

ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS AND ENGLISH “ECCENTRICITY”

Watching the English

The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour

Kate Fox

London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2004; U.S. paperback ed., 2008

Reviewed by Edward Dutton

Kate Fox's *Watching the English* (now re-issued in paperback) is an incredibly interesting piece of social anthropology. But the author doesn't seem to have made up her mind about what kind of book she wants it to be, or even what kind author she wants to be. Thus she also manages substantially to undermine our ability to take it seriously and see it as anything more than a Christmas stocking-filler for humanities majors. That said, I should stress that *Watching the English* is definitely worth reading.

Social anthropology still tends to be dominated by scholars from countries such as the United States and England, and this has generally meant that, while various tribes – and even small nations including Scotland – are examined in depth, this has not often been so in relation to traditionally dominant cultures such as the English.

Fox makes a trenchant point when she writes on the first page that, “We are constantly being told that the English have lost their national identity – that there is no such thing as Englishness” (p. 1). She however insists that there are “rules that define our national identity and character” (p. 2) and sets out to discover what they are. In doing so, Fox doubtless makes an important contribution to anthropology – and to the public understanding of anthropology, because of this book's popular and highly personal tone.

THE GRAMMAR OF ENGLISHNESS

For this reviewer, as an Englishman, it is both intensely thought-provoking yet hilarious to be forced to stand outside the culture with which one has been inculcated and observe what Fox calls its

“grammar.”

In the first chapter, Fox introduces social anthropology—and the participant observation method—to what she calls the “intelligent layman” (p. 8). She wittily dismisses the Post-Modern critique of anthropology—religiously engaged in by so many anthropology doctoral students—by summarizing what this section of the Ph.D. thesis really is: a disingenuous attempt to deflect criticism by people who all basically think that Post-Modernism is nonsense. She successfully defends herself against the criticism that globalization makes the study of nationalism irrelevant and persuasively defends her ability to talk about culture, class, and race.

This book could have so easily been very politically correct. Like some recent works of popular scholarship about the English, it could have unquestioningly promoted the idea that recent immigrants are also English. To her credit, Fox is unimpeachably logical here. She argues that immigration has obviously affected English culture, and “Any snapshot of English behaviour . . . will inevitably be coloured by this influence” (p. 17). She also observes that ethnic minorities can be English in a certain sense, claiming that some are “more English than others” if they choose to behave in ways that the English regard as “typically English” (p. 18). Fox also counters the knee-jerk reaction that any analysis of a complex culture is about “stereotypes” by arguing that these always have truth in them, and she intends not to “go beyond” the stereotypes but to “get inside” them.

The body of the book involves in-depth examinations—based on interviewing both English people and foreigners in England—about various aspects of English culture. We are told about the use of “the Weather” by the English as a means of “simple greeting” as in, “Cold, isn’t it?”—or as a silence-filler in an awkward conversation. Fox notes the “reciprocity rule”—that you must agree with your interlocutor’s interpretation of the weather. She examines “grooming talk,” observing the way that the English regard it as a rude for somebody to directly ask their job, where they come from, or even their name. This may reflect England’s obsession with social class and a complex social guessing game has to be engaged in (p. 44), though this differs between classes.

Fox also examines the English sense of humor. She emphasizes that the English, in contrast to Americans, insist on the “importance of not being earnest,” i.e., a constant need for comical self-deprecation—as in

a brain surgeon saying he's basically a kind of plumber—comical understatement, and general wryness, as in asking an English person, "Is this the right train for London" and receiving the response, "I certainly hope so, or I'm in trouble!"

"PARDONIA"

Especially interesting is Fox's examination of "Linguistic Class Codes." Again, this is something that every English reader would unconsciously know but would never have seen logically structured in this way. Fox points out that social class in England is not a matter of merit. It is not judged by money or profession but by heredity, thus it relates to the kinds of words that you learned from your parents and peers.

For example, Fox finds that—other than through accent, which she also examines in depth—a fairly accurate way to judge an English person's class is by saying something too quietly for him to hear it. If he says "Pardon?" then he is either lower middle or middle middle class and inhabits what is sneeringly called "Pardonia." If he says, "Sorry?" he is upper middle, but if he answers, "What?" then he is either upper class *or* working class . . . you can judge which by the accent.

