



ATTITUDES OR LATITUDES

Reflections and observations on peculiarities

Dear nephew,

Your comment the other evening on the differences in character between people who live in the north of the country with those of their southern neighbours has given me pause for thought. In Spain, for example, northerners, such as Catalans or Basques, are still considered frugal and industrious, while Andalusians are viewed by them as indolent layabouts, more interested in enjoying life than being serious about work, and they, in turn, see their northern counterparts as boring, work-obsessed skinflints. Clearly, this idiosyncrasy is not exclusive to Spaniards, since the same can be said of Italians when comparing the Piedmontese to their Calabrian, or Sicilian cousins. Or with Germany, where the contrasts in character between Prussians and Bavarians is notable. These thoughts are hardly news. As Elizabeth Gaskell points out in her novel *North and South*, the contrasts of values, perspectives or lifestyle between the industrial north and the south of England were already a concern in 1855. One is tempted to attribute these differences to the weather. And it seems logical that northerners, living in a colder climate, would more easily embrace a work ethic, unable as they are, to spend much time out-of-doors. Southerners, on the other hand, spend their days in sun-drenched warmth and, free from the confines of a cloistered existence, can engage in more sybaritic pursuits. It is a tidy theory.

The problem is that it doesn't explain trans-national differences when borders are crossed at similar latitudes. One wonders how the Provençals, with their leisurely love for life can be so different from their neighbours to the east, the enterprising Milanese. Or how the diligent Catalans can present such an opposing character to those who live just north of their border. It is a conundrum that has often stumped me, entertaining my travels with hours of idle contemplation. During chats with people from northern countries I have often been impressed by the ardour with which they gushed about their travels to the Mediterranean coast, describing wistfully how they enjoyed —and envied— the weather, the sun, the food, the wine... Their southern counterparts, however, would speak of their neighbours to the north with admiration, marvelling at the efficiency of their administrations, the cleanliness of their towns, and the surprising honesty of the citizens, as evidenced by the tidy rows of bicycles seen lined up unchained in the streets. These incongruences revealed the scope of the differences in their personalities, contrasts in behaviour that brought to mind a trip I made in the 1980s to Basel, Switzerland.

The purpose of my trip was to visit the Basel Art Fair, an event I had been attending for the past several years. Gisèle, a dealer friend who had a gallery in town, had invited me to dinner at the home of one of her collectors, a wealthy couple who lived in a large, rambling home on the outskirts of the city. It was a convivial evening, with an interesting assortment of artists, dealers and collectors convened round the table in lively discussion on a wide range of subjects. After dinner, the weather being mild, we all retired to the patio, where the coffee and dessert waited to be served. A large table, generously provisioned with cakes, brandy and cigars stood under the canopy of the sheltered terrace, the warm glow of candles casting a pleasant light on the guests seated round. There was a large, open meadow behind the house, and in the moonlight, a cluster of trees could be seen out in the distance, their profiles sharp against the starry sky. The evening had progressed in friendly conversation and I was duly impressed by the peaceful atmosphere and the civil and interesting exchanges I heard amongst the guests. Looking across the table to our gracious host, I remarked,

“You really live in a corner of paradise. The dinner, the scenery, the atmosphere, it’s simply the picture of perfection, and I congratulate you for having accomplished it!”

“Perfection! You have no idea, my friend, what it is to live in Switzerland.”

“But surely,” I protested, “in comparison to your neighbours to the South, your country is renowned the world over for its wealth, its great scientific and technological industries and its progressive views on all kinds of social issues, not to mention the beauty of the Alps or the countryside outside your very home!” I replied, extending my arm to the lovely meadow outside.

“Let me give you an example,” he said. “The other day I had an early meeting at work and was running late, so I rushed through my breakfast and was preparing to run out to the car, when my wife called out: ‘Don’t forget to take out the rubbish! It’s in the bin under the sink!’ I grabbed the bag and dashed out to the car. Twenty minutes later, I was parking the car in the garage under my office building when I noticed the rubbish bag in the back seat. In my rush to get to work, I had forgotten to deposit it in the bin near our home, so before heading up to the office, I grabbed the bag and dumped it in the bins outside the building. A few hours later, my secretary announced that my wife was on the phone. ‘I thought I’d asked you to take out the rubbish!’ she said, nettled. Of course I had, I replied. I had deposited the bag in the bin this very morning before coming to the office! Why do you ask? ‘Because it’s sitting right outside our door, in the landing!’ It took me some effort to learn what had happened. One of the neighbours near my office building had been looking out her window that morning and

had seen me dump the bag in the bin. Incensed at seeing someone she didn't recognise use her neighbourhood bin, she had come down and retrieved the bag, rifling through the rubbish until she had found an envelope with our home address. Armed with our name and address, she drove out to our home and promptly deposited the bag outside our front door!"

The fellow sitting next to him chimed in. "Let me tell you what happened to my neighbour!"

