

Get the Message?



by Theodore Dalrymple

Perhaps I am more sensitive to them than I once was, but it seems to me that hectoring and badgering semi-political public messages (mostly paid for at public expense, of course) are much more prominent than they used to be. This is a West-wide phenomenon, originating from the United States—because all other Western countries are far too brain-dead to resist the ideological siren song, or songs, of the technologically most advanced country in the world, however deleterious those songs might be. We are to be hectored into virtue, virtue being principally a matter of the opinions that we hold.

One sometimes has the impression that one will not be left alone until one really does love Big Brother—though who

exactly Big Brother is remains unclear. We seem to be undergoing, or at least are being subjected to, what the Chinese in the 1950s called thought reform.

If there is an ultimate purpose behind all this—how easily one becomes paranoid!—it is to render us dependent on an unseen power even for our own thoughts. First, we must be convinced that, left to ourselves, we are bad; second, that we are constantly in danger; and third, that there is a benevolent authority that will straighten out our mind and then keep us safe from all danger.

Going to the cinema in Paris recently, I collected some of the public messages that were either noticed en route or were hammered home in the cinema before the film I had gone to see.

The first, and probably the most startling, was a poster in the Métro immediately visible once I had gone down the steps into the station. “87% of women,” it said, “have already been victims of sexist or sexual harassment in public transport. Let’s raise our eyes against the aggressors.” On the poster was a histogram bar, 87 percent red (representing women who had been harassed) and 13 percent black (women who had not), to illustrate the point.

Next to it was another poster, a close-up of a young black woman’s face, with the following legend: “We are at your side in public transport. Find our guide against sexist and sexual violence. Everyone is equal.”

But who is the “we” who travels at our side in public transport? In the top left-hand corner of both posters was a little French flag, the white between the blue and the red in the profile of Marianne, with the single word GOVERNMENT in capitals. Thank you, government, for being at our side and protecting us from disobliging remarks! Alas, it seems that it cannot also protect us from mad, knife-wielding criminals who have already been convicted and are known to frequent jihadist

circles, it being too busy ensuring that men do not wolf-whistle at, or even compliment, women unknown to them.

No doubt it was very wrong of me, but my first question, when I saw the figure of 87 percent presented in this way, was "How and why did the other 13 percent of women on public transport escape sexual harassment or assault?" I will not destroy my reputation permanently by publishing the possible explanations that came immediately into my mind; but I presume the figure of 87 percent could have been reached only by subsuming gang rape and unwanted compliments on mode of dress under the same category; were this not so, the women who take the Métro generally behave with an astonishing degree of sangfroid or insouciance.

No sooner had I looked at these posters than some advice came over the public address system: At the first sign of nausea, vertigo, or any other symptom I should alight the train and alert staff, who would call medical assistance for me. It made it sound as if we, the passengers, were not going on the Ligne 3 to Réamur-Sébastopol or wherever, but into the Valley of the Shadow of Death. (Réamur-Sébastopol, incidentally, is a station particularly prone to be filled with the smell of the untreated schizophrenic who has taken neither his pills nor a bath for a long time.)

By the time I returned home after my visit to the cinema, I had been catechized on the environment, imminently to collapse; on the dangers of drugs (for example, that 25 percent of drivers in France responsible for deaths on the road had taken drugs, though we were not informed what percentage of drivers matched for age and other variables who had not been responsible for deaths on the road had taken such drugs, an important comparison if intellectual honesty were to be conserved; dangers to pregnant women and their babies of drinking too much; and on the wonders of mass immigration into France. I had also seen an advertisement for drink with the obligatory warning that drinking too much is bad for your

health, as if many people could be found who did not know it and who, on reading this warning, would amend their ways.

After having absorbed all these messages, I got into the carriage with a message of another kind painted on its side: Fuck the police. The carriage was quite crowded, and I saw a space farther up from where I got on where there were still seats. But when I reached it, I realized why the space persisted while many people were standing. Across the seats was sprawled a smelly snoring drunk, with a half-empty can of the kind of beer that only alcoholics drink rolling around the floor beside him and making a sticky mess.

Perhaps I should have woken him and told him that drinking too much can make you drunk, and also that drinking regularly to excess was bad for his health. Perhaps he didn't know this and behaved as he did through sheer ignorance.

We live in a world of precept rather than of example. Religious preachers have declined in number and influence, but they have been replaced by secular ones, often governmental. By badgering and hectoring us at a distance, they prove, or think that they prove, how much they care for us, who are their sheep. Once they have preached at us, they have discharged an important duty. In addition, they have established implicitly that they are in loco parentis to the population in a very dangerous world.

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