

Damn *la Difference*

Bemoaning the homogenization caused by modernity

by Alexander Boot

In the past, Britain and America may have been divided by a common language. These days they are united by a common culture. It is called modernity.

Culture is something of a misnomer here, particularly if one uses the word in the narrower sense of Western culture. For modernity is precisely the opposite of that.

Western culture grew out of the shared need to comprehend and then reflect individual salvation. Modern culture grew out of the similarly universal need to gain collective, and totally equal, comfort.

Salvation is always individual; perdition — and I find it hard to describe the cultural content of modernity by any other word — seeks companions. The more modern a society, the more urgent is the need for uniformity. If one defines society as something co-extensive with a country, then the quest for uniformity means increasingly hazy demarcation among classes. If one broadens the concept of society, then one can understand why the idiosyncratic differences between, say, the British and the Americans are fast disappearing. Modernity feels about diversity the way nature feels about a vacuum.

These somewhat truncated thoughts form a plinth on which empirical observation can rest. Without such a support, observation can well tumble into the mire fed by reporters, especially of the travel variety, who dissemble as only eyewitnesses can. Now, I have undertaken to observe the social differences between the Americans and the British, which is something I am possibly qualified to do, if only because my last 30 years have been divided more or less evenly between the USA and Britain. But as a starting point I would like to venture outside these countries and describe a day in Florence a few weeks ago.

Alexander Boot is a frequent contributor to conservative journals, and is presently writing a book to be entitled Death of the West.

My wife and I were spending a month in Tuscany, and after a fortnight we ran out of books to read. So a quick visit to Florence was a matter of survival, for we always direct such rescue forays toward the English-language bookshop there owned by an amiable and cultured Scot. In no hurry to re-enter the smelly world of Florentine diesel fumes, we spent almost two hours chatting with the owner. He did most of the talking, complaining that Machiavelli's books read like contemporary reportage to anyone who knows today's Florence. Our part consisted primarily of admiring the Tuscan lilt to his Edinburgh English. That civilizes chat was punctuated at regular intervals by American tourists seeking an Anglophone haven from the gesticulating Borgias outside.

First came a vaudeville Midwesterner whose baseball cap displayed his academic credentials in the form of the *Indiana State* logo. Bringing into question the educational standards at that venerable university, the gentleman asked directions to the Parthenon. "It's not here," said the unflappable Scot accustomed to such incidents. "It's in Greece." "No, I don't mean the Parthenon," said the Indiana alumnus, impatient with the foreigner's lack of understanding. "I mean the Colosseum." "That's in Rome." Unsatisfied, the man walked out, only to be replaced in short order by a stream of his countrymen, now coming in thick and thin.

One of them expressed dismay over the absence of the Bridge of Sighs among the mementoes the bookshop sold as a sideline. The owner apologized for the oversight but pointed out respectfully that the bridge was, after all, a Venice landmark. "And where are we?" wondered the perplexed visitor. Several couples then came in demanding general information on what, if anything, there was to do in Florence. "Not much," explained the Scot, "if you don't like art." "Love it. Don't you love art, babes?" "Well, in that case, there are a few decent paintings here and there." "Like where?"

After several more interruptions, all in the same vein, we bid goodbye to our friend and, laden with purchases, walked in the direction of the Pitti Palace.

Along the way we passed by a mile-long queue outside the Uffizi which we did not dare to join. Because of the strong dollar, the queue was mostly manned by Americans, bracing themselves for a sprint through a thousand rooms full of Madonnas. We overheard one “honey-we’ve-worked-hard-for-this-so-goddamit-let’s-enjoy-ourselves” tourist suggesting to several others that they stroll to the Rialto Bridge afterwards, which idea, if acted upon, would have resulted in a rather lenthly walk indeed. Finally, when inside the Palace, we overheard another American, Texan by the sound of him, commenting incredulously that the Pitti (which has only a dozen or so first-rate paintings) was merely Florence’s second-best gallery. “What can be better than this?” he enquired, a question his companions obviously regarded as rhetorical.

