Ill-Served

by Theodore Dalrymple

Staying recently for a few days in a luxury hotel in London (not at my own expense, I hasten to say), I was struck, as in the past, by the fact that not a single member of the staff was of British origin.

We are at an odd, and not reassuring, conjuncture. Britain faces an economic recession, a labor shortage (as a growing proportion of the population no longer works), stagnation in productivity, and unprecedented levels of illegal immigration. Indebtedness, both public and private, is great and growing; a gaping commercial deficit exists with the rest of the world. Current standards of living can continue only through further borrowing, which may not be possible for much longer. Both inflation and taxation are at their highest levels for nearly half a century. It is hard to see any light at the end of this long tunnel: the instinct of many, particularly of the most

productive and ambitious, is to flee. They have seen the future, and it is impoverishment.

A situation like this does not strike like lightning: it takes years of improvidence and foolishness to lay the ground for it. Demagoguery and frivolity (though without accompanying gaiety) have proved a deadly combination.

Let us return to the question of why the receptionist of a luxury hotel in London was a Pole and, indeed, almost had to be a foreigner of some description. I do not ask this question from xenophobia; I do not dislike foreigners or want to expel them. And this Pole was singularly pleasant. She was elegant, efficient, polite, charming, and spoke excellent English. In such qualities lies the clue as to why the hotel employed her, and not a Briton, as its receptionist.

Not long after my stay, I read in the press that a survey had concluded that about one in six or seven of the adult population in Britain—9 million people—was functionally illiterate. One can quibble with the exact definition of functional illiteracy, as well as the figure itself; but few would dispute the low cultural and intellectual level of much of the population.

Assuming that the survey is broadly right, the British state has spent (at current rates) something like $500 billion on the education and production of millions of semiliterates. In a way, this outcome is a miracle, considering how easy it is, and how little it would cost, to teach children to read adequately. It is possible that, in the annals of world history, one might find worse examples of government waste—but surely, they are not numerous.

Nor is it true that the population is sharply divided into a semiliterate minority and a cultivated and well-educated majority. If such were the case, it would be unfortunate for the minority, condemned to underclass status, but it would be

possible for the other five-sixths or six-sevenths of the population, say, to bear the costs of such a situation without much difficulty. In fact, the problem of semiliteracy goes far deeper and is much more serious: and if anyone were to say that the problem exists in the United States, too, I would reply that, though this is doubtless correct in the abstract, the U.S. is, to some extent, protected from the consequences by great strengths that Britain lacks.

Britain now has overwhelmingly a service economy: in 2021, manufacturing accounted for less than 10 percent of GDP and agriculture about 0.5 percent. It is unlikely, moreover, that the manufacturing or agriculture sector is going to expand dramatically; the service economy is here to stay.

The least one might expect of a service economy is a population prepared, able, and willing to provide service, but in Britain's case, one would be disappointed. I am now painting with a broad brush, admittedly: I regularly meet British people who not only provide excellent service—often ill-paid—but also seem happy to do so. A trope in left-wing journalism in Britain is that to work in a supermarket at the checkout (increasingly a technologically redundant form of employment) or as a shelf-stocker is the worst fate that can befall a human being; but my experience of supermarket workers is that they do not feel or express such misery or resentment that the left-wing journalists would hope that they felt and expressed as a prelude to building a better society—under the wise guidance of left-wing journalists, of course. Here we find an error of misplaced and inaccurate empathy: if the journalists would hate to work in a supermarket, it follows for them that those who do so must likewise hate it. That some may take satisfaction in any task less or other than saving the world does not occur to them.

Nevertheless, many Britons remain singularly unfitted, by education and culture, for work in a service economy. The qualities that the Polish receptionist exhibited are not

widespread, let alone universal, in the British population that is not economically active—or in the population that *is* economically active. To take one small indication: her willingness to wear with pride her uniform. The British, educated in a system that values self-expression above any form of correctness or correctitude, from spelling to modes of address, now regard the requirement to dress in a way not chosen by themselves as an assault on their freedom of expression. The possibility of pride in a uniform (if they are civilians) is thereby denied them. Therefore, they always subvert any prescribed mode of dress by some little (or even great) deliberate slovenliness—by an undone collar or tie, or by wearing socks or shoes of a color that clashes with the rest of their outfit. Their pride in their freedom, their ego, is thereby salvaged. In slovenliness is freedom, and pride is taken in not taking pride.

