

Bobos in purgatory

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THE bourgeois boors whom H.L. Mencken dubbed the “booboisie” have experienced a curious inversion. A twist of bohemianism has turned the boobs into “Bobos.” This latest neologism belongs to David Brooks, who sketches the features of the bourgeois-bohemians in *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There*.[†] Although not stolid and doltish like the old elite—being ironic and sophisticated instead—Bobos are just as self-satisfied. And, as their silly name indicates, they are just as risible.

Calling his method “comic sociology,” David Brooks does the comedy so well that one begins to suspect he must be related to other Brookses—he combines the razzle-dazzle vaudeville of Mel with the Boomer-centered sociological acuity of Albert. His early chapters on upscale consumer habits and business practices are particularly entertaining and on target. He is a close observer and has made the rounds of the stores (Fresh Fields, Anthropologie, REI) and, in some cases, entire communities (“Latte Towns” like Burlington, Vermont) that cater to the Bobo sensibility. The merger of bourgeois and bohemian is most apparent in how this newly dominant class spends its money. Bobos have figured out how to acquire goods and services while avoiding the accusation of greed. Indeed, they have gone farther, turning acquisition itself into a salve for the conscience. According to Brooks, Bobos “take the quintessential bourgeois activity, shopping, and turn it into quintessential bohemian activities: art, philosophy, social action.”

Sure enough, as I write this review, I am drinking inordinately overpriced green tea packaged in “natural unbleached tea bags” and sold in an artfully designed recyclable canister bearing the following message: “A simple cup of green tea is imbued with a wisdom beyond wisdom, capable of enlighten-

† Simon & Schuster. 284 pp. \$25.00.

ing both mind and body. We invite you to heat the water, brew the tea and sip its greatness, taking in its teachings." The dregs of philosophy on the British Breakfast blend are even more extravagant:

Life is impossible and so what? It is in its very impossibility that we find our joy. Tea Mind allows life to live us. It frees us from the hubris of trying to control what cannot be controlled. The life of tea is the life of the moment. We have only Now, and we each sip it in our own cups.

Needless to say, this is not a properly British attitude toward tea. For the Victorians, tea was a hard-won perquisite of empire; for the Bobos, it is the liquid voice of a nihilistic nirvana—or so the packaging promises. I'm prepared to believe that, in their different ways, both the British tradition of tea-time and the Eastern tea ceremony may actually transmute a humble beverage into a mysterious elixir, fostering peace of mind, drawing the drinkers into communion, and awakening higher spirits. A \$4.00 Starbucks "Tazo Chai" gulped down in the car during the commute to the office does none of those things. Bobo consumption is not coupled with any of the rituals or formalities that allow material things to conduce to spiritual experience. As Brooks acknowledges, "We educated elites surround ourselves with the motifs of lives we have chosen not to live."

The same appropriation is repeated for all the appurtenances of life, often on a vastly expensive scale. In his tour-de-force conclusion of the "Consumption" chapter, Brooks details the sumptuary codes governing virtuous spending: "Rule 1. Only vulgarians spend lavish amounts of money on luxuries. Cultivated people restrict their lavish spending to necessities." Thus, for example, "you can spend as much as you want on anything that can be classified as a tool, such as a \$65,000 Range Rover with plenty of storage space, but it would be vulgar to spend money on things that cannot be seen as tools, such as a \$60,000 vintage Corvette." If obedient to all seven rules, a Bobo can easily "dispose up to \$4 or \$5 million annually in a manner that demonstrates how little he or she cares about material things."

While he pokes fun at today's "countercultural plutocracy," Brooks does so with a certain gentleness (after all, he makes clear that he counts himself a Bobo). The humor is not scathing or barbed. He makes it pretty painless to recognize oneself as a Bobo—maybe too painless. The last paragraph of "Con-

sumption" asserts, in all seriousness, that Bobos succeed in making sacred the profane, in spiritualizing spending and infusing commodities with soul. But all his wonderful anecdotes and examples would seem to show that Bobo soulfulness isn't much more than slogans and simulacra. What Brooks regards as a merger of the bourgeois and bohemian looks to me more like a hostile takeover. These are not Bobos, but Faux-bos (or Bo-fauxs).

