



## Episode 433: Life at the Bottom: The Worldview That Makes the Underclass

Guest: Theodore Dalrymple

**WOODS:** I am intrigued by your writing; I'm intrigued by this book, *Life at the Bottom*, even though it came out almost 15 years ago now. It's *Life at the Bottom: The Worldview that Makes the Underclass*. I'm always telling my listeners that I've got about a half dozen people, contemporary writers, whose prose makes me genuinely envious. And I have now added another one. It's now seven people, because, having read *Life at the Bottom*, just the introduction is frankly just so beautifully written. The prose is so elegant, each word so carefully chosen, it makes me think I need to spend more time on my own writing, because the world of blogging —

**DALRYMPLE:** (laughing) I could listen to you forever.

**WOODS:** (laughing) Indeed, well I'm glad you appreciate the remarks, but they are very, very much sincere. In fact, I almost feel like your introduction to this book really ought to be a standalone article somewhere. I was reading it — I'm here in my office right now, and I wanted to email just the introduction to my wife, because we've made so many of the same observations, although perhaps not quite as eloquently as you have, because we make them in fits of anger from time to time when we are faced with the kinds of scenarios you are describing.

Let's begin by setting the stage for what you are accomplishing in this book, first by telling people what it is that you do for a living, that you would encounter some of the case studies that you mentioned. And then secondly, let's talk about what the thesis of your book is.

**DALRYMPLE:** Well, I was a doctor and psychiatrist. I worked in a city hospital, a general hospital in a poor area of a British city. And I used to do that in the morning, and then in the afternoon, I would go to the prison, which was next door. The main difference between these two great institutions is that there was much less violence in the prison. And I went in the afternoon, and I was on duty at night every third night for about 15 years and weekends as an ordinary doctor. And I was a psychiatrist there as well. So that was how I met people that perhaps I wouldn't otherwise have met.

**WOODS:** And in the course of meeting them, you could see patterns emerging, patterns of destructive behavior, people trapped in destructive relationships but not perceiving themselves as trapped, not seeing alternatives. So you're describing this as

a situation in which we have people who are not really by historical standards materially poor. And yet, we can describe their lives in no other way than as degraded.

**DALRYMPLE:** Yes. Certainly they're not impoverished by the standards even of people of my father's generation, when he was born in 1909 at the East End of London – people without any shoes and so forth and children went to school hungry and so on and so forth. And now they go to school fat. And so the nature of poverty has changed, and I don't think there's a sufficient recognition of that. But there is a terrible kind of impoverishment in people's lives, which is destructive, and people are self-destructive as well. I think this is insufficiently recognized.

**WOODS:** So when we're trying to figure out what the causes of this phenomenon might be, I think both Left and Right often will fall back on comfortable and familiar explanations. So in the case of the Left, it would be purely economic and materialistic explanations. These people have few employment opportunities, and then they just spiral into undesirable behavior. Although by saying "undesirable behavior," I'm already being more judgmental than the Left would be, but you get the drift of the argument.

And then the Right will – and I've done this too, and I do think there's some merit in the argument – will look at the incentives created by the welfare state, and say, well, the welfare state and its rise seems roughly coincident with the rise of these problems, so there does seem to be both an empirical connection, at least, and certainly at least a correlation, and perhaps some argument for causation as well. You are inclined to accept some of that, but to give maybe a more robust explanation.

**DALRYMPLE:** Well, I accept that as being a necessary condition of the kind of breakdown that I have seen, but I don't think it's a sufficient explanation, and I think the problem with perhaps both Right and Left is that they see the explanation in completely mechanistic terms. I see a necessary part of the explanation as cultural, and that certain ideas lead people to certain kinds of behavior. And of course, that behavior is made possible, perhaps, by the welfare state, but the welfare state doesn't actually mandate it. And there are welfare states where such behavior is much less prevalent than in Britain, for example, which is, in my view, the worst of all Western countries as far as this problem is concerned.

**WOODS:** Well, let's talk about exactly what kind of behaviors we're talking about. Certainly we know that ever since the work of Charles Murray in the United States, there's been a lot of emphasis on out-of-wedlock births, but it goes – the phenomenon we're talking about here, they go well beyond this one number, as it were.

