

Questions of identity

Ariel Wagner-Parker

Christmas Day was white this year and thus successful according to the aesthetic criteria sold to us with so much charm by Hollywood. And humans played the Christmas game as well, with our little village streets lit up like Las Vegas and fur-trimmed Santa Clauses, in Coca-Cola-red, climbing wittily up house-fronts all over Luxembourg.

Who cares that Santa has nothing to do with local Yule tradition or with our own home-grown „Kleeschen“.

In some gardens you can still see the pumpkins people were persuaded to purchase for Hallowe'en – a Celtic feast that sailed to the New World with the Pilgrim Fathers and has now returned to Old Europe in the containers of Corporate America.

Another alien „tradition“ has been foisted on us and it's doing us no good.

Our cultural traditions are meant to tell us something about who we are, about where we come from and thus where we're meant to be going. But an alien culture cannot do this. All it can tell us, if we have ears to hear, is the identity of our current „cultural“ Masters.

And it's not just our old traditions that are being replaced by shiny new ones. So many aspects of our everyday lives, from the trivial to the essential, have been made strange to us that we are in a real danger of losing our identity altogether.

We Europeans have been persuaded to adopt a Coca Cola and fast food culture that is fundamentally alien to us. And not just us of course: there are now over 30.000 McDonald's „restaurants“ in 121 countries worldwide, the busiest being the one in Moscow's Pushkin Square, planted like a victory flag in the heart of the vanquished Cold Warrior. We have learnt to behave and dress casually and kids who have no relation to baseball have been trained to wear baseball caps, back to front. Those who are in employment work all hours, Sundays included, rushing to the late-nite store to do their shopping when they can. We have learnt to watch television and unlearn how to concentrate for more than 15 minutes at a time.

Obviously it goes much further than the Americanization of externals. The real sea change has been in the nature of our political and social life. Before the transformation could come about, some of our deepest convictions had to be destroyed so as to create the vacuum

necessary for others to rush in and fill.

Our expectation of integrity and solidarity in public life, of mercy and the rule of law in the conduct of international affairs, our belief in the possibility of social progress – even of being listened to – have been weakened to the point where many people shrug their shoulders and retire into their personal concerns. Which is fine by our rulers.

Certain modes of conduct, unthinkable before, have become, if not acceptable, at least accepted: our political rulers lie and squirm and refuse to shoulder responsibility; directors calmly sack a few dozen employees, informing them (it beggars belief) by e-mail or SMS – not to save the company from bankruptcy but to keep up the level of shareholders' profits; incompetent managers walk away from the wreckage of public utilities as millionaires; police raid people's homes and pack them onto planes in the name of security.



„... A Coca-Cola and fast-food culture that is fundamentally alien to us“ – From Schott's Food and Drink Miscellany

We live in a society where ethics have been ousted by interest, whose mechanisms escape us and whose value-system is alien. Uncertain how we are meant to behave in this unfamiliar environment, we have become dependent. We now have to be told what is *correct* because we can no longer rely on our instincts to tell us what is *right*. We live in a permanent state of repression.

Inevitably, a vital weapon in the arsenal of the oppressors is the language we use and it is thus that the concept of

„political correctness“ was born. Political correctness is a term of abuse directed against a deliberate choice of words originally conceived as a tool of progress.

The idea was that to engineer social and political change you first had to reform language: a new phenomenon could not exist until the word for it did and conversely, you could not consign to oblivion certain obnoxious phenomena such as sexism, racism and colonialism if your vocabulary kept them alive. So you used the term „woman“ and not „girl“, because a woman is the lexical equal of a man whereas a girl is not; or Inuit, the people's term for themselves, instead of the colonial Eskimo. Equality in speech would prepare the terrain for equality in fact.

But the forces of reaction spotted the danger and fought back. They used ridicule, pouring scorn on the „politically correct“ language that was meant to change people's way of perceiving others. They did this by seizing on certain expressions, such as „physically challenged“ and laughing them into absurdity with jokey derivatives, like vertically challenged (short), follically challenged (balding) and the rest. First the expressions themselves were held up to ridicule and then, as a quite natural consequence, those who used them. Finally „politically correct“ became a term of abuse in itself and hostility to it – to its manufactured exaggerations – could easily be transferred to the progressive ideas themselves.

These days if you say „girl“ no one knows whether you are striking a blow against the dead hand of political correctness or just being reactionary. The social counterpart of this is the „girls“ who pose half-naked for advertisements and porn magazines „because they want to“, in order to demonstrate their freedom of choice.

The effect in both cases is of course the same: back to square one.

Back to square one... yes, but not quite. Things are different today from thirty years ago when it seemed possible to change the world. Not necessarily because our rulers are more ruthless or manipulative than then, but because they have invented a weapon so powerful none can resist it: they have redefined those who disagree with them as terrorists, prepared to maim and kill. They are thus free to practise zero tolerance against any opposition whatsoever in the hallowed – and oh how reasonable – name of security.

Amen.