She lists numerous other words that clearly indicate your social background, no matter what position you have in society, such as whether you say "bog," "toilet," "loo," or "lavatory" (the English do not euphemize by saying "restroom" or "bathroom," and Fox sees these Americanisms, if used by the English, as lower middle). Indeed, for many English people, your position in society is judged by language and accent, and that's that.

Fox produces a detailed examination of the English "pub rules" arguing that the "normal rules" are suspended and, at the bar, you can talk to anyone you wish. She also examines the importance of queuing in England and the "invisible queue rule" at the bar as well as the sacrosanct social importance of always drinking in "rounds" paid for by one person in the group.

Fox dissects numerous other dimensions, such as Rites of Passage, where she demonstrates that the English are not very religious and use the Church of England as a default. She dissects the dynamics of drinking very heavily in most English Rites of Passage and the creation of Rites of Passage as an excuse to drink heavily—which is necessary in a culture which sees alcohol as a kind of separate universe, as many

northern peoples do.

I was especially interested in her idea of the “Brag Wall.” Apparently, the English show off with a “brag wall” where there might be photos of them with a celebrity or a framed degree certificate. In middle-class homes, this is in the hall where guests will see it at once. In upper-class homes, it is in “the downstairs loo.” This is a clever way of showing off but doing so subtly and, as Fox puts it, “taking the piss” out of the achievement.

Equally fascinating is her observation of the “ironic gnome rule.” A working-class person will have a garden gnome (or other “working-class” item) because he genuinely likes it. An upper middle-class person might have one “to be ironic” and disparage working-class tastes. However, he would be unlikely to “ironically” do anything “middle class” for fear of being seen as a member of that class. By contrast, an upper-class person—secure in his status—would have the gnome because he genuinely likes gnomes. It’s an upper-class “eccentricity,” and he wouldn’t care what people thought about it.

TOO MANY JOKES

This book is certainly intriguing, and this reviewer read it from cover to cover without a break, but, that said, the author does herself no favors in a number of respects. This could have been an insightful work of social anthropology which we could take seriously. But for whatever reason—presumably financial—Fox chose to present it as a popular work. This would not necessarily have damaged its credibility. But she insists on making jokes and highly personal asides to such an extent that it becomes difficult to take the work seriously at all.

Fox constantly emphasizes—quite irrelevantly—her own academic credentials, the think tank that she works for, and her various academic connections. She uses footnotes to show her awareness of literature in the style of an academic work. She stresses that the research for this popular book has taken ten years. Yet she cannot help but make flippant remark after flippant remark. With regard to the nature-nurture debate she says, “I’ll wimp out of this one.” In relation to an article of hers that she cites, she emphasizes, “it’s a lot less pompous than the title makes it sound” (p. 86). She even titles one methodological section “Boring but Important.” She is always at pains to let the reader know how thoroughly “cool” she is. She smokes, she likes a drink—even at times that the some English might frown

upon! – “It’s only half past eleven in the morning, a bit early for drinking but the alcohol is part reward, part Dutch courage” (p. 1). This constant and sometimes patronizing humor makes *Watching the English* at once fascinating and frustrating. She simply goes too far in her desire to be cool and funny. It might be argued that this reflects an English difficulty with being “serious.” However, Fox observes that in English culture “the book” is another social universe where you can be as earnest or serious as you like.

AN ENGLISH MARGARET MEAD?

The credibility of the book is also damaged by its highly personal nature. Who is writing this book? Sometimes it’s a serious anthropologist. Sometimes it’s a late middle-aged, eccentric lady-of-the-mansion who is a bit naughty. (Fox is simply desperate to convey this charming “English eccentricity” – and femininity.) Fox notes that she chose to study the English not because they are “intrinsically interesting” but because, “I have a rather wimpish aversion to the dirt, dysentery, killer insects, ghastly food and primitive sanitation that characterise the mud hut tribal societies . . .” (p. 5). She has an “irrational preference for cultures with indoor plumbing.” She can’t seem to make up her mind which of these personas she really is, and the latter comes across a tad boastful – and therefore “un-English” – going into detail about what a fantastically observant person she thinks she is. Perhaps she wishes to be some sort of anthropological guru; an English Margaret Mead.¹