**DALRYMPLE:** No, I think that's an important aspect toward the whole situation, but in fact, what we have is a kind of enframed individualism without individuality. A feeling that nothing makes any difference, that nobody has a right to judge, that one's own wishes of the moment are absolutely paramount in all situations, and so on and so forth. And this, I think, can only come from general ideas.

Also, of course, people are inclined – and in my latest book, it's a book about psychology, in which I make the claim that psychology actually worsens people's behavior, because it puts a kind of theoretical screen between their own behavior that they've decided on and the explanation of that behavior, so they then start to blame either sociological factors or even physical factors, neurochemistry, and so on – for their own conduct, which they have chosen. Now this is of course, this centration to explain one's own behavior – one's own bad behavior; one never tries to explain one's own good behavior – one's own bad behavior by factors, in a sense, outside oneself, is a permanent human temptation. But with the proliferation of possible explanations, more and more people take it seriously.

**WOODS:** So what I take from your book, and seems to be what you're arguing here, it's not just a matter of, as you say, mechanistic explanations. There's another dimension here that involves the spread of bad ideas. People do behave on the basis of ideas; if that weren't the case, there wouldn't have been such a desire on the part of the state to make sure it has a hand in educating the children. The state wants to make sure it inculcates certain ideas.

So ideas do matter. And our ideas that are cooked up by intellectuals who, in their own lives, may not in fact implement these ideas to their fullest extent, but by the time they trickle down to people who constitute the underclass, they are being implemented to a preposterous degree. And these people's lives are the wreckage that are caused by these bad ideas. What are some of these bad ideas?

**DALRYMPLE:** Well, the idea, for example, that children don't need two parents, that stability of home is unimportant, that what is really important in human relationships is the feeling of the present moment and nothing else. I think part of the ideas came from the 1960s or maybe even earlier than that in the '50s, the idea that if human relationships were freed of all contractual obligations or social obligations, all conventions and so on and so forth – if the only thing that guided people in their relationships were the affections of the moment, the full beauty of the human personality would emerge, so that all sense of obligation other than to one's own feelings of the moment was destroyed, in part of course, by the retreat of religion, but also retreat of any stigma attached to any kind of behavior. And stigma is now, oddly enough, a stigmatized idea. And so people behaving badly are not stigmatized.

**WOODS:** You refer to it as "the rush from judgment."

**DALRYMPLE:** Yes, yes. Exactly. I mean, people would say to me, explaining their own good character, the good aspects of their character, that "I'm not judgmental." But life is – it's inconceivable that one doesn't make a judgment, and even the judgment that one shouldn't make judgments is itself a judgment.

**WOODS:** Of course, and these people make some of the most sweeping judgments of anybody I've ever met. If you talk to somebody who is skeptical of multiculturalism, they will absolutely render a judgment on you. If you have traditional views on sexuality, they will absolutely render a judgment on you.

**DALRYMPLE:** Yes. An American acquaintance of mine told me that he gave a talk at an American university to students who were very intelligent students, and they were very nice students, but they were actually shocked when he said that he did not believe that animals have rights. That actually shocked them. And of course, one of the problems with the idea that it should shock them is that that meant that they couldn't think of any other reason why someone shouldn't behave badly towards animals, other than it would be a violation of their rights.

**WOODS:** It's extremely fuzzy thinking, because although I can at least understand some of the claims made by people who have a sophisticated theory of animal rights, most people who are responding this way have no such sophisticated theory; they have a lot of sentiment, almost always.

**DALRYMPLE:** Yes, well of course, dare I mention, that another of my books is about the reign of sentimentality in our society.

**WOODS:** It's all the same package, isn't it? The lack of judgmental – right?

**DALRYMPLE:** Yes. I think, for example, there's been a reversal of authority, that children have become authorities over their parents. And one little sign of this – I mean, it's a very little sign – is the elimination of the word "pupil" from our language, so that children at the age of three are "students." Now, students of course are increasingly self-directed after a preliminary education. That is the whole point of education, is to – one of the points of education – is to make people independent.

But they can't be independent at the age of three. That's ridiculous. And you can't say the teacher doesn't know better than the child of three what it ought to know and what it ought to be taught. I mean, if the child is able to decide for itself what it ought to be taught, there's no need for it to be taught anything, because it already knows it.