Feeling superior, we decided that was enough for one day and escaped back to our serene village. A fortnight later we were back in London, where the sense of superiority quickly vanished into the mist so characteristic of this great city. I was tempted into buying a copy of the Leftwing *Guardian* newspaper, a temptation to which I had never before succumbed as the name of the paper affects me as the word “culture” affected Dr. Goebbels. Except that particular issue carried the results of a poll designed to find out how firmly young Brits are rooted in their cultural heritage. Not very, as it turned out:

81 percent could not name three novels by Charles Dickens,

93 percent could not quite place John Milton,

94 percent had never heard of Tom Paine (some will say this this is not such a tragic omission),

77 percent of Magna Carta,

90 percent did not know what conflict took place in 1815,

79 percent were blissfully unaware of who were the opposite sides in the English Civil War.

Even poor Dr. Livingstone was a stranger to 77 percent. And so forth, *ad gushing nauseam*.

Suddenly one realizes that a cultural chasm between the two countries exists only in the memories of retired, port-befuddled colonels from some of Britain’s better regiments. If asked, these gentlemen would probably guess, wrongly, that the poll covered only the “proles,” which term in Britain describes people who show the upper portion of their rectal divide above their jeans and

chant “if it wasn’t for England, you’d all be Krauts” at the visiting football fans. What the colonels may not know is that all of Britain has joined the louts to form a cultureless, and generally classless, mass.

Undeniably, the social landscape in both Britain and America is speckled with a few Western holdouts, for whom our cultural heritage is still a matter of life or death. But in neither place do they add up to a social, or even cultural, force. Realizing they have lost, most of

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these underground Westerners just try to survive in an alien environment, usually by attempting to blend in. They cower among their books and records, only venturing outside to make a living on the terms set by their conquerors. And they particular care to suppress a wry smile when yet another modern barbarian opines that John Lennon is every bit as talented as J. S. Bach, although admittedly in a different way.

If culture is no longer there to separate the two countries, then what about social differences? Here one has to delve into the issue of class, which creates an equally uncomfortable feeling on either side of the Atlantic. In Western times class was a useful term describing commonly acknowledged differences among various estates. In post-Western times along came Marx with his claim that class was defined solely by people’s relation to the means of production. In modern times, neither description holds true (come to think of it, the second never did).

To begin with, America, with its “self-evident” founding claim that “all men are created equal,” never had any estates to being with. Only the South once had a simulacrum of a hereditary hierarchy, but it was deconstructed by that great social reformer Gen.

Sherman. In the absence of a functional aristocracy, social divisions can only mimic a traditional class structure, in the same way in which American separation of power into branches mimics England's constitution.

Read President for King, the Senate for the Lords and the House of Representatives for the Commons, add a heavily politicized judiciary, and it becomes clear that we are looking at a phantom reflection, not the real thing. For England's constitution evolved to balance the powers of very real estates. Hence the unelected peers keeping the elected democracy in check, both together making

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sure the prince toes the line, and the latter not letting parliamentary bickering do too much damage. The U.S. Constitution, on the other hand, reflects America's absence of traditional estates, which is why her executive branch and both legislative chambers are democratically elected by more or less the same people. So the branches represent the same estate, or, roughly, the same social class if we insist on defining the term along the traditional lines.

The economic definition of class used to mean something in the U.S. but probably does not any longer. In an increasingly global, publicly-owned economy, where the managers seldom own the capital of which they dispose, the Marxian division of classes into capitalists and workers is frankly risible. Naturally, there are people with more or less money, but such differences are fluid and, in any event, they do not carry the weight of real class distinctions. After all, a marquis even without a penny to his name used to be upper class for life, while a rich shopkeeper was not.

Britain, on the other hand, once had a class structure, but in any meaningful sense this is now relegated to the status of a *Ye Olde England* sideshow.

The Crown has no clout, so neither does the aristocracy. Political power is dully vested in the Commons, which — just like the U.S. government — is a single-class institution. The dying social embers are, however, being fanned incessantly by the press (aka public opinion) and popular folklore. The maligned "class system" is being held responsible for demonstrable fact that, alas, men are not created equal, or, in any event, they do not end up so. The flogging continues even though the horse is long since dead, and the exertion involved produces new social pressures. However, these in Britain today are vectored down, not up. Hence the amusing spectacle of our privately educated Prime Minister Tony "Anthony" Blair attempting to master the glottal stop, which is akin to Beacon Hill resident trying to sound like an El Paso roustabout.

