

Publishing Prejudices



by Theodore Dalrymple

The Fore people of New Guinea once suffered from a strange neurological disease, ending in dementia and death, known as *kuru*. It was caused by an infectious protein called a prion, which entered their brains after they indulged in funerary cannibalism.

It sometimes seems to me that a metaphorical prion, that of wokeness (to use a hackneyed term), has entered the minds of the intelligentsia of the West. Of course, no analogy is exact: one of the symptoms of *kuru* was outbursts of uncontrolled laughter, and if there is one symptom those infected with the prion of wokeness do not suffer from, it is laughter, uncontrolled or otherwise.

Because so much of my life is concerned with books, new as well as old, I was naturally interested in [an article](#) in the British book-trade's newspaper, *The Bookseller*, which

described Penguin Random House's third *Diversity and Inclusion Report*. The publisher, ultimately German-owned, is probably the largest in the country—certainly among the largest—and where it goes, others are certain to follow. The article was headed by a photograph of the chief executive, expensively tailored and looking as if aware that he was elect of God.

The article reads like something out of *Pravda* in the good old days recounting a tremendous annual increase in the production of pig iron. (Pig iron was a commodity principally known to the public through the pages of Soviet propaganda. If Marie Antoinette had been Soviet, she would have said, 'Let them eat pig iron.')

Under Stalinist educational policy, selection for universities was by social origin and political reliability. Children of manual workers were chosen over those of bourgeois backgrounds, irrespective of their abilities or intellectual attainments. For Stalin, the purpose or function of education was social engineering and resultant political conformism, not induction into or extension of higher learning.

With this in mind, one reads the following with a shudder: "Socio-economic representation is currently a major focus for PRH. ... This year, the publisher has opened its internships only to people from lower socio-economic backgrounds."

The article quotes the chief executive of PRH, a true *Homo sovieticus*. He has mastered *langue de bois* with a perfection that excites my admiration, for try as I might, I have never been able to employ this language:

As well as delivering out inclusion strategy, we also look beyond our company to contribute to wider change. This year we re-affirmed our commitment to working with others for the betterment of the entire industry by signing up to the Publishers Association's new inclusivity action plan. Next, we will explore barriers to progression and retention that

colleagues from underrepresented groups face, so colleagues from all backgrounds are supported to thrive. We will also be working to publish more inclusively and publish writers from backgrounds underrepresented on the nation's bookshelves.

On his own logic, however, it is quite clear that women ought to be discriminated against in new hires, since already nearly 70 percent of his employees are women: but everyone knows that the chief executive does not mean exactly what he said, that he was speaking in a kind of code.

It is instructive to compare the chief executive's methods of recruitment with those of a manager of a professional football team. The latter chooses his players on merit and nothing else, which of course means gross disparities in ethnic and other demographic representation. The manager of a football team who said, for example, that from now on he was proposing to recruit preferentially from the disabled *because* they were disabled, and because the disabled were underrepresented in his team, would probably be sent to a lunatic asylum—or would have been, if such still existed. If, a little less bizarrely, he said that he was going to select only players from the upper classes because, on the whole, the children of the upper classes do not play football and therefore are underrepresented demographically in his team, he would likewise be considered a little crazy. I could continue with the possible forms of positive discrimination in which my imaginary manager could in theory indulge, but the point, I hope, is made.

The contrast between the way in which a huge publishing company and a professional football team go about recruitment is both sinister and alarming: for it suggests that the quality of football is more serious and important to us than the quality of our intellectual life. Football is too serious to be interfered with on the supposed grounds of social justice, whereas intellectual and mental life can and ought to

be judged by criteria other than its quality. No doubt the word *decadence* has been overused in the past, sometimes for sinister purposes, but it seems appropriate in this instance.

It is quite clear that the policy of PRH is racist, among other things, in the sense that it accords to race a great, and even determining, importance. This is obvious from the following consideration: humanity is divisible by an almost infinite number of characteristics, such as height, weight, intelligence quotient, etc. Let us just take the example of IQ. Half the population has an IQ below 100. It is clear that this half of the population is grossly underrepresented both among the employees of PRH and among the authors of the books that it publishes (silliness is, evidently, another question entirely). Even the chief executive of PRH would not start a recruitment drive among the unintelligent, or demand that more books by people with an IQ of 80 be published.

If, therefore, you recruit by demographic features, you have to choose which demographic features you consider important and relevant. Are not those who choose race as the most important quality indicating that they are, in a very real sense, racists?

I have long thought that the Soviet Union won the Cold War in the cultural and intellectual sphere, and the very form of language that the chief executive of PRH employs, to say nothing of its content, makes that assessment plausible. The worst is that the new totalitarianism is not imposed by a dictatorship, it is freely chosen. Such totalitarianism is the opportunity and salvation of ambitious mediocrities.

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