
Editor's Comment

Today, the ugly beautiful people have become an ideological occurrence. When Governor Brown semi-officially travels abroad with sexual service personnel in lieu of a spouse, this is not nonconformism but an ideological statement. It is calculated to attract favor from trendsetters whom he deems more important than ordinary constituents. A very private aide to a governor is nothing new in history or politics. Intense publicity for less traditional proclivities of a politician is new. It takes into account that America is divided into two cultures, each living by its own principles and styles. But only one is hailed by the monopolistic liberal media as progressive and wholesome—the normless and amorphous ethos of the Manhattan-Malibu axis. And Governor Brown is banking on its electoral power.

Every society has an effluvium, but effluvia, even the most noxious ones, rarely become socio-ethical problems. They have in today's America. The *lumpen* is now called an underclass, seen as a source of morality; the *canaille* has gone through a beatification process and now has its saints, like Genêt, and pious apologists, like film director Robert Altman. The ugly beautiful people, the American effluvium, once even aimed at becoming an elite, but the sheer force of numbers (a result of American affluence) has expanded them into another underclass.

Historically, elites have always been formed through a concentration of either political or financial power that rarefied itself into a social standing; attempts to form elites on the basis of moral or civic virtues, sadly, have seldom succeeded. However, in the past, elites as a rule tried to work out a virtuous image: the aristocratic ethics of honor and protectiveness, or the bourgeois morality of industriousness and economic plenty were socially and culturally functional. Rectitude was always a vital factor in their ideologies, even if it had to be propounded at the price of hypocrisy. The lower classes—for whom love, family and personal honesty were accessible moral values—had the official aristocratic propaganda of decorum and the bourgeois propaganda of decency for tangible supports in gathering the existential assets of life, work, traditions. Providing well-defined values, even if they were not always implemented in practice, accounted for the health and success of Western civilization. It determined its universal mission.

Today, the ugly beautiful people's pretense of an elite results from the fusion of technology and culture. Deprived of philosophy and faith, they use cultural bric-a-brac—lifestyles, fashion, pop art—as their spiritual identification and dialectics. With their moral stimuli in a condition of atrophy, they couldn't survive without the support of the press, electronic communications, movies, TV. In fact, their only recognizable tenet: "Fun Is Morality," ethically and socially repulsive as it is, serves as fuel for the sensationalist media.

Their social bases are nonproductive professions that enrich neither society nor culture, only decorate them. Each civilization in history had its milieu of drones, parasites and spongers, whose group rationale was the "embellishment" of drab reality. In the past, those groups elicited little more than amused contempt from their contemporaries. In today's America, this "embellishment" has become an irrationally respected and absurdly lucrative economic and social function, if not a profession. This makes the ugly beautiful people thirsty for outright social power, which they actually are close to attaining through various interactions with and feedbacks from authentic elites.

Every profession contributes something to the overall performance of a highly specialized economy. However, the production of entertainment, false eyelashes and neckties is not of the same contributory import as bread, coal and light bulbs. A free market economy is supposed to pay for what's in demand. Yet, at some point, generating an artificial demand for shoddiness and trash, and pushing up financial rewards for utterly reprehensible services, became the mainstays of nonproductive professions. The overpayment for effluvial "embellishment" is slowly emerging as the lethal mistake of our civilization. A mood has been created, no doubt detrimental to our interests as a whole, in which a fashion designer or rock impresario is anomalously entitled to be better off than someone who produces knowledge or enlightened attitudes, or an educator who exerts himself to improve human conduct. This juxtaposition of facts is slowly turning into a social caricature. A successful entertainer is paid grotesquely more than a nurse, although the latter is infinitely more morally and socially worthy. In the ugly beautiful people's dialectic this is explained by "talent" as a marketable value, but a talent to entertain in healthier societies was considered a private quality and usually dispensed for free. It's only been since technology began its woeful interaction with the production of culture that the bloodsucking careers of singing stars, literary agents, dope theorists, professional freaks, acting hacks, publicity stuntmen, have invaded the parasitic fringe of the vocational idlers, turned them into an underclass, and with the help of the corrupted media promoted the ugly beautiful folklore into an all-American exemplar. The "embellishment" rationalization has been expanded into a *Weltanschauung*, ugly, miscreated and foul as it is, but relentlessly promoted and—what's ominous—economically profitable. It subsists on psychoanalytical twaddle which makes platitudes into "wisdom" that legislates existences and emotions. It creates a pseudo-intellectual climate in which the pop-art mass magazine critics, the current spiritual leadership, anoint "greatness" and are paid out of all reasonable proportion to their social value. Why perfunctory and embarrassingly shallow

