

‘On Paradise Drive’: Sociology or Shtick?

By Michael Kinsley

ON PARADISE DRIVE

How We Live Now (and Always Have) in the Future Tense.

By David Brooks.

304 pp. New York: Simon & Schuster. \$25.

For several years, in the world of political journalism, David Brooks has been every liberal’s favorite conservative. This is not just because he throws us a bone of agreement every now and then. Even the most poisonous propagandist (i.e., Bill O’Reilly) knows that trick. Brooks goes farther. In his writing and on television, he actually seems reasonable. More than that, he seems cuddly. He gives the impression of being open to persuasion. Like the elderly Jewish lady who thinks someone must be Jewish because “he’s so nice,” liberals suspect that a writer as amiable as Brooks must be a liberal at heart. Some conservatives think so too.

There is a prize for being the liberals’ favorite conservative, and Brooks has claimed it: a column in The New York Times. With Brooks, The Times continues its probably unintentional experiment in reinventing the political column. First came Frank Rich, who added culture, high and low, to the traditional tired stew of Washington concerns. Maureen Dowd added psychiatry—trying to understand politicians as real people, usually not to their advantage. Thomas Friedman added parables, circling the globe in search of small but sturdy anecdotes to support huge structures of metaphor.

Brooks adds social anthropology. His distinctive combination of wisdom and wisecracks, now available to readers of this newspaper, was perfected in his previous book, “Bobos in Paradise,” a funny examination of the 1960’s generation as it negotiates the twin perils of aging and prosperity. His new book, “On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (and Always Have) in the Future Tense,” applies the Brooks technique to the whole darn country. He starts by slicing and dicing the American population into categories and subcategories, each with its own values and habits and sartorial preferences. Then he turns around and puts us all back together again, reinterpreting his previous examples of our differences as evidence of our essential similarity. It’s a bravura performance and always entertaining, if not always convincing.

The Brooks sociological method has four components: fearless generalizing, clever coinage, jokes and shopping lists. In the April issue of Philadelphia Magazine, the journalist Sasha Issenberg nailed Brooks, a local boy, pretty hard on some of his generalizations. Checking out the assertions in a couple of magazine articles that were partly incorporated into this book, Issenberg reported that, contrary to Brooks, people in blue states (those that went Democratic in 2000) don’t read more books than people in red (Republican) states. Nor do reds buy more items on QVC. “When it comes to yardwork,” Brooks had written, “they have rider mowers; we have illegal aliens.” Part of Brooks’s charm is that he often includes himself (disingenuously, but that makes the gesture even grander) in groups he is mocking. But Issenberg reports that red states tend to have more illegal aliens than blue ones.

Brooks defends his generalizations as poetic hyperbole and got disappointingly pompous with Issenberg, according to him, when confronted with their inaccuracy. But this won’t do. When he says that a store in a suburban mall is “barely visible because of the curvature of the earth,” that is poetic hyperbole. When he claims that it is impossible to spend more than \$20 for dinner in a Red Lobster, that is just wrong, and mystifyingly so. As Issenberg points out, these little factoids are credibility crutches. They are the difference between sociology and shtick. America’s cities needn’t actually be full of “African

bistros where El Salvadoran servers wearing Palestinian kaffiyehs serve Virginia Woolf wannabes Slovakian beer” in order to justify this typical Brooks formulation. But there ought to be one Salvadoran server somewhere who routinely wears a kaffiyeh—and I wonder if there is one.

At the very least, Brooks does not let the sociology get in the way of the shtick, and he wields a mean shoehorn when he needs the theory to fit the joke. Among some of the formerly young, “the energy that once went into sex and raving now goes into salads.” o.k., that’s funny. So is essentially the same joke a few pages later, when Brooks writes that “bathroom tile is their cocaine.” Except that now he’s referring to a different one of his demographic slices, which undermines the claim to sociology. And when another joke surfaces three times, it undermines the shtick as well. The “16-foot refrigerators with the through-the-door goat cheese and guacamole delivery systems”? Ha ha. A large Home Depot salesman “looking like an s.u.v. in human form”? Ha ha ha. s.u.v.’s “so big they look like the Louisiana Superdome on wheels”? Enough already.