The same trend is observable in everyday life where the Brits, especially those involved in modern occupations, are busily getting rid of their natural middle-class accents. Recently, for example, I was introduced to the sister of a friend of mine, an advertising art director. To my surprise, she spoke in a much more refined way than her brother, who hides his intelligence behind Eliza Doolittle's vowels still unrepaired by Professor Higgins. When queried, my friend expressed touching concern about my mental health. "You a nutter or wot?" he said. "If I spoke like me Mum and Dad, or 'specially me Nan, I'd be out of a 'kin job. So I, like, changed the accent wot I was born with. Took three years of watching 'kin *Eastenders* on the old box."

It is hard to find in today's Britain a youngster who speaks with as refined an accent as his father. The downward drift has pushed most children at least a couple of ladder rungs lower than their parents, which proves yet again that it is possible to equalize only down, not up. (Those who think that the downward drift is an exclusively British phenomenon should compare George W. Bush with his father.)

So, if traditional class interests now survive only in the pronouncements of those with a vested interest in troubling the social waters, then what exactly has taken their place in British society? The answer is, tropistic reaching out for things American. The British philistine senses that Americans are his kind of people in the sense in which the few remaining toffs at home are not. Assisted by the innate modern craving for uniformity, he wants to be exactly like his victorious American

counterpart.

Now, imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, but it is also a shortcut to epigonic falsehood. So, in his second-hand Yankiness, the Brit is getting things wrong all over the place.

For one thing, he does not realize that today's American philistine is no longer aggressive. He is beyond aggression. After all, he has won, and his Gods are no longer athirst. So the Yank role model can afford to be good-natured, bestowing with an open heart the universal right to one's own opinion. Tell him, "No, pal. Nobody is *entitled* to express an opinion on *anything*; it's a privilege to be earned," and he will merely flash his dentures. Well, you too are entitled to your views. Have a nice day.

His neophyte British counterpart will not be so benign: catch him at a wrong moment, and he can thump you. The Brit is still an ounce short of his pound of flesh, which is why his smugness is still belligerent. After all, the light of the American beacon took a while to reach these shores, and there is a lot of catching up to do.

But when the bean finally hits the Brit in the eye, it dazzles him. Why can't he be like the Americans? He has just returned from a neatly packaged holiday in Orlando, and blimey! Every house there is detached with a swimming pool! What more can you want? Culture? Plenty of that over there, mate. But *our* kind of culture, not the poncy stuff the likes of you affect. Giz the Green Card, we'd *walk* across!

Apart from the more enlightened, or more xenophobic, ten percent, the Brits are being dragged by an invisible hand halfway across the Atlantic. They are met at that hypothetical point by many Americans who feel that Britishness confers a special kind of sophistication not readily available in Topeka. So they affect tweeds and heather-colored jumpers, give names like Kensington Cottage to their bungalows for the whole family and display models of Elizabethan frigates on their decorative fireplaces. Most of the time they get things wrong, but that does not really matter.

The gravitational pull toward the universal middle ground is narrowing the gap between the two countries. Sameness is gradually setting in, and before long any

substantive differences between Americans and the British will disappear.

"Substantive" is, of course, an important modifier, for superficial differences between the two will always remain. Also within each country, the encroaching sameness of content does not preclude a variety of form.

Britain may no longer have real social classes, and America probably has never had them, but that does not mean that the people do not divide into social sub-groups. Each aspires to the weighty status of a class, but what separates them is not a true hierarchy but an array of petty snobberies and silly semiotic codes for public consumption. At work

there is the larcenous shift of modernity whereby traditional Western institutions are destroyed, but their outer shell is kept up for appearances' sake.

Thus a city executive will present to the world the appearance of upward social mobility. He will leave the bottom button of his waistcoat undone, and, if he remembers, will even refer to that garment as *weskit*. He will make sure the loud stripes of his Jermyn Street shirt will clash slightly with the chalk stripes of his three-button jacket. He will affect a passion for opera, suitably as upmarket socially as it is downmarket spiritually. And he will drop a smokescreen of hints that he would much rather be out in the country with his horses.

