

Ideological Guerrillas Are Winning the War



by Theodore Dalrymple

A metaphor for the current state of Western societies is that of a tail wagging a dog. A mere appendage has become the most important or powerful part of the animal.

Another apt metaphor for those societies is that of perpetual guerrilla war, waged by tiny ideologically armed minorities against a huge but bloated army, the majority of the population. The ideological guerrillas are nimble, rapid, persistent, and, above all, fanatical. They're fighting an enemy that's slow, torpid, complacent, and without real belief in itself. Although initially weak, the guerrillas believe themselves destined to win.

I first encountered this asymmetrical warfare back in the early 1990s. I had written an article about a condition, or pattern of behavior, known as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. In

this syndrome, people in previously good general health become exhausted by the slightest effort, even mental effort. It can last for months, years, or even decades.

There is, or was, a lively debate over the cause of the syndrome and the sufferers' virtual retirement from life consequent upon it. Some believed it was principally psychological in origin, rather like the neurasthenia of the late 19th century, which the American neurologist, George Beard, attributed to the overstimulation of the nervous system by the frantic nature of modern existence, particularly in America. Unlike most debilitating diseases, neurasthenia was commonest among the well-to-do, who had both servants and time on their hands.

Others, especially the majority of those who suffered from the syndrome, much preferred another explanation for the retirement from life that was its defining consequence, and which they regarded as physically enforced rather than psychologically motivated. They believed that the syndrome was caused by the long-term effects of a previous viral illness, the precise nature of which was as yet undiscovered.

The reason for their preference was two-fold. First, no one likes to think of himself as a psychological cripple; second, there was the fear that if the syndrome came to be regarded as psychological in origin, long-term social security or other insurance payments might be withdrawn, and sufferers would simply be told to pull themselves together.

Which of these two main schools of thought about the syndrome was correct remains in question. Either might be correct, some combination of the two, or some other theory yet to be adumbrated and proved.

At any rate, my article supported the neurasthenic theory in no uncertain terms. Of course, I might have been wrong; it remains true, as it was in Hamlet's day, that there are more

things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in anyone's philosophy. However, the point is that the organized lobby group of sufferers from the syndrome, surprisingly active, took offense at what I had written, and began to persecute me—mildly, as persecutions in history go, but still perceptibly.

They wrote to the government's Minister of Health and the chief executive of my hospital calling for my dismissal. The chief executive replied that he was sorry that I had caused them distress, but it was a free country and I could write what I liked. I doubt that the chief executive of any hospital, or indeed of any institution whatever, would write to an aggrieved group in such clear and forthright a manner now, in essence telling them to go away. A mere 30 years later, pusillanimity has triumphed, so weak in the meantime has our attachment to freedom of thought, expression, and opinion become.

Activists would telephone me at awkward times either to insult me or to beg me for a retraction. This was in the days before the internet and social media were in full swing; the fax machine was still much in use. I remember one lady begging me to apologize in public, who told me that my article, which was being faxed around the country, was causing such distress.

"Well, stop faxing it then," I said.

It was my opinion that the Bible is not always correct, that a soft answer doesn't always turn away wrath, but on the contrary inflames it.

My experience of persecution was minor by comparison with that of a man much more eminent than I, a true leader in scientific research in the field. The persecution that he suffered was so great that, for the sake of his family, he gave up all research on it. He decided never to touch the subject again; there were enough interesting subjects in the world for

research to engage him without having to sacrifice his day-to-day existence. Television and radio reporters followed suit. Thus, the argument was won by default and a pattern set, namely the suppression of contrary views by intimidation, all perfectly legal.

This was in the days when the infinitely more powerful means of the internet and social media were not available, and the technique has developed exponentially since.

That technique is as follows: first, a proposition is adumbrated that initially appears preposterous to most citizens. Then arguments in its favor, using all the sophistry available to people who attended university, are relentlessly propagandized. Finally, success is achieved when the preposterous proposition has become widely accepted as an unassailable orthodoxy, at least by the intellectual class, denial of or opposition to which is characterized as extremist, even fascist, in nature.

This process is possible because the struggle, as in a guerrilla war, is asymmetric. The Cuban Revolution comes to mind. At first, Batista's government seemed to have more than enough power to crush the 13 revolutionaries who landed on the shores in a decrepit boat. It had at its disposal artillery, aircraft, and thousands of times more men than the guerrillas, and yet it lost, largely because no one was willing to sacrifice himself in the way that the 13 men were. Strength of belief doesn't guarantee that a cause is good, very far from it; but it does mean that those who struggle on its behalf will do so with all their heart.

The absurdity of modern ideological enthusiasms is evident, but while those who promote them make them the focus of their existence and the whole meaning of their lives, better-balanced people try to get on with their lives as normal. No one wants to spend his life arguing, let alone fighting against, sheer idiocy, and thus sheer idiocy wins the day.

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