So that little, just that little semantic shift, where children of three or four or five have become students, tells a lot about the way we think. And that's one of the themes, also one of the ideas in the book: that the way we speak actually reveals the way we think.

**WOODS:** I have a largely libertarian audience, and I don't think too many of them hold this view, but just in case some of them do, there are some libertarians who feel like even social convention is a form of oppression. Even when people indicate disfavor, indicate unhappiness with your personal choices, that this is a form of oppression. But of course it's not from a libertarian standpoint, because a libertarian is concerned only with coercion.

And the countervailing argument to this would be that it's precisely because you have social convention that you can dispense with the role of the state in some social affairs, that society can regulate itself through norms that we all more or less share, and that we understand the reasons for that. It's not arbitrary that you would frown

upon certain forms of behavior. You can't have human society without particular norms being observed. And so if we are not super favorable or bending over backwards to praise everybody's choices, this isn't because we're mean and terrible people; it's precisely because we're not mean and terrible people. We want to have a functioning society.

**DALRYMPLE:** Yes. Well, you cannot escape convention. It's impossible to escape convention, because when you try to –

**WOODS:** And today we have convention, and the convention is that no one's allowed to say anything that runs counter to the leftist social program. That's the new convention.

**DALRYMPLE:** Well, I think that's putting it a bit strong in that, of course, we're not punished for going against these conventions, or at least I don't feel I've ever been punished for it. But the idea that you should not be conventional is itself a convention.

And again, if I may refer – I don't think it's in the book, *Life at the Bottom*, but I talk about Steven Pinker's *Language Instinct*, his book, which in many respects is a very good book. But he says that people should not be taught a standard language, standard English, because really a standard language is only an language with an army and an air force, as it were, and that it's schoolmarmish to teach grammar, because all forms of language are rule-driven and have the same powers of expression.

Now it seems to me that that is false. His book, when I bought his book, it was going for its 26th printing in England. And it was not written in black vernacular English, which he goes out of his way to praise, because if it had been written in black vernacular English, it wouldn't have sold – well, it wouldn't have been printed 26 times, nor would everyone have understood it. And it seemed to me that what he was doing was condemning children who do not speak standard English naturally, who do not hear it in the home, he's actually condemning them to remain at the bottom of the social scale, which is where they are born.

**WOODS:** And he does this, though, while at the same time maintaining the posture of liberality, generosity, magnanimity, because of his broad-mindedness.

**DALRYMPLE:** Yes, exactly. Yes. But at the same time, he's maintaining the need for that broad-mindedness.

**WOODS:** Of course. Of course. Now, one thing the welfare state does encourage, and I think it encourages it more than any disembodied idea does, is an entitlement mentality that's absolutely devastating not just to any entrepreneurial instinct, but to any basic self-help instinct. And did you encounter this type of mentality when you would deal with some of these patients? That it never even occurred to imagine how an economy works or where wealth comes from. There's stuff, and they want to have that stuff, and they deserve to have that stuff.

**DALRYMPLE:** Yes, well, there are two things that I might say here. The first thing is that of course it destroys any sense of gratitude, actually, for anything, because you veer between receiving what you're entitled to and resenting not getting what you feel you're entitled to. And neither of these two stances is a very attractive one. That's one thing.

And technically, it does actually have the effect of making people feel that there isn't anything they can do for themselves, you know, in a rather peculiar way. I remember I used to do home visits to patients. And I remember going to a house, which was a perfectly decent house; it wasn't — it was social housing, or perhaps I should say anti-social housing — but anyway, it was social housing; it was of a reasonable standard; not where I would have wanted to live myself, but there was no physical reason why it should not be a perfectly comfortable house.

And in the garden outside at the back was a terrible mess of broken things and litter and all kinds of things, and it looked like a rubbish tip. And I said, well, why don't you — the woman living there was a single mother, and she had children — and I said, why don't you clear it up? It's not good for your children to have to — and she said, I've asked the council to come and do it several times. It never occurred to her to do it herself or to do anything to assist in clearing it up.

**WOODS:** When you relate episodes like this and you draw conclusions from this, you surely have been accused of so-called blaming the victim, right? Because you're supposed to say that there are structural economic reasons for why people are stuck in these undesirable situations, and you refuse to give that explanation, so that must mean you're blaming the victim.