If our conscience is soothed by acquisition masquerading as art, philosophy, and social action, then we ought to convict ourselves of superficiality. And if our conscience is not soothed, then one would have to say that the enlightened bourgeois remains afflicted with the self-loathing (the "bourgeoisophobia") he contracted when he internalized the bohemian critique. Either way, the quarrel within modernity between the Lockean position and the Rousseauian position continues. (Although Brooks does not mention Locke and Rousseau, he should have.) Brooks does, on occasion, suggest that there is trouble in paradise, as when he describes how "we go around frantically shopping for the accoutrements of calm." More typical, however, is the line (borrowed from Wallace Stevens) that "happiness is an acquisition." Yet, even if happiness is an acquisition, that doesn't mean it can be purchased with "plastic." Until they figure that out, Bobos will be in limbo not paradise.

Brooks is too smart not to hedge a bit on his ultimate verdict that "it's good to live in a Bobo world." (Keep in mind, Bobos are both very, very smart and masterful hedgers.) Accordingly, he confesses,

Some days I look around and I think we have been able to achieve these reconciliations only by making ourselves more superficial, by simply ignoring the deeper thoughts and highest ideals that would torture us if we actually stopped to measure ourselves according to them. Sometimes I think we are too easy on ourselves.

Having made the obligatory obeisance, Brooks then returns to his insight-rich raillery mixed with appreciation.

MUCH of his appreciation of Bobo manners and mores stems from the fact that the information-age elite is the world's first true meritocracy. This is the argument of the book's opening chapter, "The Rise of the Educated Class." Bobos got where they are not by the accident of birth (as did the previous WASP establishment), but by proven worth, re-

ardless of religion, race, sex, class, or ethnic origin—the proof being their SAT scores and all the degrees and achievements that follow therefrom. Brooks calls them the “Résumé Gods.” The data are indeed striking: “The average Harvard freshman in 1952 would have placed in the bottom 10 percent of the Harvard class of 1960.” And today, the gentlemanly Cs are not there at all.

It is as if Thomas Jefferson’s dream has been realized; it was always Jefferson’s contention that the most open democracy would also be the most complete meritocracy. We can thank the Scholastic Aptitude Test for finally defeating what Jefferson called “the tinsel-aristocracy” and establishing “the natural aristocracy.” Brooks views the rebellions of the sixties, which followed hard on the heels of the change in college admissions, as the attempt to topple the outmoded WASP ethos and replace it with “a new social code that would celebrate spiritual and intellectual ideals.” After all the dust settled (and Brooks does acknowledge there was some dust occasioned by the breakdown of social order and the collapse of the family), we can now see that the sixties countercultural revolution was really a meritocratic revolution.

While it may be true that there has never been so much sheer brainpower in the top ranks of society, it is worth pointing out that aristocracy understood as rule by the best was always thought to require wisdom and prudence, not just “information” and stratospheric SAT scores. It was thought to depend on moral virtue and courage, rather than PR skills and cunning. I simply refuse to believe that William Jefferson Clinton, née William Jefferson Blythe III—Rhodes Scholar and Yale Law though he is—stands as the fulfillment of Jefferson’s dream.

Brooks foresees no end to Bobo ascendancy, since it does not perpetuate itself through the exclusion or oppression of others. It is a class without the usual class barriers. But one ought at least to acknowledge that the porosity of Bobodom is obstructed by the failures of public schooling. Vast numbers of America’s young are not afforded a fair shot at success. The meritocratic principle is then directly vitiated by public policies like affirmative action and minority set-asides that try to cover up inequalities later rather than preventing them earlier.

THE chapter of *Bobos in Paradise* that sent me into the slough of despond was “Intellectual Life.” The humor here is more pointed and bitter, as Brooks sketches the hypothetical

career of an aspiring intellectual entrepreneur. With subheads like "How to Be an Intellectual Giant," "Subject Niche," "Marketing," "Conferences," culminating in "Television," the tale makes plain the contemporary commodification of ideas. If Bobos spend in a way that sacralizes the profane, then they think in a way that profanes the sacred. (This is visible as well in the chapter on "Spiritual Life.")

