

# France and Britain: Theodore Dalrymple

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Fat, ugly and vulgar. Compared with our continental neighbour Britain has much more obesity, penchant for brutal shaven heads and slum chic, and increasingly crude behaviour. Anthony Daniels does not so much apologise as forewarn that his observations will be sweeping and laced with judgement. What is life after all he says if not a series of judgements? And whether you look at World Health Organisation, OECD or our own NHS statistics, 25% of Britons are obese (BMI>30) and 60% overweight (BMI>25). Obesity is increasing across the world and high in most developed countries. But not all. Britain is near the top of the OECD list, but obesity is much lower in France and indeed Italy at c.10%.

Journalist, author, essayist, cultural observer, man of letters, Anthony Daniels aka. Theodore Dalrymple maintains an air of medical detachment as he diagnoses countries that he knows rather well. Daniels and his french wife split their year between Britain and France and he says it is impossible to avoid comparisons. He observes much that is alike for instance french newspapers complain of falling standards of *orthographe* (spelling). A difference is that the considerably more limited newspaper culture in France. Circulation of all the nationals together is less than the Telegraph alone and there is nothing akin to the British tabloid press.

Daniels offers no statistics on ugliness but muses that its prevalence here is less innate than cultivated. Young men go to considerable lengths to achieve a look of brutality with shaven heads, piercings and tattoos. To which might be added the fashion for sub-hipster, drop crotch jeans which literally is 'prison chic' from the American gaols where dangerous criminals are denied belts. Some adopt the look perhaps because they are dangerous criminals. Some who are not say they do so to deter attack by those who are.

## Littered Britain

Whether the condition of our streets is an instance of ugliness or of the decline of manners, Daniels laments that Britain is more littered by an order of magnitude. On British main roads you see more litter per yard than per mile in France. He regularly travels between the M6 and Cambridge and wonders if plastic bags grow on trees. Some are carefully tied to contain their contents before discarding to the verge. Each piece of litter he remarks represents an act of sheer egotism.

France has no equivalent of the spectacle played out on Friday and Saturday nights

in every town in England of drunken yobbery and young girls risking freezing to display their often rather unattractive body parts. The ultimate achievement of a night out being to vomit on the pavement. He wonders at the waste of resources devoted to policing these scenes and cleaning up after them. Outside the privileged classes, he says, the only people who behave well are those of indian origin – hindus and sikhs.

France is said to be over-regulated compared with free market Britain. But the choice which free markets are supposed to deliver seems to be of the same multiples on every high street in the country. Interspersed with charity shops.

Cuisine is perhaps the one area in which the situation is in reverse. But in food generally the French enjoy better quality produce mainly because it is locally grown. While it is almost impossible to find fresh bread in Britain, every French town has its independent *pâtisseries*. Outdated French regulation still constrains prices. It is *interdit* to sell a new book discounted by more than 5% with the happy result that in his local town in France remain two independent booksellers. In the similarly sized town in England there are none. The independents had an interesting selection of books while the only bookseller WH Smith offers very limited fare. Daniels remarks the arrival alongside sections on History and Celebrity Chefs a whole new section entitled *Tragic Lives* - tales of childhood neglect and abuse. Often thereafter, crime.

## Charitable deception?

The ubiquitous charity shops are also a uniquely British phenomenon but not cause for self congratulation. Both the labour and the product are given for free but according to Anthony Daniels only 8% of turnover often finds its way to the charity. He regards it as deeply dishonest that some big charities receive most of their funding from government and should therefore more properly be seen as an arm of government. That is mostly unknown to those who give and who devotedly a serve in the shops. These elderly ladies if asked will insist that of course all the income goes to the charity. Meanwhile charity excess are often on high salaries.

What place do high salaries have in the charity or indeed public sectors? Talking of the vulgarisation of Britain, Jonathan Ross's reputed £6m BBC wage, he suggests, has the principal purpose of providing cover for the £800k that Mark Thompson awards himself.

The rot comes from the top. Daniels studied the entries in Who's Who of every member of the New Labour government that came to power in 1997 and under 'other interests' not a single one was prepared to admit to an interest outside of politics except football. He wonders which is worse, if it were true that the leaders of society had no cultivation or that they would conceal it for electoral purposes. The situation he terms demotic. This is very different in France. For all his scandal, Francois Mitterand was highly cultivated, characteristic of the French *Academie* elite. Sarkozy is the exception.

None of this is to suggest that France is a social utopia. Odile Wythe, a french woman living in England felt that France was headed down the same road only 15 years behind while another *francaise* said she felt safer in England. Part of the difference is undoubtedly that In France disorder is contained in *les bon lieux*, the peri-urban slums which they call '*la zone*' where the torching of cars can be a daily routine and the police rarely venture unless in armoured cars.

## Misconceptions

Perhaps then it is simply that British disorder is more intermingled. Far from seeking to contain, our famous toleration now encompasses almost any behaviour. With one notable exception: we are hysterically intolerant of crimes affecting children. But here is an irony. Disdain for traditional taboos and the cult of drunken oblivion make perfect conditions for the proliferation of such crimes. Alcohol is a ubiquitous ingredient in unwanted conceptions and the abuse later suffered. The lightly clad young women are highly independent. Of parents and mating partners that is. Though totally dependent on the State. The violent shaven headed young men know no remorse for their often serial stepfatherdom. And the abuse in the 'Tragic Lives' stories is vastly most likely to be at the hands of a step-parent.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest books: 'The New Vichy Syndrome: Why European Intellectuals Surrender to Barbarism' [www.encounterbooks.com/books/the-new-vichy-syndrome](http://www.encounterbooks.com/books/the-new-vichy-syndrome). and 'Spoilt Rotten: the Toxic Cult of Sentimentality' [www.gibbonsquare.com/spoilt-rotten.html](http://www.gibbonsquare.com/spoilt-rotten.html)