

Everyone's Authoritarian

Inner

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (July 2017)



The Readers, by Joseph Larusso



All that is necessary for evil to triumph, wrote Edmund Burke

(though no one seems to be quite sure where), is for good men to do nothing. This naturally raises the question as to where good men are to be found. Besides, there are many forms of goodness, not all of them useful in the struggle against evil.

I once went to Asyut in Egypt, about thirty-five years ago. I was told that it was a hotbed of Moslem fundamentalism and I wanted to see it for myself. In those days, even fanatics were less fanatical than they are today; besides, being still comparatively young, I thought that I was immortal and valour was the better part of my discretion. In retrospect, having survived the dangers I courted when young, my folly was a kind of wisdom, even if only unconscious, for one builds up a capital of experience when one is young from the interest on which one lives for the rest of one's life.

Anyway, I was sitting in a café in Asyut, waiting for fundamentalism to manifest itself in some way, when an Egyptian man somewhat older than I approached the table at which I was sitting. I was reading a book and he asked me what I was reading. It happened to be *A Good Man in Africa*, a novel by William Boyd.

'A good man in Africa,' said the Egyptian. 'I'd like to meet him!'

I admired his wit in what, for him, was a foreign language. Moreover, it expressed an ironical view of life that, to me at any rate, is always pleasing.

What, actually, is a good man? With the cacophony of opinion that now seems to envelop us every minute of the day, thanks to the media of mass communication, virtue has become the expression of the right ideas, which is to say of ideas that coincide with one's own. In the beginning was the Word, but the word is now the beginning, the middle and the end. In a logocracy such as ours, he is best whose words are best; and those who say things that differ from our opinion not merely think differently, but are bad people. Those who merely behave badly are not bad, provided they believe the right things; while even the best, kindest or most considerate of personal conduct will not save the reputation of someone who expresses incorrect ideas.

In such a climate—another kind of global warming, the heating of tempers—sincerity is, if not lost altogether, at least undermined. We all know what the group opinion of those with whom we wish to associate is, and therefore we espouse it if we do not wish to be considered bad. Since we don't like to think of ourselves as conformists or mere followers, we espouse group opinion with evangelical fervour, in an attempt to persuade ourselves that our beliefs are our own and we have arrived at them purely by consideration of logic and evidence. We live in an age in which it is important to appear, if not actually to be, rational.

Recently I thought of a neo-Freudian means of draining (for a moment) the swamp of humbug in which we live and breathe and take our being. It would not be a perfect device, for perfection is not of this world; but it would be a start.

A group of intellectuals would be asked, without warning or preparation, to name the first three tangible things that they

would prohibit if they had the power to do so. They would have to name them without reflection: the latter would spoil the procedure. I work on the semi-Freudian assumption that what first comes into the mind is in some sense more real than what is subsequently elaborated after more prolonged thought.

Having chosen their three *bêtes noires* (for which, of course, the French have no expression), they would be asked to write a thousand words, say, justifying their choice. The results would make a very interesting book, and if my assumption is correct, namely that first thoughts are a better guide to one's true beliefs or emotions than one's hundredth thoughts, would tell us a great deal about modern intellectual life, especially when first unguarded thoughts are compared with more considered or public and published opinions.

Like Freud, who allegedly performed the first analysis on himself, I asked myself the question I thought it would be interesting to ask others. Of course, the very fact that I thought of the question myself must skew my answer to it; indeed, the idea originated in or arose at my irritation at a comparatively minor phenomenon, that of chewing gum trodden into the street. In many places, the ground is mottled with this disgusting substance, so that it looks almost as if large snowflakes have settled on it, each individual piece representing egotistical indifference to the public space, individualism without individuality. To remove the gum is time-consuming and expensive, and in a sense pointless, since it will soon be replaced by more. If Sisyphus were alive today, he would be cleaning gum from the paving stones.

So the first of my prohibition would be of chewing gum. But what of the second and third?

The second would be baseball caps and the third, popular music in public places.

Now for the justifications, or perhaps I should say rationalisations.

I have already given one reason for prohibiting chewing gum, but I have others. Most of the chewing gum on the ground is dry and well-trodden-in, but sometimes one has the misfortune to tread on freshly discarded gum, whereupon it sticks to the sole of one's shoe. I cannot say exactly why, but there are few more unpleasant sensations, this side of torture, than that of walking with sticky gum on one's shoes. Moreover, to remove the gum, once one has found a private place in which to do it, and an instrument with which to do it, is difficult, time-wasting and rarely entirely successful. One feels, besides, a sense of shame, though one is not in the least to blame for one's predicament; who among us is proud of having trodden on chewing gum, and does not strive to conceal it?

