

The Idle Contrarian: Tail v. Dog



Young Werther

by James Como

Imagine a crippling and woefully disadvantageous affliction: one not only commonly ignored by society in general but exacerbated by it several times a day, evoking no sympathy whatsoever. Unrecognized, the afflicted lack even the dignity of victim status. There is no support network, no hashtag, nothing approaching a civil rights campaign on their behalf; no recognition a Community of the afflicted. There *is* often humiliation.

I am one of that group, and reparation for the thousands of instances of abuse should be ours. A movement, and Woke

recognition in schools, public buildings, the mass media, and popular culture (in casting and the like) ought to be forthcoming for all of us.

Always a grievous annoyance and frequently a threat unto death, my color blindness is a genuine disability. The time has come for this tail, like so many others, to wag the dog.

And why not? Most of us have noticed what can be called the Amplification of Collective Attention, its amplitude, intensity, and its duration. Of course, I do *not* mean the attention span of *individual* people; there, it seems, we are headed towards nanoseconds. Rather I mean the bifurcated effects of social media combined with the hyper-saturated news environment wrought by the synergy of cable network news, internet 'feeds', and near-instantaneous mainstream 'updates'. Sure, they make for nano-second interests (did Megan really say *that?*), but, together, they make for massive clumping, and before long the clump has become a trend, then a movement, then an established norm (e.g. Wokism).

Consider: what element of society has taken over more of the public square and thus our psycho-social real estate than sexual disforia? LGBTQ+ is ubiquitous, from Mont Blanc (the Manhattan store was repainted rainbow) to Disney to lower grade curricula in some schools and – where not?

But here is the rub. How many – you fill in the words that the letters stand for – are there in the U.S. population? From the pervasiveness of the brand one would thing . . . 50%? Certainly (and this in light of how our fellow-citizen L-Qers are presented as victims) *not* in the low teens, which is the actual number (though one hard to pin down). At work is a Movement, morphed from a legitimate civil rights complaint into a cultural insistence of unqualified acceptance, no matter one's own beliefs. To be sure, much of the actual phenomena result from trendiness (Twitter and Tic Toc are magic^[1]) and from virtue signaling: I cannot be

unholier than thou. Still, it's a small tail to be wagging the dog.

While on the subject of sex the #MeToo movement must be in the mix. I have no idea what wave of feminism we are in, or how they all differ one from the other. I *do* know that 1/ women have been historically marginalized; 2/ women have been routinely abused and exploited in their homes and workplaces; 3/ we certainly needed higher standards of deportment, enforced and punished when infracted; 4/ we needed a fresh look – for example, in college curricula – at the achievement of women, as well as corretive legal recourse; and 5/ we have achieved all that.

For example, I ask (as a former five-term chairman of an arts department) why, if now the introductory course includes the plethora of women artists previously ignored (apparently they were not so boxed out as had been claimed), we need a course on Woman Artists in History? (An aside: shall we keep waiting for the MeToo movement to recognize and condemn the sexual predations and humiliations of the sainted MLK?)

You see I have not forgotten race. Here old age is an advantage. Old Ones remember how genuinely bad things were: the routine slurs, the invisibility, the deprivations, the violent outrages, the *legal* injustices – very little of which now exist. And yet, *now* we are told how racist we are, systemically, what with our white privileges. Here more than elsewhere we bathe in the pool of self-abasement, no nonsense being so nonsensical as to be dismissed. Where is Benign Neglect when we need it?

So there are three tales wagging the dog, in each of which large swaths of the population are invested, psychologically and financially. (Will Black Lives Matter finally pay up? Maybe sell a mansion or two?) Along the way I've steered clear of politics per se, the provenance, often sickening, of cults and conspiracy; by definition their whispers, claims,

whining, threats, predictions, and violations of socio-political norms are part of the dog itself, where they have always been, in the bowels.

I've mentioned power, which, I believe, is what the tail-wagging is about, much more than social justice, that and *the destruction of the dog itself* (such is the malice towards and hatred of the dog: you haven't heard the depredations of America and how it must be destroyed until you've heard ranting academics).

But here and now we have something new, at least new to us. I'll call it *The O'Brien Syndrome*. Do you recall O'Brien from 1984?

"How much is 2+2, Winston," O'Brien asks of his victim. "Four." The pain comes. He repeats the question; same answer, same pain. He repeats the question. Winston asks, "what answer does Big Brother want?" O'Brien answers, "five" and repeats the question. "Five," Winston answers. The pain comes. This goes on for a while, until Winston, desperately, asks what the problem is. "Simple, Winston. Big Brother does not simply want the right answer, *he wants you to believe it.*" And Winston finally does, casually answering "five" when asked spontaneously.

Our Big Brothers settle for no less. I'm sure that if I had a job, especially an academic one, this meditation itself would be deemed immoderate and get me called into HR.

I know I'm being too rational. There are ideologies, careers, identities, and passions at stake, an entire *zeitgeist*: all more powerful than consistent, valid thinking. Collectivism rules. All enormities are viewed as social, or cultural, failings. Yet rarely are we told the offenses are *immoral*. Amidst accusations and demonization has any public figure ever said, simply, we must reform our hearts? Or would that be too . . . Christian? Or Jewish? Or Muslim? Or . . . *anything*

religious?

But the dog is barking; that is, the counter-*Zeitgeist* looms, often itself in the extreme, trying to substitute one Big Brother for another (though the Left is more at far more home with him). And where is the Center? Is it relative, and therefore subject to change? Or is it steady. Is valuing human life, opposing socialism, resisting the tails mentioned above, and so on “right wing” (and therefore ‘extreme’)?

Note, those tails are legitimate. They should wag, proportionately. And we should address them, and have, and are. But the whole dog is bigger, more important, more complex, *and far healthier* than any tail or collection of tails.

[\[1\]](#) Not really. Real is what used to called the Werther Effect, after the widespread impact of Goethe’s character, who dresses in a certain way and commits suicide. He was widely imitated.