“In America, it is acceptable to cut off any driver in a vehicle that costs a third more than yours. That’s called democracy.” True? Funny? Wouldn’t the joke work just as well the other way? “. . . a third less than yours. That’s called capitalism.” And if it works both ways as a joke, it must not work at all as a sociological insight.

In his fondness for coining phrases and his show-off use of commercial brand names as shorthand for demographic nuances, Brooks clearly takes after the country’s greatest living conservative social observer, Tom Wolfe. Like the factoid bubbles so skillfully burst in Philadelphia Magazine, the brand names are there as evidence that you’re not talking through your hat. So the nuances had better be right. As far as I know, most of Brooks’s are. As far as I know is not very far in some shopping areas. I must take his word about Corian countertops. But in the case of Trader Joe’s, to which Brooks devotes a multipage riff, I feel more at home. And Brooks has failed to solve the mystery of this appealing but hard-to-define California-based food chain.

The term “Bobos” (short for “bourgeois bohemians”) almost joined Tom Wolfe classics like “the right stuff” and “radical chic” in the Coinage Hall of Fame. The test of a successful coinage (I state with Brooksian bluff-authority) is whether many people use the term without knowing where it came from. If “Bobos” ultimately fell short, keep in mind that the challenge was daunting. It would have had to displace a beloved and long-established incumbent—“yuppies”—describing roughly the same phenomenon. The near miss must have hurt. In his new book, Brooks flings coinage after coinage up against the zeitgeist, hoping that one will stick. Among the more promising contenders are the “crunchy zone” (one of his suburban slices), the “meatloaf line” (between distant suburbs, where they allegedly don’t eat meatloaf, and real rural America, where they do), “Patio Man” (from an already famous Brooksian epic about purchasing a barbecue at Home Depot) and “conquest shopping” (from the same saga).

When he turns from the task of subdividing Americans to the task of stitching us back together, Brooks becomes as incomprehensible as the subtitle of this book. (What does it mean to “live in the future tense”?) Near as I can tell, Brooks’s argument is a variation on the famous Turner thesis. The historian Frederick Jackson Turner wrote in 1893, just as America’s western expansion was more or less complete, that the empty West had served as the country’s defining fact and safety valve. The ever-present possibility of picking up and moving west had made Americans free and equal, and had spared us the conflicts of class and nation that infected the Old World of Europe.

Brooks’s thesis—to give it more clarity than he does, at the risk of getting it wrong—seems to be that the suburbs and exurbs play a similar role in 21st-century America. Although sometimes he seems to be saying that the “move on” energy of Americans comes from technology like the Internet, or is more spiritual than geographical or material anyway. In any event, our defining—and uniting—characteristics as Americans, according to Brooks, are that we’d rather leave than fight, and we’re always thinking

about the future instead of dwelling on the past. That means the enormous gulfs in values, aspirations, understanding of the world and food preferences he outlines so wittily in the first part of “On Paradise Drive” don’t turn Americans against one another (as they would the folks of some clotted and backward Old World nation). We all prosper in our various cultural cul-de-sacs (or as Brooks puts it, much better: “Everybody can be an aristocrat within his own Olympus”), and we don’t trouble ourselves about what the folks in the next cul-de-sac might be up to. No skin off our backs.

The Brooks thesis, if I’ve got it right, is a lovely, sweet thesis, as genial as the author himself. But a better answer to the question of why, if Americans are so diverse, we get along so much better than those foreigners, might be, “What in the world are you talking about?” It certainly is not obvious that the spirit of live-and-let-live is stronger in America than elsewhere. The citizens of other countries at our economic level, like those in the old nations of Europe, seem generally better than we are, not worse, at not rubbing one another raw. Maybe that is because they know they will be rubbing up against one another in any case.