**DALRYMPLE:** Yes, because if you have a structural explanation, what you're trying to say is that the victim is an inanimate object that has no capacity for thought or action itself. I mean, one would have to start calling people things, rather than people. Now those people that I saw were perfectly capable of thought. I never had to change the way I was talking because I didn't think they could understand me. And I never said anything in print that I haven't said to them in person.

And often it comes as a kind of relief to them that someone is talking to them as if they were agents themselves. Now, actually they have a complex psychology, because in many ways they are agents. They know that they're agents. And yet they have to present themselves to people as if they were not agents, if they feel that it's advantageous to do so.

So it introduces a kind of dishonesty into their lives, which is something that cannot do them good and doesn't do society any good. So on the one hand, they will present themselves as helpless beings. And on the other hand, they know perfectly well that they're making decisions for themselves.

**WOODS:** If it's the case that what we're faced with then is not just a matter of economics, and it's not primarily a case of people's good natures being corrupted by

government programs that are supposedly well-intentioned but have just gone wrong, then the alleged solution becomes much, much more intractable. Because if the problem is not mechanical, then the solution is not mechanical. And perhaps there isn't a solution. How do you look upon this when you're trying to assess what, if anything, can be done to improve the lives of people like this?

**DALRYMPLE:** Well, the first thing to do is, I think, to remove certain ideas that they have. Many people in quite open societies feel that in fact they're closed societies. In Britain, for example, people will say that, well, I can't do anything because I wasn't born in the right place and so on and so forth.

Now, that kind of attitude is actually historically and sociologically quite wrong. It's not empirically true, but it has certain psychological compensations. It allows you to be resentful, and resentment has certain satisfactions, such as being able to feel superior to the world and explaining away – not explaining – but explaining away your own failures and failings, without actually having to take any trouble to do anything about your situation.

So the first thing to do is to try and counteract ideas that people have. I had a debate with a woman who's a well-known journalist in Britain; the name probably wouldn't mean very much in America, by the name of Toynbee, Polly Toynbee. We had a debate, and it was a debate about the nature of poverty and the injustice of our society and so on.

And I pointed out that her own newspaper had published an article in which it showed that the richest groups of people, when they are considered by their religious affiliation in Britain, are first Jews and second Sikhs. Now, the interesting thing about that is that they were immigrants into the country. They arrived with nothing. There was a degree of prejudice against them – although it was not so great that it crushed them and there was no legal restraint against them or persecution of them – and within a matter of only a few years, within one generation, they went from being very, very poor to being the richest groups in society.

And the only explanation of that must be that there is something – unless you believe, of course, that they are parasites leeching off others, which someone like Polly Toynbee would not have wanted to believe, and quite rightly; she's absolutely right there – is that something in their mentality made them able to rise, despite prejudice against them. And she replied to me to say, well, of course, immigrants are always the kind of people who are striving. And I said, but that is precisely my point. The problem is the mind-forged manacles. It isn't the structure in society, and therefore, the first thing to do is to try and remove the mind-forged manacles.

**WOODS:** Well, a better argument than that immigrants tend to be people who are striving is they'll say that people who come to Britain or elsewhere are a self-selected group. It's the most brightest, the most talented, so let's not compare those to, let's say, some minority group or the underclass in the aggregate, where you've got people of all different abilities and skill levels.

**DALRYMPLE:** Yes, they would say that. But in fact, it doesn't really explain differences in the outcome between immigrant groups themselves. Because if you take Britain, for example, the Sikhs and Hindus have risen far faster and quicker and more successfully than the Muslims, who arrived at the same time with the same degree of wealth.

**WOODS:** All right, so then in that case, there has to be some other explanation. There has to be something. And again, it has to do with ideas, attitudes, and again, getting rid of these self-imposed, in some cases, inhibitions; these views that I can't do this or I can't advance in this way or this is not how I've learned to advance. I've learned from my own parents or my own parent or whatever, that the way to get ahead is not to try, in effect to be stuck in a cycle. It's not even like they reject the idea that I should maybe take a course online for free or take a book out of the library and see if I can improve myself. I don't think it's that they evaluate these ideas and reject them; it never occurs to them to entertain these ideas.