This attitude is visible everywhere. Take another small example, which I have also noted in the past: the way road repairs are done in Britain. Temporary road signs and white and orange plastic cones are put up to warn approaching traffic that roadwork lies ahead, but when the work is completed, these objects are often not removed but merely pushed to the side of the road, to rust and decay—or, in the case of the plastic cones, overturned into the mud to become filthy and remain where they are for years. The sandbags used to weigh down the temporary signs are also frequently left to rot in the rain by the side of the road. Even during the performance of the work itself, in my experience, the contractors regularly manage to create far more disorder than their counterparts in other countries do in similar circumstances, suggesting an absence of serious planning, such that a project that would elsewhere take weeks, at most, goes on for months, causing unnecessary holdups that must harm economic efficiency.

This is a small thing, no doubt, but not insignificant. It

means that no one—not the workmen for the contractors, not the management of the contractors, not the public authorities that award and supposedly supervise the contracted work in the name and interest of the public—takes any real care in what is being done. And since the phenomena I have described are countrywide (it is scarcely possible to drive more than a few miles without observing evidence of them), this suggests a cultural, and not simply a local organizational, problem. The habit of not caring is now ingrained.

Returning to the Polish receptionist, the first thing to note is that her English was better than that of a typical British worker. Obviously, she had to learn English as a second, perhaps even a third, language, which meant that she had gone to the trouble to learn it correctly—that is to say, English in its most standard form. But educationists in Britain have long waged war on the idea of a standard language, and generally have prevailed. Rules of grammar are arbitrary; no way of speaking is superior to any other.

The same goes for pronunciation. Britain may be richer in local accents than any comparable country, often with plentiful dialect words in addition, all of which is a delight to those who savor the vagaries of language. (Twenty miles from where I live, for example, *we are* becomes *we am*, usually shortened to *we'm*, which I love to hear, but which must puzzle any foreigner. Who or what is this *Weem* of whom the speaker speaks?)

The Polish receptionist has an accent that she will never lose, but she has learned to enunciate clearly and tried to approximate her pronunciation to a standardized English language as closely as she could. (She was delighted when I complimented her on her success, understanding, as I do, what an effort it must have taken.) The result was that she was comprehensible to English speakers in a way that many people with regional accents in Britain would not be outside their own area.

This would not matter were there no ideological resistance to teaching a standard language and pronunciation in parallel to the local way of speaking, which pupils could then adopt as necessary, without losing their local dialect. But such instruction would constitute an assault on their self-esteem, for it suggests that they needed to learn something even as basic as how to talk. And since practically everyone learns to talk in some manner, and none is superior to any other, pedagogical interference has no justification. The pupil gets the impression that he has nothing to learn (a lesson easily extended to other fields) and the teacher that he has nothing to teach, which relieves him of responsibility as well as any chance of being judged wanting. The Polish receptionist was not the victim of such nonsense. She knew that her task was to make herself understandable to customers; a Briton with a strong regional accent would think that it was the duty of the customer to understand him or her.

The corruption starts early. A medical colleague, living in a middle-class area, discovered that 30 percent of the spelling examples given by the teacher at the local school to his highly intelligent daughter to learn were erroneous. He complained to the headmistress. She failed to understand why he was worried; after all, she said, even the erroneous spellings were understandable, and to make oneself understood was the sole purpose of language. The spirit of Dickens's schoolmaster, Wackford Squeers, lives on: "W-i-n, win, d-e-r, der, winder, a casement."

The Polish receptionist had another advantage not frequently found among the British: a knowledge of how to address people, in a friendly, polite, but not overfamiliar manner, an implicit knowledge that derives from a culture rather than from formal training. In her position, a young Briton would often be either obsequious or, more likely, resentful—determined to prove that a cat may look at a king. Even answering the telephone in an appropriate manner appears

beyond the capacity of more and more Britons. Worse still, the gracelessness of modern British culture is not merely spontaneous but has an ideological edge to it, such that many come to regard any refinement of speech or manners as artificial, a manifestation of social injustice. The more vulgar the conduct, therefore, the more authentic and politically virtuous; a downward spiral. A service economy with a labor force that thinks like this is a service economy without service.

