

BOOK REVIEW

Transatlantic Patterns: Cultural Comparisons of England with America

Martin Green / Basic Books / \$11.95

Ferdinand Mount

English schoolboys used to kill class-room time (still may, for all I know) by playing a game called dot cricket. This pastime, furtively enjoyed under the desk or behind the cover of a Latin Grammar, demanded only a pencil and two pieces of paper. On one, the scorecard, you write out two lists of names, fact or fiction, living or dead: your two teams. Philosophers, say, versus Tyrants. Wittgenstein, Plato, and Ayn Rand play Atila the Hun, Castro, and Hitler. You square off the other sheet into areas marked "caught," "bowled," "one run," "four runs," "six-hit," "no run," and so on. Close your eyes, wave your pencil, and inflict a dot at random. Atila pitches to Rand. No run. And so on. The game nicely combines design and accident—the fun of team selection, the unpredictability of the result. Nietzsche swings the game with a home run. Hitler falls to a mean curveball from G.E. Moore.

There is a lot of dot cricket in Martin Green's writing: the fun, the conjunctions of opposites, the random grab-bag method, the hit-and-miss, the love of lists and dichotomies. "The circumstances of my life have forced me to compare England with America more than most people do," he writes. Elsewhere, Mr. Green more candidly owns that it is not just because he was born and raised in England and now teaches in America that he so readily resorts to dichotomy. He admits to a "preference for seeing situations in patterns of brightly colored, simply labeled, alternative choices." He likes sentences which begin "the world is divided into...." Mr. Green is, in short, a dot-cricket buff. Instead of practicing the trade of literary criticism, for which Tufts University pays him, he is prone to draw up lists and wave his pencil in the air.

This amiable weakness was first clearly revealed in his last book, *Children of the Sun*. This was a more ambitious work than *Transatlantic Patterns*, which is a spin-off: a collection of mostly reprinted essays which attest to an abiding interest in Anglo-American comparisons but cannot be said to constitute a sustained analysis. We must, in fact, refer back to the earlier book both to gain a more comprehensive view of Mr. Green's method and to assimilate the basic assumptions which are not fully stated in *Transatlantic Patterns*.

Children of the Sun's main thesis is that English culture after 1918 was rotten with decadence. The Dandies were in control, and only when the Decent Men launched a

counterassault was there any prospect of a return to health. The Decent Men were Lawrence, Leavis, and Orwell. The Dandies included almost everybody else on the literary scene: Waugh, Auden, Isherwood, Betjeman, the Sitwells, Anthony Powell, Virginia Woolf, P.G. Wodehouse. The teams, you might think, seem a little unevenly matched. What is this dandyism that embraces such a varied collection? Mr. Green's definition is decidedly sketchy. He seems to prefer picking his teams and seeing how they make out together. He neglects almost entirely the basis of dandyism—that, regardless of the gaiety of its gestures, it is in essence a reaction to despair, a concealed stoicism.

This sort of criterion would eliminate half his Dandies and fatally undermine his claim that dandyism had infected the English literary scene from top to bottom. Instead, Mr. Green limits the attributes of dandyism to the playful, the frivolous, the fantastic. But he comes unstuck here too, because every successful work of art, however seriously intended and morally purposeful, must contain *some* hint of the playful, simply because playfulness is the vibration of the imagination at work. It is just because George Orwell lacks this quality that his novels, despite their purity of prose and crystalline honesty, remain sadly earthbound, and Orwell himself was too brave and clever not to realize it. Only his political fables, *Animal Farm* and *1984*, are liberated by their form into the playful realm of art. Lawrence too can be flat, trite, and bombastic when the preaching swamps the play. *Children of the Sun* rests upon a gravely inadequate concept of art as well as of dandyism. Decency is not enough. Moreover, Mr. Green's dot-cricket criticism leads him further astray when he tries to balance up the sides by enlisting the Americans as honorary Decent Men, rather as English actors in Hollywood used to invite their baseball-playing friends to make up their cricket sides.