**DALRYMPLE:** Well, of course – but people like Polly Toynbee, with whom I was debating, are actually doing their very best to persuade them that they are right in not trying, because there's nothing they can do to help themselves. So if you have that attitude, of course you're going to remain more or less in the same place.

And the other thing of course that happens is that, thanks to the welfare state, which in some ways is a good thing, they don't actually have to worry about their subsistence. Their subsistence is guaranteed. They're never going to go without a house; they're not going to go without food. They will always have clothes. They won't have, of course, everything that they want, but nevertheless, there is no danger of starvation. There's no feeling that tomorrow there will not be enough to eat.

And one then has to say, what other purposes do they have? If they don't have any purpose about getting a bit further in life, if they don't have any culture or education, if they have no religion, if they have no political beliefs, what is left for them? And actually what is left for them is trying to extract some kind of entertainment or drama out of life. So I think that quite a large part of our social pathology is actually caused by the meaninglessness of lives of people in that situation. It is better for them to have some kind of drama, even though it's unpleasant drama, than just to vegetate with the not very glorious subsistence that they have.

**WOODS:** I should clarify, by the way, in case it requires clarification, that of course, we're not saying that somebody who endures a brief period of poverty or is experiencing financial difficulties, we're not saying these people are losers. We're talking about an identifiable group of people in the U.S. and in Britain and no doubt elsewhere; I'm sure in France and elsewhere – an identifiable group that exhibits the same, dreary pattern of self-destructive behaviors generation after generation. That's very different.

So we're not saying that if you just got out of college for two years, and you're having trouble landing a job, that this is because you've got all the wrong ideas or so on and

so forth. We're talking about a phenomenon that is really unique in history, that you would have a group like this that you can identify that exhibits these behaviors.

**DALRYMPLE:** Well, certainly, it's the first time in history in which they haven't lived in real poverty.

**WOODS:** Right.

**DALRYMPLE:** Incidentally, the idea of a welfare state originally – someone asked me not long ago about the Beveridge Report, and that was a report which suggested that the welfare state should be extended; it was a report in Britain during the Second World War.

And when you look at that report, the idea was that people who temporarily fell on hard times through no fault of their own; it's not an individual problem that the rate of unemployment goes up or it goes down, you know. That is not attributable necessarily – and in fact, certainly not – to individual fault. That those people who fall into difficulty should be given assistance, so that they do not have to live in the most wretched and miserable poverty. They should not be cold; they should not be hungry; they should not fail to have a roof over their head and so on and so forth.

But the idea was to give those people a helping hand until such time as they could stand on their own feet. It was not envisaged that up to 20% of the population should be permanently dependent on subventions. And in fact, now the number of people who receive subventions in our society has, well in Britain, has reached almost 50%. And that was not the original idea of the welfare state, as conceived by William Beveridge back in 1944.

**WOODS:** Isn't it interesting, though, that there seems to be such a dreary pattern of programs that weren't conceived to turn out a particular way, but doggone it, they sure did over time. You would think we would draw some kind of political lesson about this or be, perhaps, more skeptical in the future. I'm not altogether convinced that that lesson is being learned, particularly in the United States, where now the most fashionable political figure who's running for president is Bernie Sanders, who wants the most retrograde socialist policies that have been advocated by anyone in the U.S. for the past half century.

So anyway, it's very frustrating. I sometimes think that being an economist in particular, although neither one of us is a professional economist, must be one of the most depressing jobs, because you're lying there on your deathbed, and people are repeating the same fallacies you spent your whole life trying to explode. But we carry forward anyway for the good of mankind.

I appreciate your time today. I will link to – [TomWoods.com/433](http://TomWoods.com/433), that's the show notes page – I will link to *Life at the Bottom* and your other books and ways people can read what you've written. Any parting thoughts for my mostly American audience?

**DALRYMPLE:** Well, I'm slightly more optimistic for the future of America than I am for Britain or maybe even France, although France is better than Britain in many respects.

**WOODS:** Oh that would be an interesting topic for a show as well, but I have trespassed on your time quite enough already. Theodore Dalrymple, thanks so much for being with us today.

**DALRYMPLE:** Thank you very much.