

Service Without a Smile



by Theodore Dalrymple

Like several other countries in the West, Britain has given up on the sordid and vulgar activity of making things and instead gone in for the more refined and sophisticated life of service industries.

In the case of Britain, however, there is a particular problem: The people are not very good at providing service, at least in such enterprises as hotels and restaurants. They do not know how to do it themselves and will not learn from others.

I recently stayed in a British-run hotel in the south of England. It could have been grand, having once been, I imagine, the mansion of some Victorian magnate. It was no architectural masterpiece, and I should even have called it

ugly had my standards of ugliness not been lowered by acquaintance with the efforts of modern British, American, and French architects. By comparison with them, the mansion was elegance itself.

It was crumbling, but not in a charming way. The stucco was peeling, the grounds were neglected, and a modern conference center had been glued to the building to destroy its symmetry. But it still had the kind of public rooms that are now absent from most modern hotels, from the days when hotels were not mere dormitories and had a social life of their own.

But the carpets! If you looked at them for too long, they would have given you an epileptic fit, or at least a migraine. They made a painting by Jackson Pollock seem a masterpiece of draftsmanship. The fact that they had to be designed, manufactured, and then chosen was enough to make you despair of humanity. And the chairs had been upholstered to produce yet further nausea.

Needless to say, vile music poured into the bar like poison gas. Such vile music nowadays is like a natural phenomenon: Its omnipresence is taken for granted, and no one knows how it gets there.

The staff, all British, had been put in a uniform: completely black, as if the hotel were intended to be a rest home for fascists. But the uniform was not threatening because it was dirty or crumpled in purely individual ways, and the staff all wore different footwear, most of it casual. It was as if they were trying to express themselves through their shoes, to demonstrate that they were individuals.

The whole point of a uniform is to give people a pride and an esprit de corps; here, it was taken as an attack on freedom, and obviously worn with reluctance.

What was most striking about the staff, however, who were mostly young, was that they were nice people, smiling and

obliging. They were clearly doing their best; but the fact that they were doing their best was not comforting.

In this connection, I recall the late Methodist preacher and soapbox orator Donald Soper, who used to speak every Sunday at Speakers' Corner in London, along with many other curious figures, such as a rotund friar from the Catholic Truth Society and a man so heavily tattooed that he would display his torso in silence to the amazed amusement of the crowd (he would be regarded as normal now).

One Sunday nearly sixty years ago, Donald Soper was attacking the record of the government when someone in the crowd shouted out, "Leave them alone, they're doing their best." Quick as a flash, Soper, who was a very witty man, said, "That's precisely what I'm afraid of."

Yes, these young Britons were doing their best, and that was precisely what I was afraid of. They had, for example, no idea how to address customers. They called us "guys," though we were old enough to be their grandparents. Their manner veered between overfamiliarity and obsequiousness, and sometimes they managed to combine the two. Obsequious overfamiliarity or overfamiliar obsequiousness: Either would do as a description. I have never encountered it anywhere else in the world.

The hotel was not exactly dirty; it was cleaned regularly but not thoroughly. Attention to detail was completely lacking. It was as if it were not even seen, or if seen not thought important enough to be bothered with. There was no supervision by management.

Self-service breakfast was a kind of compendium of terrible British catering. The bread was industrial, out of a packet; the coffee was instant; the butter was in tiny little packets, fiddly to undo and guaranteed to spread as much on your fingers as on the bread. There was, it is true, some cured ham, but it was thrown onto a plate in a forlorn little pile,

without any attempt at aesthetic arrangement. But the true acme, apart from the dried and shriveled-up bacon, was constituted by the fried eggs. They had evidently been cooked several hours before. They reminded me of the rubber fried eggs that you could buy in the practical-joke shop that once existed opposite the entrance to the British Museum, where you could also buy floating sugar lumps and plastic dog excrement, as well as sneezing powder and false mustaches.

These fried eggs, however, were no joke: They were real. They slid around the dish on their film of old lard as easily as champion skaters on the ice. The yolks had turned hard.

The clientele, practically all British, appeared not to mind (though admittedly they would not have known that I minded, since I said nothing, though they might have noticed me smiling with amusement).

It was clear that the only way that the hotel could improve was to be taken over by foreigners, staffed by foreigners, and possibly patronized by foreigners. And this is painful to say, because the staff of the hotel were (a) very pleasant and (b) *doing their best*. But this points to a profound cultural problem, at least for a service economy.

You will find in Britain any number of immaculate bed-and-breakfasts run by individuals, indeed that are so perfect that you feel somewhat guilty at spoiling the perfection by your intrusion. This disjunction suggests a national incapacity to organize or manage anything on any scale (give or take a royal funeral or coronation); and this incapacity affects even those things that were once managed well, such as the police force.

If I had to guess at the, or an, underlying cause of the inability to manage anything, I should suggest the spread of fatuous tertiary education, which has dulled the practical intelligence of millions and returned them nothing of value either intellectually or spiritually.

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