

TALE OF TWO CULTURES

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The sad saga of the rise and perhaps quick demise of our current Whatever-in-Chief brought into sharp relief an older story, one that had been flying just under the national radar for years. It is the story of two cultures that have ceased to communicate, and have over the years grown to viscerally detest each other. The story goes back some distance, more recently to Charles Murray's "Coming apart", Joseph Stiglitz's "The Great Divide", or J.D. Vance's "Hillbilly Elegy". Tho one may go back a bit further.

In the early 1980's, my friend Ed Sadalla, a social psychologist at ASU, conducted a simple-minded study. He recruited a socially diverse group of subjects and asked them the following question: Given the two diets below, which one do you prefer: (1) a health-food diet (lots of fruits and vegetables, grilled or stir-fried fish or chicken, fruit juices of skim milk, whole-wheat bread or brown rice). Or (2) an all-American diet (deep-fried or mashed potatoes, steak, sweet sodas, white bread, fatty milk products).

Dividing the original group into two sub-groups according to their food-preference, my friend then proceeded to ask them for their: (a) preferred alcoholic-beverage (wine vs. beer); (b) preferred music (jazz or classical vs. country or pop); (c) education level (highschool diploma or less vs. one or more college degrees); (d) employment (blue-collar vs. white-collar or beyond); (e) politics (liberal vs. conservative). When the responses were analyzed, the results were rather striking: Preference for the all-American diet correlated almost perfectly with less education, blue-color employment, and preference for beer, country music and conservative politics. And the converse with the health-food diet. What my friend had demonstrated was the clustering of major features that, to this day, define the two main American sub-cultures. For his pains he also received the Golden Fleece award from then-senator William Proxmire (D-Wisc.), bestowed upon the most useless government-funded study of the year.

More than a decade earlier, in 1967, Lila and Henry Gleitman, two psychologists at Penn, conducted a study on the major dialect boundary in American English (measured by several grammatical features), as correlated to level of education. Their subjects were divided into four groups: (a) secretaries; (b) lower-division undergraduates; (c) upper division undergraduates; and (d) graduate students. The major dividing line, it turned out, grouped the secretaries and lower-division undergraduates on one side, and the upper-division undergraduates and graduate students on the other. Your education level, it seemed, correlated with the American dialect you spoke. It took at least two years of college to cross the divide.

Among Democrats, locally and nationally, it has become a favorite pass-time to pick the reason for the disastrous results of the last national elections, with much finger-pointing and gnashing of teeth. The various beefs that right-thinking Democrats have with Trump's core constituency (Hillary's 'deplorables', a.k.a. Rednecks) are, alas, only too familiar.

Having lived among the Rednecks on and off for 45 years now, I happen--unlike most of my over-educated friends and fellow travelers--to share some of their background: back-breaking childhood labor on the farm, high-school dropout, 3 years of military service, love of Bob Wills' fiddle, fatal infatuation with firearms, a passion for horses and Stetson hats.

The fact that I spent much of my working life in and out of universities obviously makes a difference. But unlike most over-educated Rednecks (as my wife is fond of calling me), I have remained bi-cultural and bilingual, and have retained my sympathy for this shrinking minority who work with their hands, live on the land and drive on the gravel, and have largely been left behind by our complex, fast-moving, urban culture and economy. I may not always share their politics, but I still feel their pain.

What is more, I suspect that one of the most decisive reasons why a toxic sociopath now occupies the White House is the fatal inability of educated liberal America to understand where our Redneck come from, what ails them, why they voted the way they did, and why it is so easy for the rich and powerful, those who own our politicians and rule our lives, to re-direct the anger and frustration of working-class America toward **us** rather than against **them**.

I am also old enough to remember the Weimar Republic of 1918 -1933, where much of the blame for Hitler's phenomenal rise can be laid at the feet of the German Socialists and Communists, their incessant sectarian bickering, their nit-picking Marxist dogmas, and their inability--just like ours--to communicate with **their** Rednecks. The German left didn't get their Rednecks' number, but Hitler did. He spoke their language, felt their pain.

What we have here, just like what they had in Weimar Germany, is an acute failure of cross-cultural communication. **They** don't understand--and feel put down by--our language and cultural choices. **We** don't understand--and often deride and condescend to--theirs.

You may not recall the old cartoon-strip Pogo, but I will always cherish one installment from way-way back. Its logo: "We have met the enemy, and he's us". The same idea can be found, in a more gentle form, in both the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels: "Remove the beam from between your eyes before you propose to remove a sliver from your friend's eye".

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