

The Paradoxes of Cultural Confidence: Is Western culture in decline?

By Theodore Dalrymple (Tony Daniels)

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My subject is the importance and paradoxes of cultural confidence at a time of great conflict, both within and between societies. The subject is of particular interest for countries such as Great Britain and France, but also for Canada where, I believe, demands for the institution of Sharia law have not only been made but taken seriously in some quarters.

In Brussels, the capital not only of Belgium but the administrative centre of the European Union, policemen have been enjoined by their superiors not to eat or drink anything during the day in the month of Ramadan while patrolling the predominantly Muslim area of the city, for fear of offending the population. I quote this particularly striking and egregious example, because it indicates, to me at least, a complete collapse of confidence in any kind of principles, in the absence of which fear becomes the unadulterated guide to public policy. But fear of what, exactly? Social disorder, perhaps, or of terrorist attack, or even of merely ideological criticism and the charge of being culturally insensitive and perhaps racist?

Unfortunately, where fear is the guide, hatred often takes over. A genuinely authoritarian reaction, or worse, is not out of the question.

A man whom I would not normally quote very often

with approval, the former professor of English at Cambridge, Terence Eagleton, summarized our predicament with great precision in his recent book, *The Meaning of Life*: “In the conflict between Western capitalism and radical Islam, a paucity of belief squares up to an excess of it. The West finds itself faced with a full-blooded metaphysical onslaught at just the historical point that it has, so to speak, philosophically disarmed.”

I will not stop to argue whether this situation is unprecedented, but I doubt that many will not see in it an accurate, if schematic, depiction of our current intellectual, moral and social situation. Incidentally, the conflict is not merely between Islam and Western capitalism, or (as I would prefer to say) Western capitalist society, but any strong system of belief.

We are faced by a dilemma: on the one hand, we cherish the ability and freedom to doubt as the foundation of all that is good in our societies; on the other, we recognize that radical skepticism is not necessarily a good standpoint from which to resist the encroachments of those who are not in the least skeptical, and indeed believe themselves to be possessed of the unique truth.

Let me briefly outline some of the sources of what one might describe as debilitating skepticism and its

close cousin, cultural relativism. I shall here mix, promiscuously I am afraid, social, historical and philosophical observations: partly because it is so difficult to disentangle them, but largely because I am neither a sociologist, nor a historian, nor a philosopher, but rather a doctor with a sideline in social and cultural commentary.

Let me start with an historical observation. It is hardly a secret that the last century was among the bloodiest in human history, despite, or perhaps because of, enormous technical advance. The epicentre of the troubles was Europe, the heart and soul of western civilization. I need hardly remind you that the worst atrocities in human history were perpetrated by the most advanced people, culturally, scientifically and philosophically, of their time. It is only natural that the worth of an entire civilization that brought the Gulag and Auschwitz should be questioned.

The human tendency to make gestalt switches was encouraged by the revaluation undertaken by intellectuals of all that had gone before these, and other, catastrophes. German history, for example, was widely conceived, even by the Germans themselves, as having been nothing but a run-up to the Holocaust. And where once it would have been normal to view Europe as a source of enlightenment to the benighted, now it was viewed much as the serpent in the Garden of Eden.

Columbus, far from being a hero, became a horseman of the epidemiological apocalypse that struck America in the wake of the arrival of the Spanish. Where once Europe was involved in a *mission civilisatrice* in Africa, all of Africa's problems were now seen as having derived from European incursion in the continent.

We can see an echo of this attitude in the response to the American invasion of Iraq: however crass you may think it to have been, it is surely not possible to blame it for all the travails of Iraq or of the region as a whole. But there is little doubt that the emotional

investment in the criticism of America is vastly greater than that in the criticism of the political traditions of the Middle East.

The point is that if you believe that the history of your culture is nothing but a catalogue of horror, massacre and the oppression of others, then you will not be very assiduous in its defence once it comes under concerted attack. Among intellectuals, at any rate, the history of crimes and catastrophes is more popular than that of achievement; and this view eventually communicates itself to society at large, to the point when it is not even realized that there is any

achievement to record. In any case, there is a natural tendency, at least in the modern world, to take progress for granted the moment it is made, but never to accept problems as being an inevitable part of human life.

At the same time as events in Europe – both wars that were eventually to engulf the world – forced, or at least encouraged, a re-assessment of the moral worth of the civilization that appeared to have brought them about, there was, probably not coincidentally, an epistemological attack on the notion of objective knowledge. The history of philosophy, like all the history of

everything else, is a seamless robe, so it is impossible to say exactly when the radical skepticism that was to become post-modernism actually started: perhaps in about 400 BC. Nevertheless, thinkers such as Michel Foucault were clearly very influential in propagating the idea that nothing was a question or matter of truth, but only of power; that all views on all subjects were masks for someone's, or some group's, interests. Moral standpoints could be analyzed in much the same way. Everything boils down in effect to Lenin's pithy question, Who whom?, that is to say, who does what to whom?