Americans, you see, are healthy, daring, bracing, and open-minded, while the English are sickly, timid, and cozy. In England after 1945, according to Mr. Green:

There was also, unofficially, a widespread mood of exhaustion and depression, one source and expression of which was a resentful feeling of inferiority to America....The dandies, especially, found America overwhelming....New York was the opposite of London, and a world-centre of vitality. London was a world-centre of impotence....And in real life we could take the Kennedy family as symbolising—a little later—all those qualities that made the American personality *bigger* than the English. It was not

only that they had more vigour, more beauty, more ease, more range, but that they possessed these qualities in such an easy relation to adulthood.

Mr. Green must be popular at Tufts. Writing as I do from the world-center of impotence (you can see the billboards on the way from the airport—Visit London, World-Center of Impotence), I envy his lot among these vigorous, easy, rangy beauties. I cannot resist wondering, though, whether American *writers* fit quite so naturally into the Decent team as Green claims. Hemingway and Fitzgerald are surely archetypal Dandies. As Green himself points out, Waugh admitted to having been influenced by both. What could be more dandified than the doctrine of "grace under pressure"? And, to take a random handful, McCullers, Purdie, Brautigan, Mailer, Pynchon, Barth, Capote, and Tennessee Williams are easy and rangy perhaps, but *decent*?

The source of the trouble is, of course, that Mr. Green has made too facile an equation between the political and the cultural. Cultural health is not a necessary consequence of political, still less of economic, strength. Neither the world dominance of the United States nor the rapid decline of British power has been directly reflected in art or literature. Political factors tend to be refracted by a multitude of other influences. Even the devastating experience of the First World War was rendered differently by different participants. Berlin under the Weimar Republic and London in the twenties were very dissimilar places which shared the horrors of the Somme only as a social catalyst. It may be, as Mr. Green claims, a failure of nerve that English culture should have shrunk from throwing in its lot with international modernism. But if so, it is a failure of nerve that has a long prehistory, and a complex causation which cannot be reduced to a crude dichotomy between health and decadence.

As a kind of clincher, Mr. Green throws in an anecdotal personal comparison. On a visit to London he attends morning service at a military chapel. The most eloquent sight he finds is the faces of the officers' wives: "They are faces strangely innocent of expression and experience. They have never achieved any of the major expressions, or any adventurous experiences. They are uninteresting human beings, drilled into a human style that was only an imitation of being human." How sadly these dull, limited women compare with Mr. Green's American students; in his exhilarating discussions with them,

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There is all the space and resonance in the world. We read Blake, and compare him with Mailer, read Mary Wollstonecraft and compare her with Doris Lessing, read Godwin and compare him with Paul Goodman, and so on. Paine's essays lead us to reflect on the absence of any equivalent in the McGovern campaign. On the American intellectual scene such sweeps of perspective come more naturally than they do on the British scene.

And how. When Mr. Green and his students get to sweeping their perspectives, they really sweep 'em.

Yet—I hesitate to interrupt the sweeping—is the contrast, well, quite fair? Could I not carry out a somewhat similar exercise if I attended church at West Point and compared the officers' wives there with my own circle of perspective-sweepers, who at the drop of a hat compare Martin Green with Susan Sontag and Walter Matthau

with Walter Benjamin and Indira Gandhi with Benny Goodman? Perhaps not. Perhaps the officers' wives at West Point sweep their own perspectives. Perhaps *they* all gather round after morning service and compare Dwight D. Eisenhower with Doris Lessing and James Bond with Simone de Beauvoir.

Now, Mr. Green is a decent critic when he puts aside his dot cricket and settles down to the set book. He says apt and original things about Evelyn Waugh and William Dean Howells and Mark Twain and particularly about Kingsley Amis, whose unease and change of politics Green charts with sympathy, partly because he shares Amis' early allegiance to the English moralistic Left of Leavis and Raymond Williams. But it is not because of these modest literary *aperçus* that Mr. Green's

work has achieved a certain celebrity. It is because of his larger claims as a polemical historian of culture. And here, the doubts about his qualifications will not go away. For one thing, he lacks the intellectual stamina. Green is an inattentive student, prone to daydream and play hookey from Dr. Leavis' classroom, and he is in for a nasty rap over the knuckles if the Doctor catches up with him. The trouble is that through the cracked and dusty classroom window he could see brightly painted butterflies dancing outside—the Brideshead Beauty and, most entrancing of all, the giant Nabokov fritillary. But the most lasting impression of *Transatlantic Patterns* is of the artistry and delight of Evelyn Waugh—the most anti-American, unhealthy, resolutely reactionary novelist of modern England. □