Even worse, of course, is the chewing gum sometimes discarded on the underside of seats in buses: but the consequences of this are so awful that description is not fit for a family audience.

This is not all, however. There is the effect of chewing gum on physiognomy. Can anyone look kind, or even polite, while chewing gum? If so, I have not witnessed it. But it is easy when chewing gum to look insolent, aggressive, dismissive, and even potentially violent. People who chew gum often look as if

they are wound springs, or phosphorus on water about to take flame. You cannot look refined and chew gum.

No doubt habitual gum-chewers will deny that they ever discard their gum as I have described. Perhaps so, though I do not really believe it. Just as no one in France votes *Front National*, so no gum-chewer ever discards his gum on the ground: but somehow it gets there (by welling up volcanically, perhaps?).

Gum-chewers would claim that they *enjoy* chewing their gum, but all I can say is that, like joggers who claim to enjoy their jogging (jogging would be the fourth on my list, it is so bad for the hips, all of which will need replacing), they do not look as if they do. And even if they *do* enjoy their gum, this very fact appalls me. Moreover, as far as I am aware, nobody in Singapore, where gum is prohibited, is any the worse or more miserable for its prohibition. There may be things wrong with life in Singapore, as there are everywhere, but they would not be put right by chewing gum.

If I were dictator of the world, then, gum would go.

What of baseball caps? They are, of course, comparatively innocuous, even when worn backwards or sideways. (I was told that wearing them backwards is a sign of solidarity or identification with young men who visit other young men in prison, because they have to reverse their baseball caps to approach glass between visitor and prisoner). But they have the effect of making the intelligent look average and the average moronic. Can anyone look intelligent or dignified in a

baseball cap? Such caps are inelegant at best and positively hideous at worst. Moreover, people wear them in restaurants, which is uncouth and crass, and is a habit that I would like to see suppressed with the full vigour of the law, though this is the desire of my heart rather than of my head.

We come now to popular music—by which I mean rock and its cognates—in public places. It is like a noxious aerosol spray, and no better than a harmful drug slipped into a drink without the drinker's awareness. It amazes me that environmentalists have not taken up the challenge against such noise pollution. It agitates people and I have little doubt that it causes them (without their knowing it) to become more aggressive. The right to silence, which is normally taken to mean the right not to answer police questions, should include the right not to be bombarded with such music. If people want to listen to it—hear it would perhaps be a better expression—let them do so in private.

I recognise that my three more-or-less spontaneously chosen prohibitions are indicative of a tendency toward authoritarianism; but I think that everyone is a natural authoritarian, and that there is no one who does not want to prohibit something. Everyone, no matter how libertarian, thinks (or should I say believes in the depths of his being) that *something* ought to be prohibited, and it is not credible that anyone should think or believe that he lives in a society whose permissions and prohibitions coincide completely with those he would like to be in place.

I think, on the whole, that conservatives would find this test easier than liberals (in the American sense). This is not because conservatives are by nature more authoritarian than

liberals, but because what liberals are prone to dislike or despise, or wish to prohibit, are abstractions such as injustice, inequality and racism, whereas conservatives are more concrete in their distastes. You can prohibit chewing gum in a way that you cannot prohibit inequality or injustice, and it is precisely concrete prohibitions that the test is after. Tell me what you would like to see banned, and I will tell you who you are. No test could be more revealing of anyone's true beliefs.

I suspect that the concrete dislikes of intellectuals would be quite similar when tested in this fashion, and for similar reasons, irrespective of their political outlook. Tastes are fundamentally more divisive, or at any rate more sincerely divisive, than opinions. Needless to say, tastes can be faked as well as opinions, and in our time there are many intellectual Marie Antoinettes who pretend to like or take seriously things which in their hearts they despise, for the sake of appearing to others to be virtuously democratic, broadminded and non-discriminatory. But the test, which demands an immediate, spontaneous and unselfconscious reply, tries to correct for such dissimulation, and I think we might be surprised by the results. Most people, after all, who claim to love the people are appalled at what the people actually do, what they like and how they behave. I don't believe that anyone, certainly no intellectual, looks at a football crowd, or even the shoppers in a crowded shopping mall, and feels a love of humanity welling up in his heart.

The respondents to the test would have to be unaware that it was being administered to them, or they would alter their responses to make themselves appear more easy-going than they were. But if carried out with skill, it would reveal everyone's inner authoritarian, so much more deeply ingrained

than anyone's inner libertarian.

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