

All Men Are Created Snobs

by Theodore Dalrymple (May 2015)

It is a sad fact that many distinguished men, who in their time seemed to bestride the world like colossi and excited anything from extreme admiration to the utmost detestation, but who never evoked mere indifference (if indifference, that is, needs to be evoked at all, rather than being merely our default attitude to the majority of our fellow beings), are no sooner dead than forgotten. As Richard II puts it, rather more eloquently than can I:

... within the hollow crown

That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps Death his court and there the antic sits,
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
To monarchize, be fear'd and kill with looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
As if this flesh which walls about our life,
Were brass impregnable, and humour'd thus
Comes at the last and with a little pin
Bores through his castle wall, and farewell king!

Collective amnesia, indeed, can set in even before a distinguished man's death, and that seems to have happened in the case of Robert Ranulph Marett, a festschrift for whom, published on the occasion of his 70th birthday in 1936, I bought recently. He was never exactly a household name, having been a social anthropologist in Oxford and the head of a college there, but he was the student and teacher of many men more famous than he (in so far as anthropologists *can* be famous) and the two pictures of him in the book, one of a portrait painting and the other an inserted loose photograph of him showing the Alake of Egbaland (the king of a kingdom in Western Nigeria) around Oxford, the Alake, a cheerful and splendid figure in magnificent robes, his wife behind him, the Queen, looking as glum as Mrs Obama in Saudi Arabia, indicate a highly distinguished man fully aware of his own distinction. He is confident of his position and importance in the world, and yet he was by then already in the process of being side-lined even from his own academic discipline. The *Dictionary of National Biography* says of the festschrift:

... the majority of the contributors... make no reference to his work, and those that do

mention it do so merely as a brief, preliminary courtesy.

Immensely gifted, vastly erudite, he is now forgotten; as the *Dictionary* puts with a frankness painful to all authors who hope they will still be read after their deaths, but who are not half as gifted or erudite as was he, 'Few, however, read Marett's works today.' They are truly at one with Nineveh and Tyre.

I probably should not have bought the book, titled *Custom Is King: Essays Presented to R. R. Marett*, had it not been Marett's own copy, bearing his signature in the confident hand of a distinguished man. Even then, I dickered over buying it (it is strange how we waste thousands in our lives without a second thought and then ponder deeply over spending a small amount of loose change), for I find social anthropology, which ought to be so interesting, almost impossible to read. And indeed, many of the titles of the essays were of positively Saharan dryness, for example *The Modern Growth of the Totem-Pole on the North-West Coast*, or *An Interesting Naga-Melanesian Culture-link*. Even the mildly salacious title, *Kinship, Incest and Exogamy of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast*, is misleading. I doubt that many readers could get past:

The basis of filiation is the agnatic lineage. Four degrees of lineal filiation may be noted here, though many more degrees function in practice.

Of fundamentally frivolous nature, I would find *Sodomy in the Supreme Court* or *Wife-Beating in Buckingham Palace* more interesting.

Still there were one or two things of interest even in all this weary pedantry. Marett was not a humourless man, he was fond of anecdotes and once had a public discussion 'as to the credibility of [the story of] a missionary to the cannibal islands who "became ultimately absorbed in his work:"' that is to say eaten and absorbed in the digestive sense. It so happens that, more than forty years later, when I was just setting out for the South Seas, I met a man who claimed that a great-uncle of his, also a missionary, had been eaten in Fiji. I did not know, and still do not know, whether he was in earnest or pulling my leg as a naïve young man.

And then there was a chapter titled *The Chameleon and the Sun-god Lisa on the West African Slave Coast*. This, I admit, might not get many pulses racing, but the opening sentence, 'It is a well-known fact that for most Africans the chameleon is a "peculiar" animal,' was for me a little like Proust's madeleine, for in East Africa where I worked the people believed that the bite of the chameleon was deadly poison and that if one got into your hair it would never get out. Probably more and worse than this was believed of it also, for I once caused a little

platoon of soldiers to run away from me in terror into the bush because I approached them with a chameleon (for me a fascinating creature) in my hand. The paper in Marett's festschrift says that in the southern part of what used to be called Dahomey:

When a pregnant woman, while walking in the bush, suddenly meets a chameleon and she gets frightened, the child which she delivers will be seized by the chameleon.

It is odd that people who have lived in close proximity to these harmless, if prehistoric-looking, creatures for thousands of years should have remained so superstitious about them, but I am much less disdainful of such error than I would once have been, for most of our minds are full of beliefs which are probably mistaken and for which we could give no evidence other than the authority from whom we first heard or read them.