"You also have a story like this?" I enquired, intrigued.

"I live on a street lined with private homes, all of them similar, with a small garden in front and an attached garage," he explained. "The chap that lives next door was fined the other day for having forgotten to close his garage door. One of the neighbours had filed a complaint with the police, apparently incensed by how the open garage broke the architectural line and marred the aesthetic symmetry of the row of houses!"

The next morning I was on the Swissair flight to Geneva, a propeller-driven plane whose low flight plan took us over Lac Lemman. Out the port-side windows, the snow-capped Alps shone brightly in the late spring sun and I gazed at the beauty of the landscape, lost in thought. The stories I'd heard last night threatened my convictions about the tolerant nature of the Swiss, so seemingly at odds with the 'civilised' appearance they projected. But my doubts were soon laid to rest, as a lissome blonde in uniform approached with a tray of bonbons and a glass of ice-cold champagne. Sipping my drink I thought, how civilised indeed, and leant back in my seat to enjoy the rest of the short flight.

The Swissair flight landed in Geneva right on time, but the connection to Madrid on Iberia was delayed and I had to wait several hours for its departure. So after checking into the desk and reserving a no-smoking seat, I sat at the bar and read the paper. Eventually our flight was called and I stepped out onto the tarmac. Gathered outside, a restless group of teenagers was gambolling about, apparently a Spanish high school sports team returning home from a meet. Next to them stood several very short and elderly ladies, clad all in black, large parcels wrapped in twine at their feet. They represented an image of rural Spain that no longer exists, but in those days village women of Andalucía generally wore black for most of their lives. These ladies were returning home, perhaps from visiting immigrant children in Switzerland, or maybe they had been immigrants themselves, and were going home, loaded with Swiss items for their families. In the bright sun, their small, dark shapes presented a charming contrast to the tall, well-dressed Swiss businessmen who were also waiting for the flight.

We were called to board and the teenagers rushed ahead, swarming up the boarding ladder in the excitement to be first. The rest of us followed and found our seats. Mine was on the aisle; next to me was the window seat, and opposite the aisle were two more, both occupied. Behind me, the kids were making a tremendous noise. I could hear yelling and laughter as they hopped back and forth between the seats, trying to settle in with their companion of choice. Overhead compartments were being opened and shut with a bang, much to the consternation of the stewardess, who was trying her best to bring order to the chaos. I smiled at the energy of these kids, amused by the anarchic nature of their Iberian character, so in contrast with the well-behaved children I had observed in Basel. For twenty minutes two separate stewardesses had been trying to calm the rowdy group, trying in vain to stem the pandemonium, until finally, the captain's voice came over the speakers informing the kids that the plane would not take off until they were all in their seats and buckled in. They would be free to change seats once airborne, but until then, they must remain seated. That quieted them, and in a few minutes we had reached our cruising altitude. The flight continued on, the kids had settled down, and the stewardesses began passing out drinks. It had been a busy week and I was glad to be heading back to Spain. There would be a lot of follow-up work to be done, but in the meantime, I'd sit back and enjoy the flight.

Reading the Spanish papers over my beer and nuts, I was surprised to find myself enveloped in a cloud of cigarette smoke. The fellow opposite the aisle was happily puffing away and the smoke was blowing in my direction. I had clearly reserved a non-smoking seat, so I called the stewardess over.

"I'm afraid there's been a mistake with my seat. I had expressly asked for a non-smoking seat and believe I've been given one in the smoking section," I protested, showing her my ticket.

"Not at all, sir! You're sitting in the proper seat. This area where you are is the non-smoking area!" she replied, handing me back the ticket.

"Well, what about this gentleman here?" I asked, pointing to the chap beside me.

"Oh, he's in the smoking section. All seats on the right of the plane are for smokers. Those on the left are for non-smokers!"

A lot of water has passed under the bridge since those days. Airlines once permitted smoking, and they seated the smokers in the rear of the plane. To comply with international regulations, Iberia also sectioned off their cabins, but their approach was more conciliatory, allowing for families to remain together by placing smokers on one

side of the aisle and the non-smokers on the other. Like all airlines, Iberia no longer allows smokers on their flights, let alone does it segregate them from non-smokers by a simple aisle.

The biggest change, however, has been how the rise of low-cost airlines, offering international fares at a fraction of what it costs to travel by road or rail, has opened the skies to thousands of people who previously couldn't afford to fly. In their wake they have left a carbon footprint that threatens the planet, endless masses of tourists taking selfies every day anywhere in the world, and entire neighborhoods succumbing to the pressures from Airbnb emptied of neighbours who are unable to cope with the resultant exorbitant rent increases. However, every inveterate traveler will insist that the differences between towns remain the same as always, that *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, ignoring the inexorable homogenization of cities once known for their uniqueness.

There you have it, dear nephew. Something to think about before flying.

With all my affection,
your uncle