I find it incredible for Brooks to have penned this repulsively funny vignette and then to conclude, as he does, that intellectual life is, on balance, better now than in the past. Part of the problem is his limited range of reference. The choice he offers is between his hypothetical social-climbing idea-monger and the "*Partisan Review* crowd" of the 1950s, whom he implies (whether rightly or wrongly I don't know) fit the stereotype of the bohemian intellectual: alienated, garret-dwelling, self-absorbed, and detached from ordinary life. What Brooks never does is acknowledge the possibility of a life of the mind that transcends the modern dialectic of bourgeois and bohemian, and transcends it not by a monstrous amalgamation of the two but by sustained reflection on both the peculiar modern condition and the timeless human condition. The institutional locus of this free life of the mind has, for centuries past, been the university. If that is no longer the case, then we are in serious trouble. Journalism and punditry are not adequate replacements, for they exist almost wholly within the popular and democratic orbit. The university, however, by virtue of transmitting the learning of the past and the experience of other times, places, regimes, and ways, can, to some degree, escape those confines. Ideally, the university can serve as a counterweight to the natural tendency of democracy to think too well of itself. That democratic tendency toward self-congratulation has been amply on display from the time of Tocqueville to the Bobo present.

Very much in the American tradition, Brooks speaks disparagingly of the "detached" intellectual: "Detaching oneself from commercial culture means cutting oneself off from the main activity of American life. That makes it much harder to grasp what is really going on." However, there is a form of knowledge—and a higher one at that—that involves seeing rather than grasping. And philosophic or theoretical detachment (which is quite distinct from alienation), far from impairing vision, is essential to it. Socrates spent his whole life in the marketplace without ever marketing himself. Professors today are not so pure, but the last thing we need is to be cheerily encouraged

to welcome our prostitution or fatuously instructed in how to perform it.

The only realm of life where Brooks really finds the Bobos falling short is the political. He waxes downright Tocquevillian when he laments that “our national life has become compressed, our public spirit corroded by cynicism, our ability to achieve great things weakened by inaction.” He has no complaint with the Bobo emphasis on local community. What he would like, however, is for that revival to serve as the first step toward a renewed sense of patriotism and national greatness. In the final pages, Brooks’s flattery of the Bobos reveals itself to have had an ulterior purpose: He wants them to develop a new ethos of public service, to loft their ambition higher and assume the responsibility of leading America into “another golden age.” While sympathetic to Brooks’s project, I doubt whether the individuals he has sketched in the previous chapters are capable of responding to his appeal. What is required is a recovery of the classic and heroic (Homer, Plutarch, Shakespeare, Lincoln, Churchill), and for that, one would need schools and universities true to their mission. We would have to leave behind intellectual hucksterism for the life of the mind and turn away from the sort of “spiritual life” epitomized by “flexidoxy” toward the genuinely religious life. Great politics cannot exist without a foundation of great thoughts and great sacrifice.

DESPITE finding much to disagree with in *Bobos in Paradise*, I am pleased that it is being bought and read in numbers sufficient to make the best-seller list. It is a book that helps make sense of our topsy-turvy world. It delivers the most concise and illustrative accounts of the characteristic Bobo reversals. (Bobos transform work into creative play, while introducing mandatory health-consciousness into pleasure. They like their leisure austere—the rigors of extreme sports, the discipline of S&M, the physical challenges of eco-tourism—and their religion lax. And on and on.) While the descriptions of the Bobos are brilliant, my own feeling is that the praise of them rings hollow. Who knows, maybe David Brooks even intended it to—that would certainly be a rhetorical strategy worthy of Bobo cleverness. In the end, it is the finely-drawn images that remain in the mind, and along with laughter, they evoke the sort of chagrin, or shame, or disquietude that can further self-knowledge.