journalistic renditions of history, contemporary affairs, behavioral issues and artistic creativity time and again have become multimillion dollar enterprises is a crucial question. The answer probably is: Because the greedy and unscrupulous liberal publisher strikes an alliance with the liberal media manipulator, and together they set out to boost at any price a conformist liberal critic, or a liberal intellectual bigot, thereby forming the most formidable sociocultural device of our time. They all frequent the same leisure circuit; at their cocktail parties and carefully crafted cultural events, the gathering and inbreeding of mutual supportiveness is taking place. Next morning, it passes into publishing and editorial offices, or movie studios, and the warped liberal ideals get blended with journalistic hype and with a communication system that feeds and thrives on everything value-free, offbeat, far-out. Opinion making for the mere sake of opinion making has become a tremendous, all-encompassing industry.

In such a climate, inversion and perversion of sociocultural meanings becomes both a basic instrument of "change" and a source of unholy profits. The acting profession, for one, though certainly an artistic skill, was never held in high esteem in refined civilizations: actors made their living by impersonating other people, somehow an offense to the Judeo-Christian sense of God-given human properties. Among the ugly beautiful people, actors equal ancient prophets. But not only has the actor's role been blown out of proportion, the entire mechanism of culture has been corrupted.

For over six decades, Hollywood mirrored the character and dreams of the nation. It did it in a garish way, and was called the cradle of a vibrant and folksy art. Simple-mindedness and tinsel, always Hollywood's image, did not prevent it from capturing some essential truths about America, which commanded the attention and sentiments of the world at large. During the '60s, Hollywood was put on another course, hailed as "creative" and "introspective" by liberal elites. Movies began to reflect the marginal rather than the essential, aberrations of reality rather than reality itself. Instead of dreams, we were offered nightmares which were declared self-questioning insights. To claim that *The Exorcist*, *Jaws* or *A Wedding* represent anything but the sleazy periphery of truth is not only a fraud, but also the main factor in Hollywood's degeneration to the repulsiveness of a jaded stripteaser whose only ambition is to shock and to make money. This fundamental change in creative trends has had many consequences: among them, some new ways have materialized for the celebrity elites to live, love and influence the cultural aura of the country.

The ugly beautifuls are on the uppermost end of the affluence scale, but their political orientation is intensely radical and leftist. This has something to do with the present

marketability of leftism, radical chic, and other demonstrable clichés; it can be safely assumed that any political extremism of any totalitarian brand would be warmly embraced by them, provided its meretriciousness would supply maximum visibility. The owner of a prosperous Manhattan disco, who obviously culls his astronomic income from pimpish instincts, declared to awed reporters that he was "against Vietnam" and "would never go." The central ideological and theoretical organ of the ugly beautifuls, *Women's Wear Daily*, frantically promotes penthouse radicalism and overtly communist pop singers and "poets," goes into raptures at any modish cause, rally, etc. It also attempts to rationalize its stance: normlessness and dissipation of values are presented in its pages as a fight against hypocrisy, constriction, convention. A fabulously rich film director unveils his proclivity to stealing and touts it as "moral" impulse: "I like robbers . . . they are some of the finest people I ever met," he crows, and *WWD* reports it with pride.

It has already become clear that, in spite of all liberal media efforts, there's an unbridgeable rift between the common people and the ugly beautiful people of America. In fact, the latter are the former's openly declared enemy. Two kinds of money earned by two kinds of people have obvious civilizational consequences: those who provide food, electricity and transportation are pitched against the producers of news, entertainment, pop art and distorted liberal ideas. The ugly beautiful people are the focus of contention: the first loathe them, the second not only tolerate them but permit them to act as their legitimate elite. The first still think that patriotism and the Boy Scouts are good things; the second reject anticommunism, falsely present themselves as underdogs fighting on the side of other underdogs from their Beverly Hills mansions, and serve cocaine at their parties in the name of sacred solidarity with the oppressed. Being recklessly pushed by the media as the paradigm of American success, these ugly, mean, cynical, most often brainless people, who made it into the spotlight, ultimately ruin the common man's social chance to live better. As the alliance between the ugly beautifuls and the peddlers of Liberal Culture perennially needs an enemy on whom it can prey and structure its power of vilification, the producer of energy and housing becomes its natural victim. He is unable to create a fashionable cultural image; deprived of cultural weapons, his defenselessness becomes an easy source of money and fame for the liberal ugly beautiful predator. His intentions are smartly defamed, his preferences become the new American demonology. Cultural con men lavishly live off his denunciation. He has little social power and only some vestiges of political power. (Nothing exemplifies this better than the recent "memoirs" of Margaret Trudeau; when we realize that her lover during her marriage to the prime minister of Canada was the owner of Club Mediter-

