
OUR CULTURE, WHAT'S LEFT OF IT: THE MANDARINS AND THE MASSES

BY THEODORE DALRYMPLE

REVIEWED BY MARGARET A. LITTLE*

Theodore Dalrymple, the pen name of a British doctor and writer, has justly been recognized as one of the most insightful cultural and social critics of our time. In his new collection of essays, Dalrymple examines world culture, spanning the globe from the slums and prisons of modern Britain to Third World relief operations to the Asian subcontinent to the Muslim suburbs of Paris. It is seen through the lens of literature, social criticism, artistic display, popular culture, the clash of transplanted cultures, philosophy and economics, ranging from Shakespeare to Marx, Orwell to Keynes, Turgenev to Woolf.

In fact, this book is worth the price of purchase for one essay alone, that being his 2002 essay "Barbarians at the Gates of Paris." It is simply chilling in its prescience of the breakdown of the rule of law and the conflagrations in the housing projects outside France's lovely, but frozen and unwelcoming urban centers. The book also includes his essay, "When Islam Breaks Down" named by David Brooks of *The New York Times* as the best journal article of 2004.

Dalrymple is an extraordinarily well-read polymath, who brings a scholar's insight to the world of arts and letters, society and politics that are the wide-ranging subjects of this book. Because Dalrymple spent years practicing medicine in Third World countries, and the rest of his career providing medical care to Britain's extensive underclass and prison populations, he brings something far more valuable to this enterprise than just an academic's wide reading list and a willingness to state his opinions. His mother, a refugee from Nazi Germany and his father, a committed communist, lend his personal history a deep understanding of how the ideologies of 20th Century intellectuals have not only destroyed facile optimism in man's capacity for progress, but did so by genocide conducted by formerly civilized nations that would have been unthinkable in the early decades of that century. As Dalrymple notes, the fragility of civilization is one of the enduring lessons of the last century. From this unique vantage point, Dalrymple concentrates his gaze on our current world culture, and anatomizes the current moral decline and policy madneses of liberal bureaucrats that are destroying the ordered liberty upon which western culture's fragile claim to civilization rests.

His prior book, "Life at the Bottom: *The Worldview that Makes an Underclass*," (also recommended reading), is a detailed dissection of the cultural ethos of modern day Britain's underclass, raised in a culture of resentment and dependency, fueled by an ethic devoid of personal responsibility that is largely the construct of liberal upper-class ideologies. This book, by contrast but also

continuation, seeks a larger canvas upon which to examine the perilous and often toxic effects of social policy that demean personal initiative, hard work, personal responsibility, and bourgeois values. Instead, these effects celebrate transgression, cause blame-shifting, moral equivalence, and cultural relativism. These and other products of the intellectual class's blind and destructive ideas are sold as dogma to the underclass through the ideologies of its social, educational and political policy makers and other modern instruments of public decay and disorder including popular culture and the media. He brings a clear-eyed and non-dogmatic realism to these essays, enhanced by his abiding love of the arts and letters and the insights that the best of our cultural inheritance can bring to the task of living an informed civic life dedicated to alleviating the misery of others, the focus of his own daily efforts.

Like Montaigne, Dalrymple's subjects range widely, from the brilliant "How to Read a Culture" illumination of pre-Revolutionary Russia, to his predictive meditation on the Le Corbusier cites of Paris, to essays on literature, art, popular culture, and his beloved Shakespeare. He does not flinch from the problem of evil, indeed opening his book with a meditation on it entitled *The Frivolity of Evil*, a subject to which he returns again and again, whether through a study of MacBeth, his own attraction to the underside of life ("*A Taste for Danger*"), or the grim and sordid realities of serial murder ("*A Horror Story*"). In addition to meditations on writers such as Shakespeare, Orwell, Turgenev and Marx, he includes a host of neglected writers and thinkers that shed valuable insight on modern European and world culture. One virtue of this book is that it brings a number of lesser known or unknown writers to the reader's attention and edification and understanding of just how European civilization came to such disastrous ends, and how its ideological exports continued to fester in the cultural revolution of China, the killing fields of Cambodia or the demagoguery that piled up corpses at a terrifying rate in Rwanda just ten years ago.