Paradoxically, the means used to draw this conclusion was the study of history. Historical evidence was adduced to demonstrate that in human affairs, that is to say in the whole of human life, there is only the interplay of power, not merely as a matter of empirical fact – surely we all know that people often

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cloak their interests in a mantle of facts and rationalization – but as an epistemological necessity.

Strangely enough, also, complete skepticism about the possibility of reaching truth – this denial that there was any truth independent of human interests to be reached – was not incompatible with the strongest moral views, though these moral view were always in diametrical opposition to established moral traditions. The connotation of the notion of transgression changed from negative to positive. It was a moral duty to challenge everything, and to overturn as much as you could.

This resulted in a very odd psychological and philosophical attitude. It was accepted by many intellectuals as an unquestionable assumption that, in its confrontation with the rest of the world, the western world was always in the wrong, *ex officio* as it were, because its superior power; that because there was no such thing as truth, the claims of western civilization to have developed methods for discovery of the truth, organized science for example, were merely a mask for its greed and power-hunger; and that therefore a sympathy for those outside the western tradition who claimed to know the truth, moral and religious, was a sign of virtue, provided only that the moral and religious truth they claimed to know was in conflict with western power. In other words, the test of virtue became the degree to which one was prepared to reject and revile one's own society.

I should add a third ingredient. Radical skepticism after the Second World War was always used in the service of permissiveness: if you couldn't provide a firm, and indeed irrefutable, metaphysical basis for a behavioural prohibition or restriction, then that prohibition or restriction could safely be ignored by any person striving to live the moral life. This movement, if I can call it such, started among the intelligentsia but soon communicated itself to the rest of society: what was good enough for the Bohemian was soon good enough for everyone else, particularly, as it happened, those people who were least able to

withstand the practical effects. To give you just some flavour of this, let me tell you that I worked in a hospital in which had it not been for the children of Indian immigrants, the illegitimacy rate of children born there would have approached one hundred per cent. It became an almost indelicate question to ask of a young person who his or her father was; to me, it was still an astounding thing to be asked, "Do you mean my father now, at the moment?" as if it could change at any time and had in fact changed several times before.

I ask you to believe me, though if necessary I could provide chapter and verse, that the society in which this all this has taken place is now deeply unattractive

in many ways. *Inter alia*, it is extremely crime-ridden. No doubt things in Canada are not so bad; but I should be surprised if, at any rate in the worst areas of Toronto, things were completely or unrecognizably different. What we now see, in Britain at least, is a society in which people demand to behave more or less as they wish, that is to say whimsically, in accordance with their kaleidoscopically changing

desires, at the same time as being protected from the natural consequences of their own behaviour by agencies of the state. The result is a combination of Sodom and Gomorrah and a vast and impersonal bureaucracy of welfare.

When one looks at this society, if one assumes that it is the whole of society and not merely a part of it, it is indeed difficult to see very much that is worth defending in it. Thus the criticisms of Islamists in our societies, for example, are not wholly wide of the mark (and here it is worth bearing in mind that they, the Islamists in our society, will often live in close proximity to the least attractive manifestations of our permissiveness, not experiencing the higher glories of intellectual freedom, the existence of which our own intellectuals have been at such pains to deny or denigrate); where they, the Islamists, or any other kind of religious fundamentalists, err is in their frankly idiotic supposition that the nostrums of their religion have anything to say to the modern world or

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offer a solution to its problems. It should be sufficient for them to remember that three of the four allegedly rightly-guided caliphs were brutally murdered for them to realize that, from the very first, Islam offered no political panaceas for mankind, to put it mildly. And what was not true then is, *a fortiori*, even more true now.

It is not surprising that radicals, socialists and liberals don't find very much to defend in our societies: in a sense, they gain their colours, and probably their self-esteem, by attacking the status quo. But our societies have become difficult to defend for conservatives also. Things are far worse in Britain than in Canada, I have little doubt, and I think that I would have little difficulty in showing you scenes – everyday scenes – in Britain that would persuade you that it is a society that deserved destruction, if you mistook the part for the whole. But complacency is not in order: things can fall apart with surprising swiftness, as they have in Britain.

Let me now return the part that the loss of cultural confidence plays. A very clear example is that of the BBC. As you probably know, the BBC is funded by what in effect is an hypothecated tax on households that have television sets (I don't have a television set, but my attempts to persuade the authorities that I don't is a saga in itself, and I don't think that, even now, they believe me, and they keep threatening to break in and check. After all, the non-possession of a television set is a sign virtually of vagrancy.)