His Wall Street counterpart will go through similar motions. He will make sure there is not an ounce of polyester in his button-down shirt. He will sport Brookes Brothers or Paul Stuart jackets with no shoulder pads, British regimental ties to which he is not entitled, and black brogues. He will greet strangers with "How do you do?" rather than "Nice to meetcha." In New York, he will know that even one summer weekend spent in the city spells social death. And he will donate \$200 a year to the Metropolitan Museum, which modest contribution will get him invited to the annual black-tie do. This will not only enable our hero to wear what he is at pains not to describe as a "tux", but — he hopes — will let him bask in the reflected glory of the wealthy patrons of the arts. In reality, he will be rubbing shoulders only with his fellow \$200 donors, but our hero does not know that.

However, come weekday evening, and both

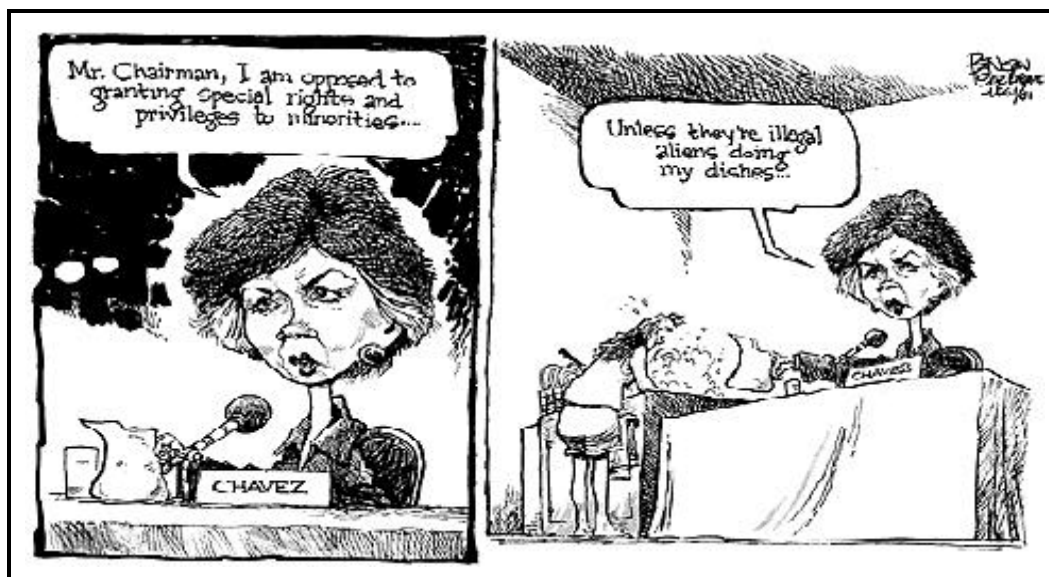
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protagonists revert to type. Slouching in his armchair with a can of beer or a glass of plonk grafted into his palm, each will stay transfixed to the TV screen fleshing the latest highly-rated soap. Or else he will do some mindless housework to the accompaniment of what he mistakenly calls music. Sheltered from the prying eyes of the world, he no longer needs to pretend.

In the morning, the classless Dr. Jekyll will stay at home, and the class-conscious Mr. Hyde will prowls the streets. But even though he will be at pains to distinguish himself from other classless prowlers representing different sub-groups, he will betray his quest for sameness by conforming rigidly to the semiotic shibboleths of his own type.

Pluck ten executives out of a Park Avenue crowd

at lunchtime, and you will have before you ten sartorial clones, each wearing an identical suit in one of the two regulation colors. Likewise, ten Texans in a Pasadena honky-tonk will be wearing identical clobber of jeans with silver belt buckles, Stetsons, Western shirts and cowboy boots. Or else drag ten media types out of a wine bar in London's Soho, and you will regaled by the sight of ten. Black, oversized Italian suits (upmarket Italians wear British cuts, by the way) and black shirts buttoned up all the way to the top. Within each sub-group uniformity reigns in every superficial detail. And by looking deeper, one will realize that it is only the superficial details that separate one group from another. *Vive la difference*, indeed! •



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