

A Northerner Ventures South

by **Anjali Davidson**, a first-year sociology undergraduate at the LSE.



The Northern society recently held a pub quiz, and I attended as one of the markers. As I sat with the committee and the answer sheets, during the quiz a female member of the committee was asked why she had joined the Northern Society by a lad with a decidedly Southern accent. She simply answered “because I’m Northern.” I noticed that her own accent was relatively neutral and couldn’t place it —the only hint of a northern accent was the bluntness in the way she pronounced the letter ‘a’ without the silent ‘r’ afterwards, like saying ‘grass’ rather than ‘grarss’. I went away and thought about this, it intrigued me. I classify myself as Northern especially being in London and at the LSE through my accent. My brother and I, both moved away from our beloved city of Manchester to study, and we both seem to have picked up some insecurities about our accents, and while his became exaggerated, I fear I may be losing some pronunciations to the Southerners. It was refreshing to hear someone identifying as Northern by something other than their accent, and while my occasional use of the word ‘owt’ or the way I swear (the f word has a ‘u’ in it, not an ‘a’) might garner a few laughs from Londoners, though it does refresh my confidence in my accent, it also refreshes my confidence that the Northern identity is so much more than accent.



Source: Twitter @80snostalgia

My brother lived here for a year. He came back for his graduation a few months after I moved down, and I realised he can’t walk around London without getting angry. As we walked towards the

tube station, dodging umbrellas and unintentional shoulder barges from people blinded by the light from their phones, he would shout “heads up Londoners-try and actually look where you’re walking”. Of course I thought this was hilarious, especially watching their fear as a stranger tried to talk to them, and while I saw what he was getting at, like some of the people he was trying to communicate with I couldn’t help but wonder if it might be a bit much. I’ve laughed with friends about the culture gap between the North and the South (particularly London) but it wasn’t until I went back to Manchester in the reading week that I really understood it. In Manchester, I could hold conversations with strangers in the lift rather than staring grimly at the floor while we all pretend we’re on our own. Smiling at people you make eye contact with in the street should be a normal thing, but in London a lot of times people look away (if they manage to look up to your eye level in the first place). Waving at strangers with whom you just had a minor interaction if you see them again is a given back home, while I can hardly hold eye contact with someone who just smacked a door in my face in London. Everything felt so much more familiar, which is to be expected, but it also felt friendlier.

I don’t live near the LSE, so it still surprises me every day when I come here to be surrounded by looming Edwardian and Victorian buildings; the huge windows and how regal it all feels. I get the tube too, and though there are always a range of people trundling through the station, the number of suits feels somewhat intimidating (especially when combined with a hoity toity accent). That’s why I think I needed the Northern society. The very nature of LSE, from the fact that the first class I ever had was opposite the Australian embassy, to the hordes of Economics students in suits; to the students who live in a hall that has a swimming pool and a deli in it, I find intimidating. It’s nice, in this sea of global strangers—some of whom belong to the hoi, and some others to the polloi, to quote Matt Berry— it’s nice to find some comfort in a commonly held aspect of our identity. It’s nice to be surrounded by people who are equally surprised when a question containing the key phrases “post-punk band” and “Macclesfield” doesn’t get answered immediately with Joy Division—what other post-punk bands from Macclesfield are there? But it’s also nice to get a reminder of how we were brought up to behave. The London attitude is insidious. I don’t talk to people on the tube very often, and it does annoy me when people get on the tube before they let others off, while I too would only let them know passive-aggressively, when at the end of the day I’m only delayed by a fraction of a second (at that).

It’s much easier just to keep your head down and your mouth shut as you glide, quietly, through the swathes of the silent masses, but I also find it soul-destroying. Sometimes it’s nice to remember that we can interact normally with complete strangers; to remember that we’re not aliens; to remember that we can smile at people in the street out of common courtesy. And sometimes we just need people to vent to when we get charged an extortionate £2.80 for a half-pint of flat, watered-down lager.

About the author: *Anjali is particularly interested in intersectionality and power disparities in the context of modernity.*

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