid', you'd think that people would get very angry, but they don't get very angry, they say, 'Well, yes, you are right.'

PS: But they still don't change, do they?

TD: Well, I think some do change. Of course the problem is that the change comes late in their lives when it is genuinely very difficult for them to change. What do you say to a woman who's got three children by three violent men, none of whom is supporting her, and who's living on an income of 29 pounds a week in some God-awful place where she'll be beaten up if she walks out after sundown—and where if she stays at home she's going to be burgled? What do you say to someone like that: 'Take up basket weaving?!'

PS: Last question. Indulge me. We're sitting here dissecting the British class structure. What's your own background?

TD: I come from a long line of refugees. My mother was a refugee from Nazi Germany in 1938 and my father was East London Jewish. But he was able to climb up the social scale very rapidly. I know one shouldn't generalise from one's own experience, but the one lesson I learned from that is that a class society is not a closed society. My father was in many respects not an easy man and he never praised anybody—he thought there was a zero-sum total of praise in the world, and that any that you gave to somebody else detracted from the amount that could be given to him! [*laughs*]. The single exception was his teachers from the school he went to in the East End of London, whom he recognised as the people who had enabled him *easily* (not with great difficulty) to get out of the slums—it was just after the First World War. I think he would find it more difficult now than in 1919—and I think that's a terrible indictment of our society. I've still got the school books they gave him, and they're actually of a much higher standard than anybody's school books now. Nobody said to him, 'You come from the slums so you don't learn Latin.' I think there's been a great misreading of British society in that people have

assumed that because it was a class society it was a closed society. I think that was not true.

But the intelligentsia insists on saying that it's a very closed society and of course, if you go on and on about it, eventually it becomes true. I think that we've now developed a growing caste where it's become true. I think if I was a child in, say, Smethwick [inner city Birmingham], how on Earth could I get out of it? The schools won't help me. But I'm constantly amazed. You get a Sikh bus driver and all his children are going to university and they become doctors and lawyers and businessmen and so on. So if they can do it, then other people could do it as well, but I think it's more difficult than it was. It was possible in Britain to go from the bottom to the top in one generation. It's true that there was snobbery, but I think part of that was a good thing in that there was a class whose culture seemed admirable to the people below them.

PS: Australians talk about the 'tall poppy syndrome', which you've probably heard of—a very strong sense of classlessness, meaning 'Don't you get above yourself'. And there's a celebration of the Kelly gang

inheritance, and the 'larrikin' and the surfer boy beach bum. I wonder whether that sort of stuff indicates the same sort of problems that you are describing in Britain?

TD: I don't know Australia well, but it's clear to me that Australia is a class society just like any other society and the difference is that they don't really want to recognise it. The kind of people I've been mixing with since I got here are clearly not the man in the street! I've noticed it in America too. They tell me Britain is a class society and they have no class in America, and you're sitting round this palatial table being treated in a grovelling fashion which I've never seen in England! I think I would advise Australians to get over it and say, 'It's a class society like any other society—so what?' The things that really upset people all over the world are the small signs of disdain, they really get people. It's not so-called structural injustice.

PS: Theodore Dalrymple, thank you very much for this interview. ■

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