

Faded Prestige



by Theodore Dalrymple

The worst enemy of the West is itself, and the same goes for our democracy. We are so arrogantly certain of our survival and superiority, we in the Western democracies, that we never give a moment's thought to how we appear to others. We don't have to do so, we think, because of our inherent superiority and invincible strength. Why should we worry what Africans, for example, think of us?

Civilizations, it has often been said, do not collapse because of external enemies, but from internal decay. There is not a strict opposition between the two processes, however, for decay may make external enmity far more formidable than it might otherwise have been. And internal decay there certainly

is.

Our unpreparedness to see ourselves as others see us is all the worse because the Western democracies, which thought themselves the model for the rest of the world to follow after the fall of the Berlin Wall, have lost their allure in much of the world, at the very time when they are losing financial and military power.

Try to imagine yourself an intelligent person in a non-Western country reading the story of Susanna Gibson, a candidate for election to the state legislature of Virginia. This lady, now 45, streamed herself having sex with her husband (a family lawyer, by the way), taking paid requests for further sexual activities. I will not repeat what she is reported to have said while performing: Suffice it to say that it was not refined.

Her excuse for her paid exhibitionism is that she was raising money for good causes; that is to say, the causes that she would vote for if elected. Thus, the end justified the means; and this argument seems to have convinced at least some voters. It is by no means certain that she will lose the election.

What would you, the intelligent person in a non-Western country, think? No doubt your own country is full of degradation and depravity, but nothing so frivolously decadent as this. You would think that a country in which such a thing could happen with impunity is worthy neither of respect nor emulation, and even if you would like to emigrate to it, your desire would be to improve your personal material conditions of life rather than join a society that you could admire for its underlying ethics or principles. As the Chinese would put it, the country in which such things happen has lost the mandate of heaven.

It is not only in the United States that the shamelessness of

candidates besmirches the prestige of popular election as the legitimation of government. Churchill famously said that democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others, but the dishonest antics of candidates can make even the last proposition seem doubtful.

In France, a candidate for the French National Assembly, Juliette de Causans, has admitted that she used a photograph in her campaign that had been retouched—so grossly retouched, in fact, that when an untouched photograph of her was placed beside her campaign photograph, you would not have known that it was of the same person, and indeed could not possibly have been the same person. It turns out that several other candidates of her party, called Europe Ecology Equality, have done the same thing.

This is not quite as bad, perhaps, as what the pornographic candidate for the Virginian legislature did, and indeed I have on occasion allowed a publisher to do something vaguely similar by using an out-of-date photograph of myself in the publication of my work (not that I was ever so good-looking that it affected sales in the slightest). But it would satisfactorily demonstrate to any intelligent non-Western person how deep is the intellectual and moral rot of our democracy.

In the first place, the heavy retouching of the campaign photograph implies that a significant number of people—enough to make the difference between victory and defeat—vote on the basis of a photograph of the candidate. This does not suggest a well-informed electorate that takes its political choices very seriously. The electorate is more like the clientele of a supermarket that shops without a list of what it needs.

But perhaps the candidate who doctored her picture was mistaken; in reality the electorate takes no notice of such things as how the candidate allegedly looks. If this were the case, she (and those who did likewise) would have been

insulting toward the very people whose vote she (and the others) solicited. No doubt in an age of publicity, sometimes known as information, a certain degree of superficiality is inevitable; but when politicians can so alter their photographs that they bear very little relation to reality, we are approaching Soviet levels of dishonesty, an era when people disappeared from past photographs as soon as they were disappeared from life. (I always laugh, incidentally, whenever I see Mr. Xi's jet-black hair.)

When the unfortunate disparity between Ms. Causans' real appearance and that in her election posters was exposed, she said, "It is my right as a candidate to have a beautiful photo." Could anything better illustrate the egotism that is now current in the Western world?

Alas, having a beautiful photograph and being beautiful are not at all the same thing. Many beautiful photographs have been taken of ugly or even deformed people, but that is not the same as making the subjects themselves beautiful (though they may have beautiful characters). No one has a right to be considered beautiful, and no one has a right to deceive the public by what amounts to forgery.

Far more brutal things go on in dictatorships, of course. But intelligent non-Westerners, who often take it as a given that their government will be mendacious, corrupt, and tyrannical, but who have been read lessons in good government for years by Western intellectuals, will increasingly realize that Western democracies are giants with feet of clay, that our people and our institutions are rotten through and through. Our political life seems little more than a succession of scandal, corruption, mendaciousness, frivolity, and bitter disputation over nothing, while on every hand real and severe problems and dangers go unaddressed. We are therefore no longer to be looked up to, but rather down upon. Prestige is like the blush of a grape, and when it goes, it goes forever.

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