BOOK REVIEW

A Theory of Racial Harmony

Alvin Rabushka / University of South Carolina Press / \$5.95

William R. Havender

However unjust the present regimes of Southern Africa, it is sad that their opponents should chant so ritualistically for "majority rule," without a word about the special problems of associating within a single polity two or more disparate societal groups. Indeed, from the dearth of debate about this topic one might easily infer that it makes no difference what kinds of governmental structures emerge in Rhodesia and South Africa: that as long as the outcome is consonant with "majority rule" the particular arrangements are but clerical details best left to pragmatic negotiation between experienced diplomats. Any such outcome, it is assumed, would have an equally good chance of achieving peaceful relations between the races within a unitary state. One need only glance around the world, however—at Ireland, Cyprus, Lebanon, Palestine, Ethiopia, Nigeria, the Indian subcontinent, Malaysia, Uganda, even Canada and Belgium—to see the manifest untruth of this belief. In actuality, the details of the political bargain struck between ethnic communities is of the utmost importance if "majority rule" is not to devolve into majority oppression, with attendant civil war, partition, mass emigration—and even genocide.

It is a striking feature of communal conflict in these many lands that the combatant groups share the same perception of government: They all regard its control as far too vital to their own security

and well-being to risk its passing into the hands of their rivals. Government seems to be viewed as a dispenser of injury and inequity rather than as a bringer of benefits and justice—*except* when controlled by one's own clansmen. That this belief can be so ubiquitous, recurring independently, like the law of gravity, in countries that otherwise differ vastly in race, language, history, religion, and industrial advancement compels the observer to examine with care its source and nourishment, for there may be some crucial flaw in our concept of democracy that engenders racial and ethnic conflict.

This is the reason for directing your attention to Alvin Rabushka's *A Theory of Racial Harmony* which, while small and quickly read, throws a lapidary light upon this problem. Rabushka, a Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, argues that the risk of racial and ethnic antagonisms is greatly reduced in those societies where the role of government in the lives of its citizens is minimized. Stated so baldly, his thesis will doubtless seem simplistic, yet Rabushka supports it with an impressive body of theoretical and empirical argument. What is most convincing, he distinguishes the political mode of social allocation and decision-making from the voluntary exchange, or market, process, and suggests that the political resolution of social questions which could otherwise be handled by the market vastly raises the probability of ethnic and racial confrontation.

What are the differing properties of political vs. market actions that sustain this proposition? First and most important,

political action necessarily entails action in large groups. Democratic politics, after all, is a game of putting together winning coalitions, so that, like it or not, playing it effectively means being associated with a group. Because differences in the kinds of goals that people seek are commonly rooted in their cultural or ethnic heritage, ethnicity provides a logical and convenient basis for aggregation into groups for the political attainment of shared goals. A special feature of this process is that, since a political contest can be wholly won or lost by only a small number of votes, the marginal return for securely marshalling even the last, most reluctant supporters within one or the other ethno-political camp can be huge. There is, therefore, a strong incentive to sharpen ethnic boundaries whenever group "ends" must be sought through political mechanisms.

The market, on the other hand, permits people to act as individual agents in setting and attaining their goals. Too, the loss of a few market "votes" does not have the same all-or-none consequence for the achievement of ethnically conditioned purposes, so that there is no comparable urgency to gather strays back into the herd. Therefore, the independent action of individuals in markets results in group boundaries becoming diffuse and indistinct.

Second, coercion is an essential part of any less-than-unanimous political action; the losers are necessarily coerced into accepting the result (the "majority" does, after all, "rule"). In contrast, there is by definition no coercion in market trans-

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