Though these meditations would appear to be addressing vastly different arenas of life and human experience, a common thread of respect for the accumulated social values that comprise what we call civilization emerges again and again. He skewers the academics and social theorists who champion transgression and who posit that they, and their new systems of thinking are wiser than more traditional outmoded mores, where "disregard of convention is regarded as a virtue in itself." As he notes,

Having spent a considerable proportion of my professional career in Third World countries in which the implementation of abstract ideas and ideals has made bad situations incomparably worse, and the rest of my career among the very extensive British underclass, whose disastrous notions about how to live derive ultimately from the unrealistic, self-indulgent, and often fatuous ideas of social critics, I have come to regard intellectual and artistic life as being of incalculable practical importance and effect.

Dalrymple's insights encourage us to pay attention to the culture around us, never letting us forget that no century more urgently than the 20th—with its charnel houses of totalitarian regimes—demonstrates better how fragile civilization is and remains.

His insights are distilled from his active engagement with the most fragile and troubled parts of his own culture in Britain and throughout the world. One example—"It was in Africa that I first discovered that the bourgeois virtues are not only desirable but often heroic." Invited to share a meal in the home of a hospital worker, he was deeply impressed with the immaculately clean, tidy furnishings of the modest home to which he had been invited. Never again would he bring the disdain of the 1960s generation to the daily heroism of a person holding squalor and decay at bay with the simple virtues of homemaking.

Although Dalrymple's focus is often on the places of failure in our culture, the book does not leave one with a dystopian sense of doom and gloom. Quite the contrary. His bracing and fearless look at the underclasses and political madness the world over is leavened by his acknowledgement that the fact of progress is undeniable:

Mankind has indeed become ever wealthier and ever healthier. The life expectancy of an Indian peasant, for example, now exceeds by far that of a member of the British royal family at the apogee of political power. In much of the world, poverty is no longer absolute. . . it is relative. Its miseries are no longer those of raw physical deprivation but those induced by comparison with the vast numbers of prosperous people by whom the relatively poor are surrounded and whose comparative wealth the poor feel as a wound, a reproach, and an injustice.

It is this culture of envy, resentment, and entitlement fueled by the fatuous and destructive ideas of left-wing social critics that Dalrymple takes on as a poisonous legacy from the mandarins to the masses, bent on infusing the very poorest and most vulnerable classes with a self-destructive—and incidentally class affirming—cultural ethos of dependency and decay. In essays such as *What We Have to Lose, How—and How Not—to Love Mankind*, and *The Dystopian Imagination* (or in his prior book, *We Don't Want*

No Education) he shows how chic disdain for the hard-won cultural values of past generations inevitably leads to failure, violent cycles of abuse, and ignorance that hold the underclass at the bottom of the heap for generations, regardless of the geography of the underclass in question. He urges us to pay close attention to the occupations of the underclass, to the popular culture and received social values foisted upon them. He stresses the importance of working to preserve the best of our cultural values of free will, moral judgment, accountability, and respectability that have allowed western civilization to represent the best hope for further attainments.

Dalrymple's unflinching gaze into the darkest recesses of human existence as well as his experience and understanding throughout many cultures and times, gives this book not just moral authority but experiential wisdom. Too many pundits lack engagement with or even understanding of the grim state of the underclass or the starkest calamities of our time. Dalrymple's quotidian immersion in dark places light the world over and his willingness to confront the problem of evil put him in the worthy company of the best essayists and cultural and political critics such as Orwell, Burke and Montaigne. The incisive and unconventional wisdom of these beautifully written and grounded essays will stay with the reader, and like the best of Orwell's essays, equip the reader with the tools to deconstruct the mad notions and effects of widely-accepted modern social policies, mass-media and popular culture.

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