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Opinions & Views

Scènes de la Vie in Province

Susan Sontag: *I etcetera*; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; New York. *On Photography*; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; New York. *Illness as Metaphor*; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; New York.

by Leo F. Raditsa

Miss Sontag lives off her talent the way some of the rich live off their capital—because they fear the pleasure, and the responsibility, of work and learning. She takes important things for granted and makes a fuss over unimportant things—like everyday photographs or wayward remarks about death-dealing disease. She leaves important matters undiscussed, because she assumes we agree about them, when actually she is afraid of changing her mind and facing her mistakes. She is half-educated, a true product of American education with passing acquaintance with many novels and an undergraduate reading of Plato still in her head unchanging and not about to change. She surrounds herself with words and things and, I bet, people who will not challenge her assumptions. She feeds the hunger for intelligence by teasing it with superficial brilliance. She parodies academic method, but does not know she is parodying it, at a moment when, alas, with some exceptions it is beyond parody. She wastes herself and others.

Caught without clear experience of either philosophy or history, Sontag tries to learn both philosophy and history from novels—not even from poets who are more demanding and do not lend themselves to the easy generalizations she takes for knowledge. She yearns for philosophy but will not dare be true to her yearning—and appeals to people who also yearn for philosophy but do not know it. This makes her a

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patsy for political propaganda, which substitutes for conviction and for the uneasy sense that one does not know enough to judge. She is pernicious, because she confirms people in their inadequacies, because she tries to convince her readers that their inadequacies are all in the world we have.

Of these books, *On Photography* is more worthy of comment, although it is deeply flawed. Photographs fascinate Sontag in a way the other things, like illness, she writes of do not. In this book she comes closest to a real subject, to something she cares about—but she evades it—with categorical judgments and haste.

What she really wants to talk about is seeing, but somehow she does not find her way to her real subject. As a result she denies her subject: she argues that it makes little sense to distinguish between photographers who can actually see and those who photograph because they cannot see. She will not, in the end, distinguish between photographers like Walker Evans and Edward Weston who can see—and the hundreds of others who cannot. She will not make judgments of value.

Photography, which looks so easy because its techniques are quickly mastered, is actually a demanding and limited art. It requires narrower discipline than any other art. As Paul Goodman used to say of the movies, it is good for two things only: documentary and dreaming.

Evans used to limit himself as severely as a symbolist poet. I saw that vividly when he criticized a piece of my prose when I was about nineteen. He went over every word and phrase with a care I had never imagined lived. Through all that severity I had the unmistakable impression that this was how he saw and photographed: that he was teaching me to give words the regard he took to the world and the discipline he gave

to his camera. He was severe, but it was a severity full of warmth, not of cruelty. As a result it awakened awe in me: I had never before sensed the delicacy that came with the strength of words. There was, too, a lot of unnecessary fastidiousness that, I think, came from his refusal to yield to the facility of cameras. He was careful, almost fearful, in his struggle to make the camera serve his eyes—not his eyes the camera. His eyes were full of sight—of delight, joy and wit.

Because Sontag argues that photography is not an art, she is careless in her aesthetic judgments. She takes Weston's nudes much too much for granted—and this at a time when few if any painters, for whom it is a vastly easier subject, can paint a nude! She is also too uncritical in her praise of Robert Frank's photographs.

Twenty years ago, with the publication of *The Americans*, Frank's photographs seemed to show something about the United States which we had been denying. Evans spoke of a "new" eye. Now in looking at those photographs I am struck both by how much they owe to Evans and how different they are from Evans' work—how awkward, distant, and hostile. Unlike Evans, Frank tried to make the medium do more than it could. As a result his photographs now seem to me to tell more about himself—and at the same time deny it—than they do about the United States. What they see in the United States is important, but it is often confused by the stubbornness of Frank's insistence on his eye as his own.

For Sontag the chief characteristic of photographs is that they are both intimate and distant—at the same time. In short they are promiscuous. But this contrast between intimacy and distance is not inherent in photography: it occurs because so many people take photographs without looking, because they are unable to see. Because she argues