But none of this would have induced me to buy the book had it not contained an essay entitled *Snobbery* by an anthropologist called A M Hocart. The latter was a very interesting man, a man of real substance, though hardly a household name. Like Marett a classicist, he was fluent in French and German, and learnt all the languages of the places in which he lived, as a schoolmaster, colonial administrator or researcher, from the language spoken by a tribe in the Solomon Islands, where he participated in the first anthropological field trip ever carried out, and Fijian to Pali, the scriptural language of Theravada Buddhism. He never succeeded in obtaining an academic post in Britain, however, and was eventually appointed Professor of Sociology at Cairo University, dying there of a tropical infection contracted on a field trip. His books are more highly regarded nowadays than those of the man whose work he was celebrating in the festschrift, though perhaps titles such as *The Northern Fijian States* or *The Cult of the Dead in Eddystone of the Solomons* were never destined for the best-seller list.

The subject of his essay in the festschrift, *Snobbery*, seems to me one whose importance it underestimates, both in its practical and moral significance. I doubt that there is anyone completely free of this vice, either in its direct or inverted forms; this is because it is a basic human need, though not a human right, to feel superior to someone else.

Hocart's opening paragraphs are of a completely different readability from the rest of the book:

The desire to emulate one's better has been a most potent, perhaps the most potent, force in the diffusion of customs. Yet it has received scarcely any notice from sociologists. Why?

In the first place we are not honest with ourselves. Few like to admit that they adopt new ways because they want to rise to a higher social status or fear to drop to a lower one, in short that they are snobs. It is especially difficult to admit as much in these days of equalitarisim, when only low people admit they have betters, and it is part of the social rise to recognize no superiors.

This is acute and well-expressed; but since Hocart's day something rather peculiar has happened: there has been a reversal of the direction of the emulation. Until quite recently, emulators emulated those higher in the social scale than themselves, which meant of course that there were more emulators than emulated. Nowadays, however, it is persons in or from a higher social class who emulate those in a lower social class. They adopt the manner of speaking, dressing and cultural tastes of those below them. Intellectuals affect vulgar expressions and anyone with an avowed uninterest either in sport or in popular music is suspected at once of enmity towards the people, of the kind that at one time earned a ride in the *charrette* to the guillotine.

What does this change in the direction of cultural influence and aspiration signify? I think it signifies the complete ideological victory of egalitarisim, from which few dare derogate. Of course, there is a vast difference between the *pays idéologique* and the *pays réel*, that is to say between the way people think they ought to feel and act, and actually how they *do* feel and act. The desire for social and economic advance, to be at the top rather than at the bottom of the social scale, is as acute as ever. The scramble for position and prestige is ferocious. But the desire to stand out from and above one's fellows cannot be avowed even in the privacy of one's own skull, let alone in public – except perhaps in the context of sport, and there only because the common man accepts that sport can only entertain him where such competitiveness exists.

The downward cultural aspiration of those in the upper social echelons is purely defensive. If they indulge in egalitarianism in the symbolic field, they hope that their economic inegalitarianism will go, if not unnoticed, at least less noticed. They are all playing Marie Antoinette playing shepherdess. Once they are in private, they can drop their affected egalitarianism for public consumption and become what they are in reality, namely ferocious elitists. In other words, downward cultural aspiration, or apparent aspiration, is the means by which the contradiction between the *pays idéologique* is reconciled, though only in appearance, with the *pays réel*. And in a society in which what is virtual is as important as, if not more important than, what is real, an apparent reconciliation is as important as a real one.

The problem is that what starts as affectation becomes habit which becomes character. In the end, the play-acting becomes real. If Marie Antoinette had played shepherdess for long and often enough, that is what eventually she would have been. And so in the end the coarseness of popular culture triumphs over (by degrees, to be sure) all other forms.

If, as Hocart says, 'The desire to emulate one's better has been a most potent, perhaps the most potent, force in the diffusion of customs,' the fact that the higher echelons now ape the lower means that the lower have no need to aspire to anything in order to imagine themselves to be rising in the social scale, for there is nothing higher to emulate. This false egalitarianism serves, then, to conserve the social structure as a fly is conserved in amber. Social mobility falls while culture becomes less refined. There is therefore nothing to be said for this pretence, except perhaps that it dampens outrage against inequality.

'It has been the purpose of this paper,' concludes Hocart, 'to show that [snobbery] has played a very important part in the growth of civilization.' Perhaps so; but again we meet with a contradiction, for in individuals we almost always find it intensely disagreeable. Perhaps the best thing to be is a snob without showing it.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is