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American Weirdness: Observations From an Expat

The disorientation of coming home and buying toothpaste

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ADAM HALE

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Sometimes it begins with the toothpaste. Whenever I go back to the United States from Europe, where I've lived for more than half my adult life, I'll often find myself in a jet-lagged fog at a huge American drugstore staring at the toothpaste aisle. Why? I ask myself, or anyone who's around. Why are there so many kinds of toothpaste? Whitening, baking soda, clean mint, fresh mint, gel, paste, swirls of gel and paste, kids' toothpastes, sensitive-teeth toothpaste. Why?

It's not that there isn't a variety of toothpaste in Paris, where I live. France is a developed country with a market economy—well, mostly a market economy—and its own large supermarket chains. But there's

something about the toothpaste aisles of the United States that I always find jarring, and that I find emblematic of America's over-the-topness: the dozens of varieties of everything—everything!—when fewer varieties might suffice. New York City may be the logical extreme of this. Is there any other city in any other country on Earth that's so accustomed to shopping for anything at any hour of the day (and I mean in stores, not online)?

[*The bad American habits I kicked in Finland*]

Of course, other things leap out, too, on first impact back in New York: glacial air conditioning; cars that seem as big as studio apartments; chirpy customer service—any customer service; cheese that's not so much cheese as oil poured into plastic; Amtrak, a national train service roughly twice as expensive and twice as slow as that of any self-respecting (albeit debt-ridden) European country. And then there are the significant social differences: gay people being super out and proud; people of color, and women, in positions of actual authority.

Landing from Europe in New York, where I lived for years and which remains a spiritual home, I always feel acutely how long I've been away. It takes days to adjust. So loud! So fast! So much energy! Why did an iced coffee and avocado toast (I know, playing to type here ...) just set me back \$17? Wait, *what happened* to the subway? Every visit back begins with a triple whammy: jet lag, sticker shock, and status anxiety. Since I left, the real-estate prices in New York have soared exponentially. (The salaries have not.) Everyone seems so driven, propelling themselves ever forward by force of will and ambition and grit and impatience, reinventing themselves, measuring themselves up against one another in ways you rarely see in Europe, or at least in continental Europe, where ambitions seem more circumscribed (or barriers to entry higher), even as state support makes a middle-class existence easier than it has become in America's leading cities.

[*Why Europe's trains are so much better than America's*]

But the biggest adjustment is one that's harder to describe: It has to do with time. Time spent talking at meals. Time in the morning. Appointments in France (and Italy, where I lived for years) are rarely before 9 a.m., more likely after 10 a.m. Power breakfast is not a thing. In Greece and Spain, lunch is well after 2 p.m., afternoon coffee sometimes around 7 p.m., and dinner even later. On a reporting trip to Moscow a few years ago, many of my appointments seemed to come through after 10 p.m. and emails would arrive in the middle of the night. Americans are more likely to be early risers, and have been power breakfasting for centuries. In the marvelous letters he sent home while researching *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville was shocked by this. "We were quite surprised at first to see women appearing at the breakfast table with faces carefully made up for the day. We are told that this is customary in all private houses. Paying visits to a lady at nine in the morning is not thought improper," Tocqueville wrote home to his mother from New York in 1831.

He was also struck by American eating habits. "At first we found the absence of wine from meals a serious deprivation, and we are still baffled by the sheer quantity of food that people somehow stuff down their gullets. Besides breakfast, dinner, and tea, with which Americans eat ham, they have very copious suppers and often a snack. So far, this is the only respect in which I do not challenge their superiority; they, on the other hand, reckon themselves superior in many ways. People here seem to reek of national pride. It seeps through their politeness."

[How did work-life balance in the U.S. get so awful?]

I moved to Europe a decade ago this month, a few weeks before Lehman Brothers collapsed and the financial crisis hit. Many things have happened since then. Being an American abroad feels different now, under this administration, than it did under President Obama. That's another story. For me, living away from home has become

home, as much as *home home* is home. There are many things I love about living in Paris—the vast expanse of sky, the functional metro, warm baguettes with *demi-sel* butter, unlimited cinema movies for €19.50 a month, conversations not dominated by Trump.

Still, I often miss being surrounded by the American enterprising spirit, a spirit I hope I'll never shake. Occasionally, I'll have hankerings for tastes from my childhood: corn on the cob; blueberries; Junior Mints; Thanksgiving stuffing. Everyone living in a new context has moments like this.

But this, too, has changed over the years. American foods, especially junk foods, have been creeping into Europe for years. You can buy American candy at the supermarket in Paris. And peanut butter. Nothing is supersized—yet. But if and when that happens, I wonder, will the toothpaste selection grow, too? And if so, will that make it harder for Americans to be homesick abroad, or easier for locals to be homesick at home?

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