In these circumstances, to ask people to change is not regarded as a matter of training or improvement but as a criticism of who they are at the deepest level. Having long absorbed, both subliminally and consciously, the doctrines of multiculturalism—that no way of being is superior to any other—they logically conclude that the way they are is as good as the way anybody else is, and therefore that no one has any justification for demanding change of them. If multiculturalism requires us to accept others as they are, it has the corollary that others must accept us as *we* are: an attitude much in evidence when young British people gather in foreign resorts, where they are (rightly) feared and detested. If drinking and debauchery are part of our culture, who has the right to gainsay it?

Alas, the miracles wrought by the educational system are not exceptional. Much of the public administration produces similar wonders. The National Health Service, long the object of uncritical veneration, grows less responsive to need the more that is spent on it. Approximately 10 percent of the population is on waiting lists for operations or procedures, even as the NHS consumes between 12 percent and 13 percent of GDP. Obtaining an appointment to consult a doctor is now an unpleasant, often time-consuming, task, an appointment awarded to an aspiring patient as if it were an undeserved privilege. Only one in four family doctors works full-time, in part a result of the rapid feminization of medicine, and more than

half work less than three days a week. This might suggest that their salaries are too high but also that the work itself, with its associated burden of bureaucracy, has become disagreeable. Early retirement is the cynosure of many doctors' eyes; tens of thousands have done so in part because of increased regulation, and doctors who want to work beyond retirement age could, until recently, look forward to penalization by additional taxation.

The criminal-justice system has likewise broken down. The backlog of cases is so great that it encourages a sense of impunity among those inclined to break the law. Further, the attachment of the public itself and of the police to the very notion of law and order has declined, in favor of a politically correct moralism. A jury in Bristol recently acquitted four students of criminal damage after they toppled a statue and threw it into an estuary, impressed by the moral purity of their motives—the statue that of a rich merchant and philanthropist of the early eighteenth century who had dealings with the slave trade. Six doctors accused of causing a public obstruction on a bridge over the Thames, demonstrating against the use of fossil fuels (never mind the excess of deaths likely to be caused by the inability of some people this past winter to afford to heat their homes), won acquittal because the judge was impressed both by their sincerity and their arguments—as if his job were to sift the arguments for breaking the law and then endorse those that he agreed with or found sincere.

Little groups of such demonstrators have been holding up traffic or otherwise making a public nuisance of themselves, but the police seem more concerned with protecting their safety than preserving public order. In effect, they side with the protesters, who are very small in number and of a class that has never experienced the kind of hardship that they are helping to bring about, against those thousands to whom they cause intense frustration and misery and who are simply going

about their lives.

The police have been indoctrinated, or at least intellectually cowed, into believing themselves not to be mere guardians of the law as it stands, but responsible for bringing about social justice—a far grander, if less precise, role. This renders them unable to deal with even the tiniest public disturbance, so that they find themselves held in equal contempt by the law-abiding and the lawbreaking: an achievement, of a kind. Recently in the *Guardian*, ever in search of new fields to render uninhabitable, an article by an apologist for the Just Stop Oil! protesters argued that it was wrong to oppose such demonstrators by means of the law because the law was already, in effect, a broken reed: as if the way to repair the broken reed were to break it more often. The writer did not appear to realize (and nor did the newspaper) that the article was a virtual incitement to violence: for if the law is not the answer to lawbreaking, then armed mobs will be.

One ought not to exaggerate, of course. If Britain is a failing state, it is certainly not a failed state in the way that Yemen or Somalia is a failed state. My wife and I, greatly against our expectations, recently received the most excellent care under the NHS; and everywhere we still encounter hardworking, competent, and obliging tradesmen, shopkeepers, and even minor officials, who do their best and lend quality to our lives.

Yet still an air of irreversible decay, even of deliquescence, hangs over the country. The British state, incapable of fulfilling its most fundamental tasks, seems determined to prove the truth of Frédéric Bastiat's bon mot, that the state is the means by which everyone tries to live at everyone else's expense. Workers for the state are accorded privileges that others cannot dream of: for example, final salary pensions indexed to the cost of living. (Until recently, private pensions were severely limited in size, beyond which

they were penalized fiscally.) Such dependence on the state has been created that the government confronts a stark choice: reduce the dependence and deal with social unrest, or spread impoverishment wider. It has chosen the second option. The British have become a people of the government, by the government, for the government.

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