CLASS STRUGGLE

It seems quite evident that Fox is very keen for readers to realize that she is definitely “upper middle class.” She goes into detail about how upper middle-class people would convey themselves as such and then does precisely this. She uses almost stereotypical upper middle-class language which would make a lot of English people just laugh at her. She claims that she was a “dreadful little prig” when she lived in

¹ Margaret Mead also disliked mucking in with tribes, though unlike Fox she was actually supposed to be “participant observing” one. As such, her 1920s research into Samoa was eventually discredited. It may not have been, had she actually lived with the tribe rather than in the comfort of a U.S. Naval Base on Samoa. See Derek Freeman, *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

America as a child and uses words like “ghastly.” She marks the language of the upper middle class—as distinct from the middle class, which is the standard language in the UK—and insistently uses their language, talking about “loo,” “napkin,” and so forth. She refers to the “Winnie the Pooh” books as if everybody reads them when surely they are mainly read by upper middle-class children in the UK. She confuses upper middle-class culture with English culture. I wonder if this is an attempt to come across as effortlessly upper middle class.

She also appears desperate to emphasize her social status following the English hereditary model. She stresses again and again that her father “Robin Fox” is a very important anthropologist, and she cites him quite a lot. She is not, therefore, a working-class girl come good. She is genuine “upper middle class.” We, of course, have to know about her sister, who lives in Lebanon and with whom she goes to stay, and her rather successful fiancée called “Henry” (a typical upper middle-class or upper-class name). Indeed, the very fact that she has this need to boast at all would, by her own observations, make her upper middle class rather than upper class.

I don’t mean to be personally insulting, but this book would make fascinating reading for a psychologist. It is so highly personal and says so much about the character of its writer. But why must the reader wade through all this upper middle-class angst and identity construction to find the—actually rather interesting—research? Why publish ten years of—I assume—meticulous research in such an ostentatiously personal and popular form? Some anthropologists might like to be able to cite this research but might shy away from so doing, fearful of being criticized for relying on too “popular” a work.

Indeed, in some areas even the “scholarship” is illogical. Fox wonders whether she can “summon sufficient detachment” to study her own culture. She argues that she can for all kinds of facile reasons such as her father “training me for this role since I was a baby” (p. 6). A far more persuasive reason is that Fox has lived for long periods abroad and is therefore presumably more able to respond to her culture from an outsider perspective, having been detached from it. Anthropologists generally agree that the essence of their science is to be confronted with the “other” such that one is forced to question the structure and presuppositions of the “other” society and, indeed, one’s own. In general, I think, analysis by an outsider would therefore be easier, but analysis by a detached insider could also be useful.

Though actually to say that would presumably be too “serious” for Fox.²

Fox’s lazy tendency to confuse upper middle-class Englishness with Englishness as such also makes me wonder about her sample. She observes—for example—that there is a national English ritual of listening to “the Shipping Forecast” on Radio 4.³ But, in general, only middle-class people (and upwards) listen to Radio 4, and, in my experience at least, I have only met one person who also listened to the Shipping Forecast—despite not being a sea-captain—and this was an amazingly eccentric university lecturer.

Fox does indeed “wimp out” of the nature-nurture debate which is a shame because there has been some research—published since this book came out, it should be said—which has suggested that the famous English “sense of humor” may actually be a genetic issue.⁴ Moreover, her insistence on constantly writing about the English in the first person plural is interesting—because it’s normally “we British” in the English media—but it also makes the work seem less objective and detached. However, the book would seem to indicate that this doesn’t especially bother this “popular anthropologist.”

Despite my criticisms, I recommend this book. It is certainly a very original analysis of English culture. Fox’s constant flippancy and patronizing tone may be distracting, but in many ways, her anxious attempts to convey an affected upper middle-class identity make it all the more enjoyable.

*Dr. Edward Dutton has a Ph.D. in Social Anthropology. His book **Meeting Jesus at University: Rites of Passage and Student Evangelicals** is soon to be published by Ashgate.*

² See for example Katy Gardner and David Lewis, *Anthropology and the Post-modern Challenge* (London: Pluto, 1996).

³ This long-established forecast informs British mariners about weather conditions at sea. It has gained some popularity as a piece of English eccentricity.

⁴ Andy Bloxham, “British humour ‘dictated by genes’,” *The Daily Telegraph*, 10 March 2008.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2008/03/10/nhumour110.xml>