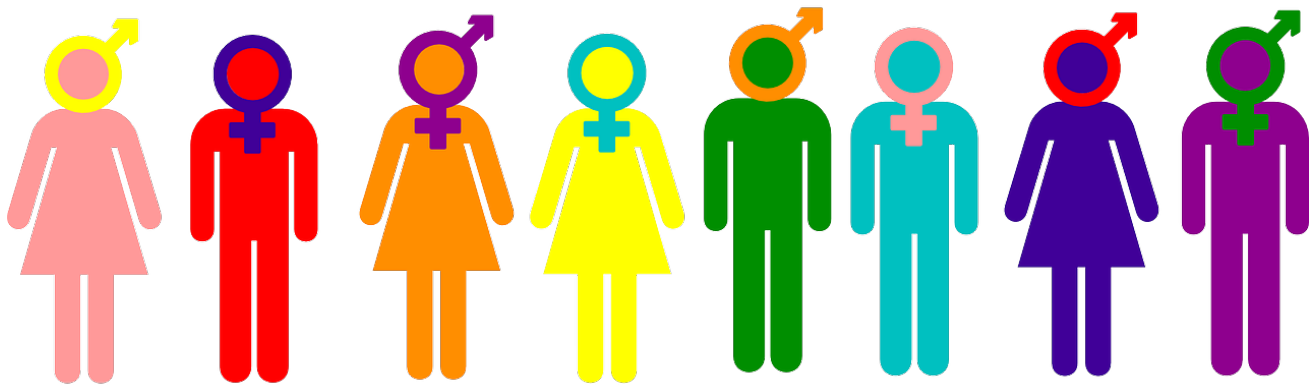


Bores and Bullies, Pursuing Conformity and Power

by Theodore Dalrymple



A page in the October 11, 2018 print edition of the *Guardian* newspaper tells us a great deal about the political and cultural state of Britain, and perhaps—since Britain is not unique—of much of the Western world. On the left side of page 7, a story is headed, “[Supreme Court Win for Bakery in Gay Marriage Cake Row](#)” and on the right side a story is headed, “Museum Backs Down after Outcry Over Use of ‘womxn’.”

The left-hand story is about bakers in Belfast, an evangelical Christian couple called Daniel and Amy McArthur, who refused to bake a cake for a homosexual with the words “Support Gay Marriage” written in icing on it. (Northern Ireland does not recognize or permit the marriage of homosexuals—yet, one might add, for such recognition and permission is coming as inevitably as showers in April or leaves shed in autumn.)

The man who ordered the cake, Gareth Lee, then sued the bakers, claiming that he had been illegally discriminated

against by their refusal. Initially, he won the case with a small settlement; but instead of taking the line of least resistance and paying it, the McArthurs took the risky and possibly ruinously expensive path of appeal, right up to the highest court in the land. They argued that they had not refused to bake the cake because Mr. Lee was a homosexual, but because they did not want to participate in propaganda for a cause in which they did not believe and which in effect was the opposite of what they believed.

The court accepted this argument and reversed the judgment. Under the British legal system, the loser in a civil action has usually to pay the winner's legal costs. In this case, the plaintiff, Mr. Lee, was supported by a publicly funded body, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, to the tune of \$330,000. This bill now falls on the public.

The second story concerned the decision of the Wellcome Institute in London, one of the largest medical charities in the world, to use the word "womxn" rather than "women" in a four-day event about women writers, supposedly on the grounds that the former spelling was more inclusive in so far as it did not exclude transsexuals. The institute received protests and then issued an [unctuous and cowardly apology](#) in grovelling bureaucratese:

We've had some questions about why we're using the word womxn for this event. We're using it because we feel that it is important to create a space/venue that includes diverse perspectives. It was agreed during our conversations with collaborators as the programme developed.

The institute said that it has been motivated by the desire to be more "inclusive." But:

We should have put more thought into whether this was the right terms to use communicating about the event. We made a mistake, and we should not have used it. We're sorry that we

made the wrong call.

It had evidently become less important, for reason not specified and probably not specifiable, "to create a space/venue that includes diverse perspectives."

These two stories illustrate something important about a lot of recent social agitation: its purpose is not to promote tangible improvement, such as a clean water supply or better public transport, but to exert power, often by a small minority over a large majority. It derives from a sadistic impulse to inflict pain on others in revenge for the agitator's existential discomfort; the pleasure is in forcing others to swallow their disagreement.

In the case of Mr. Lee, his desire to force the bakers to write what they did not want to write was a totalitarian one. If one went into a patisserie and asked for an éclair and were told that the patisserie did not make éclairs, one would simply try to find another that did. One would not go to law claiming bitter disappointment. Mr. Lee could easily have gone to another baker who would have baked him his cake; but no, he wanted to force the McArthurs to do what they did not want to do, to exercise power over them in a matter that was of importance to them. Mr. Lee might, in other respects, be a very nice man; but in this matter he behaved disgracefully, and the public authority that supported him, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (its very name Orwellian), was attempting likewise to increase its own power to dictate to citizens.

The case of the Wellcome Institute was slightly different but had what Ludwig Wittgenstein might have called "a family resemblance" to the other story. Unacknowledged in the Institute's initial decision was fear: fear of a tiny special interest group that thinks (not altogether without foundation) that it has society on the run. It enjoys the terror that it

exerts.

In its report on the case, the BBC website [quoted Dr. Clara Bradbury-Rance](#), an academic at King's College, London, the publisher of whose book, *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory*, has this (*inter alia*) to say about it:

Bradbury-Rance resists charting a narrative of representational progress or shoring up the lesbian's categorisation in the newly available terms of the visible. Instead, she argues for a feminist framework that can understand lesbianism's queerness. Drawing on a provocative theoretical and visual corpus, Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory reveals the conditions of lesbian legibility in the twenty-first century.

This is what counts as scholarship—publicly funded, of course—in our brave new world. And the author's reflections on the word "womxn," as reported by the BBC, were that the word "stems from a longstanding objection to the word woman as it comes from man, and the linguistic roots of the word mean that it really does come from the word man." The project is no less than to change the very way in which we speak, as the Russian communists and the Nazis attempted to do (with considerable success).

Of course, no one remarked on the irony of the condescending nature in the first place of a conference on women writers, which brings to mind Dr. Johnson's famous remark about women preaching: "Sir, a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hinder legs. It's not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all."

Is this the impression that the conference really wanted to give to the rest of the world about women who write?

By coincidence, happy or unhappy according to your point of view, the day following the publication of the two articles

cited above, the [Guardian reported the case of Karen White](#), a transsexual (male to female) prisoner who was still “transitioning,” who was imprisoned for stabbing a neighbor and who, while in a women’s prison, sexually assaulted women there. The prisoner then admitted to having committed two rapes outside prison and was sentenced to life imprisonment—in a male prison. But will he soon not be a woman and therefore entitled by inalienable right to serve a sentence in a women’s prison? After all, under British law, he can change the sex on his birth certificate and actually *be* a woman and *have always been* a woman.

G.K. Chesterton is reputed to have said that when people cease to believe in God, they will not believe in nothing, they will believe anything. Actually, what they will believe in is power as the highest good. In the process, they become bores and bullies.

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