Brooks almost makes this point himself a while later: “America is not only the nation where you can get a supersize tub of French fries to go with our 32-ounce double cheeseburger, it is also just about the only nation where people blow up abortion clinics.” But this comes while he is riffing about Americans’ inclination toward excess, rather than our mystical ability to get along. So that’s different.

Brooks has a wise and funny few pages turning the familiar golf concept of “par” into a universal suburban state of grace:

“Your DVD collection is organized, and so is your walk-in closet. Your car is clean and vacuumed, your frequently dialed numbers are programmed into your cordless phone, your telephone plan is suited to your needs, and your various gizmos interact without conflict. Your spouse is athletic, your kids are bright, your job is rewarding, your promotions are inevitable, everywhere you need to be comes with its own accessible parking. You look great in casual slacks.”

Unfortunately, he couldn’t resist doing practically the same clever thing with a remark from the autobiography of Ray Kroc, the founder of McDonald’s, about the importance of French fries. Brooks conjures up a mystical concept called “Fry!,” defined roughly as monomania about some business goal, preferably one that seems shallow or pointless in the larger scheme of things. This he also presents as a spiritual state of grace, and he credits the business executives who religiously “Follow Your Fry!” with America’s economic success.

These riffs will not win prizes for internal consistency. In the Fry! discussion, there are detours into the culture of frequent flier points and the obsession with upgrades, among other topics. These are hilarious, but Brooks seems to forget his premise that Fry! is about monomania. That hardly matters if he’s not trying to be serious. But he is trying to be serious, at least sometimes. He says he wants to rescue American civilization from the charge that it is shallow, and his main argument against that charge is that seemingly shallow behavior like shopping for the perfect barbecue or marketing the perfect French fry is actually a deeply spiritual quest, on a continuum with those of the Pilgrims arriving from the east and the pioneers heading west. We’re certainly not going to buy that notion if the author himself can be distracted from it whenever the possibility of a good joke floats by.

“Is he serious?” is an interesting question about David Brooks. But a more important question, for Brooks himself and for all of humanity (now that he is a Times columnist), is “Is he conservative?” Although Brooks’s mockery is genial rather than sneery and distancing like Tom Wolfe’s, there is no doubt that if a professed liberal New York Times columnist, say Paul Krugman, were to describe the products and culture of capitalism the way Brooks does, his lines would be cited and denounced on every right-wing radio talk show.

When he ridicules consumer appetites, Brooks is safely within the permissible, rueful conservative critique of capitalism's "contradictions." When he writes of the "tediousness of pod after pod of the highway-side office parks" and the "sheer existential nothingness of an office-park lobby," he sounds quaintly like the cultural critics of American capitalism in the 1950's and 60's. But when he declares that hard-working business executives are living their "whole lives" in a furrow—"in that furrow, your personality becomes a mere selling device. Friendships become contacts. The urge to improve deteriorates to mere acquisitiveness. Money becomes the measure of accomplishment"—well, frankly, that sounds more than a bit like Karl Marx, doesn't it?

And it gets even worse. In an uncharacteristically heavy-handed passage, Brooks imagines an effete French intellectual confronting a straightforward, honest, rough-hewn Nevada trucker. Boy, does that Frog learn a thing or two. Brooks's complaint is not that the French hate Americans, but that they love us for the wrong reasons:

"Our eager openness to everything, our capacity for mindless fun. . . . The convertible nation, ripping off our tube tops, yipping like banshees as we cruise down the freeway from cineplex to surf shop. How charming! How wild! How seductive the Americans are, with all their careless money and ingenuous vitality!"

Brooks calls this a "pro-American insult," but it is alarmingly close to his own pro-American critique. And when he goes on to imagine his French intellectual "posing like a great Gallic hunter" next to a "bon mot he has bagged on the American desert," the appalling truth becomes unavoidable.

David Brooks is not merely a liberal. He's French.

J'accuse.

Michael Kinsley, the founding editor of Slate, will become the editorial and opinion editor of The Los Angeles Times next month.