There are two schools of thought about how a publicly-funded broadcasting system can justify its existence. The first says that, since it is paid for by everyone, it must produce programmes that are popular, *i.e.* have audiences as large as commercial broadcasting stations. The second says that the only justification for the existence of such a broadcasting system is that it produces programmes that commercial broadcasters will not produce and that are good in themselves because of their high intellectual and artistic calibre.

There is no doubt that the first school of thought is winning if not the argument, exactly, then in practice. The BBC's programmes become less and less distinguishable from commercial programmes; and this is surely because the elite in British society lacks the confidence in its own cultural leadership, and in its right or duty to lead. It fears not so much criticism from below, but from others parts of the elite, the more so since there is no longer any theoretical agreement over what constitutes high calibre – though oddly enough, the intellectuals who most promote cultural relativism are generally themselves highly cultivated in an old-fashioned way.

In short, we have a society that is prosperous and technically advanced that is, however, driven by doubt and intellectual anxieties, as characterized by Professor Eagleton. Let us now turn briefly to the challengers to that society, those who, according to him, have, if they do not suffer from, an excess of metaphysical certainty, namely Islamists.

Without wishing to sound too Freudian about it, excesses of certainty often attempt, only half-successfully, to conceal severe doubts and to head off the possibility of radical and devastating criticism. No intelligent Muslim can be unaware of the dangers of allowing the light of reason and, for example, textual criticism, into the purlieus of faith. That is why textual criticism of the Koran, in the manner of biblical criticism that has been going on now for nearly two centuries in the West, is itself carried out only in the West: the dangers of disintegration are all too obvious. The intelligent Muslim, after all, has the example of Christianity before him, which has fractured into myriad pieces and rationalist criticism of which, the superficial religiosity of America notwithstanding, has turned all western countries into secular states.

Moreover, belief in Islam as being the revealed universal truth and way for Mankind is the only consolation of countries and peoples who, the venerable age of their civilizations notwithstanding, have fallen decisively behind other societies in economic and other respects. Remove Islam, and

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there is little ground for pride left. As one of the founders and most influential thinkers of Islamism, Sayyid Qutb, puts it in his famous book, *Milestones*: “It is not easy to find fault with the [European] inventors of such marvelous things [that is to say, all the inventions that make life safe and comfortable], especially since what we call the ‘world of Islam’ is completely devoid of all this beauty.”

Nevertheless, there are those who act as if they had no doubts and as if doubts could be expunged by action. They are like those people, who are not few, who mistake vehemence of expression for depth of conviction. This mistake sets up a competition which is, in logic, rather like an arms race: you have to become more and more vehement, and act with greater and greater extremity, in order to prove that your belief is stronger than that of others, who are accused of doubt, wavering and equivocation.

Fortunately for us, then, what appears like cultural confidence is in fact its opposite. Could it also be, then, that our seeming doubts about our own societies are really the opposite, a secret confidence that they are so strong that they are invulnerable? Certainly, I don’t think anyone believes that our societies are in imminent danger, in the sense of being forced to replace themselves by something very different from what they presently are, by anything that their enemies might do. Cultural relativists do not expect to wake up the following day and find that their right of free expression has been abrogated and the laws overthrown. And, ultimately, I think they are right to be confident: in my opinion, a lot of their doubts about and criticism of western society, corrosive as they might be, are actually a form of exhibitionist breast-beating; they don’t really mean it, any more than Marie Antoinette really wanted to be a shepherdess.

My view, then, is that the current challenge to our societies from Islamism is weak, indeed laughably weak, although in the short-term Islamism is capable of causing a lot of mayhem. It is weak because it seeks to do something that is impossible: it seeks not to reform modernity (many aspects of which are indeed unattractive) in limited ways, but to abolish modernity. This it cannot do because Islamists

themselves are deeply attached to the modern world and involved in modernity.

Let me quote an American president, speaking in a very different context: we have nothing to fear but fear itself. Belgian policemen strike a blow for freedom, eat your sandwiches!

Anthony Daniels is a retired English prison doctor and psychiatrist who has gained international renown as an author and columnist writing under the *nom de plume* Theodore Dalrymple. Daniels is a regular contributor to *The New Criterion*, *The Spectator* and *City Journal*. Among his many books are *Life at the Bottom: The Worldview That Makes the Underclass*; *Romancing Opiates: Pharmacological Lies and the Addiction Bureaucracy*; and *Our Culture, and What’s Left of It: The Mandarins and the Masses*.



Atlantic Institute for Market Studies

2000 Barrington St., Ste. 1302 Cogswell Tower,
Halifax NS B3J 3K1
phone: (902) 429-1143 fax: (902) 425-1393
E-Mail: aims@aims.ca www.aims.ca