The Ravages of Cultural Termites

by Theodore Dalrymple

In his great book titled *Russia in 1839*, the Marquis de Custine called the Tsar "eagle and insect." He was eagle because he soared high above the country over which he ruled, completely alone, taking it all in at a glance, but he was insect because there was nothing too small or trivial for him to interfere with: he or his power burrowed into the very fabric of society as a termite burrows into the fabric of a wooden house. There was no escaping him.

This is the image I have in my mind of the operation of the adherents of Woke ideology. They have a grand vision, at least implicitly, both about the nature of the society in which they live and what should replace it. Insufficient, incoherent, or absurd as their vision might be, it actuates them. As human history demonstrates, intellectual insufficiency is no bar to

effectiveness in the search for power; indeed it might be an advantage insofar as more scrupulous searchers after truth and goodness are riven by doubt.

On the other hand, nothing is too small for their attention. Being visionaries, they can infuse their slightest actions with the most grandiose theoretical significance. This gives them self-importance and confidence that they are doing what once might have been called God's work. Triviality is thus reconciled with transcendence. They are part of the movement of History with a capital *H*, whose right side they both define and bring forward by their actions.

Of course, the metaphor of eagle and insect is not perfect. The eagle is sharp-eyed while the adherent of Woke ideology has cataracts. When the house crumbles to dust because of the action of the termites, it is not because they desired such a denouement: it was, rather, a natural consequence of their conduct. The destruction wrought by the adherents of Woke ideology is a good deal more deliberate.

The notion of those adherents as cultural termites came to my mind (not for the first time) when I bought a book recently. It was *Conspiracy on Cato Street* by Vic Gatrell.

Professor Gatrell is a good, perhaps even a great, historian. His writing is magisterial and as pleasurable to read as any novel. The Cato Street Conspiracy of 1820, in which a group of impoverished working-class men planned to kill almost the entire British cabinet and thereby start a revolution, was of interest to me in part because it may have had an important indirect effect on medical history.

> *We live in a world of costless gestures—costless, that is, to those who make them.*

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nancially, he decided on his recovery to start a medical journal as a way of maki

ng money, and he founded *The Lancet*, so to become, as it has remained ever since,

one of the most influential medical publications in the world. There was no fo un

dation for the belief that Wakley, a large and powerful man with the anatomical

knowledge necessary for swift decapitation of corpses, was the decapitator of

the executed conspirators, but much beliefneeds no foundation. Such, at any ra

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Soon into Gatrell's fascinating book, I noticed a typographical oddity: the decapitalisation of titles such as that of the Duke of Wellington, the Archbishop of York, or the Lord Chancellor, King George IV, which became the duke of Wellington, the archbishop of York, the lord chancellor, king George IV etc., all against customary usage.

Presumably, this was in some way an attempt to cut them to down to size, to express a lack of respect for, or even a hatred of, the social hierarchy of the time: a democratic gesture. This, of course, is profoundly silly, as if to write Tsar Nicholas I were to endorse Tsarism, or to write Pope Francis were to be a believing Catholic. But we live in a world of costless gestures—costless, that is, to those who make them.

Professor Gatrell is 81 years old, and it therefore seems to me unlikely that, whatever his personal political opinions, the decapitalisation was at his instigation. More likely, it was the idea of sub-editors, who imagine that, in their own small way, by their typographical diktats, they are fighting for justice and helping to bring about a more equal world. And I was subsequently told by an academic that such impositions are now standard practice at the Press—and indeed throughout publishing.

A friend of mine has written a book about a past African leader who is not generally highly regarded by Africanists. The book is a more subtle and nuanced account of him than is usual, portraying the man both as a genuine idealist and as the kind of egomaniac who is common among political leaders. The book is excellent.

However, his publisher wants him to capitalise the word black

as it refers to human beings. He is against this cheap (and, ironically, racist) demonstration of supposedly virtuous sentiment, but he has had difficulty in finding a publisher, not because of the quality but because of the subtlety of his book, and was therefore left with an uncomfortable dilemma: sticking to his guns and risking non-publication, or acceding to the demand and feeling besmirched by his weakness and pusillanimity. This, incidentally, is the dilemma increasingly faced by applicants for academic positions: accede to the demand of the commissars of diversity, inclusion and equity, or forego such employment altogether.

The very tininess of the scale of the activities of publishers' editorial staff is what is sinister about them, for it suggests the thoroughness with which the march through the institutions has been carried out. No wonder that the simplest of tasks or duties of the public administration in Britain (and no doubt in other countries) are now matters of ideological contestation and are therefore not carried out with diligence, leaving decay to work its way through society.

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