

Diogenes's Invectives

A sinister affair of placards

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In my younger days, the public square in Athens was the meeting-place of gossip-mongers and thieves. I must admit I have a liking for gossip-mongers and thieves because the former guarantee the spreading of human foolishness and the latter the circulation of goods.

Truly, I often catch myself regretting the gossip-mongers and thieves of the agora (the public square in question). The other day, as I was quietly meditating in my barrel, somewhat cross with the universe, I was suddenly shaken by a terrific clamor rising from the neighboring streets. I first heard screams, the uproar of an approaching throng and the crash of broken objects. I was then confronted by an excited mob brandishing placards and clubs, and invading the agora crying “Long live so-and-so” and “Down with something”. Twenty seconds later, the street opposite belched forth a second mob, exactly identical to the first but for the cries and placards (due to a lack of coordination, I assumed).

At first, I believed that, after realizing that misunderstanding, the two crowds would immediately settle it, by harmonizing cries and placards.

Alas! Not so. As incredible as it may seem, the idea of a concertation did not occur to them.

Each party started insulting the other; blows were exchanged and cobble-stones removed from the pavement of the agora. Each crowd then proceeded to build barricades and a pitched battle began.

My barrel standing between the barricades, and stray projectiles starting to fall around me, I decided that it would be a wise move to come out and lecture the contenders.

— “Listen, my friends”, I told them. “You are behaving foolishly. Can't you see that the people who sold you these placards gulled you? Lend them to me for a few minutes, with a paint brush, and I will sort out your differences.”

— “Who is this senile old man?” asked a most disagreeable, robust young man planted behind the barricades on my right, with a kind of catapult capable of throwing cobble stones a quarter of a mile away.

— “I assure you”, I continued, keeping my sang-froid, “that with a minimum of organization, your difficulties will disappear on the spot. Just trust me. I'm going to collect all the placards from the right as well as from the left. All I need is a few minutes. You will be satisfied”. My plan was simple: by writing “Long live Diogenes!” on all their baleful placards, I would reconcile everyone in the twinkling of an eye. But they turned a deaf ear to my words Boos were shouted on both sides. They called me a nigger, a Czechoslovak, a revisionist, an

intellectual, a hippy, a Chinese, a francophone, a colonialist, a Libyan, a Vietcong, a Constantinian, a Turk, a Greek, a Fleming, an imperialist, a leftist, a secessionist, an Orangist, and race-cyclist!

Some claimed that I fed on the blood of the people, that I was undermining morals and Western civilization, that I was sold to the Albanians and to the Yanks, while others were of the opinion that I was rather a puppet of the Irish, the English, the South-Africans, Fidel Castro and Groucho Marx. They could only agree on my beastly morals.

I hope people will understand me when I mention that this diversity of opinion brought back to my memory the good old days of my controversies with Plato, although I must say that the resources of your modern languages in this field are quite deceiving to a compatriot of Homer. Never mind. I wanted to thank my interlocutors in the same tone and was expressing my point of view when a tomato crashed on my bald forehead. On the other hand, the robust young man was directing his catapult at me: I put an end to the conversation and withdrew to my barrel, all the more willingly as time had come for my siesta.

I immediately fell into a soothing sleep amidst the raging battle, dreaming that the Trojans were making an incursion into the Greek encampment, awaking Achilles' fury.

When I woke up, street-sweepers were collecting the debris, painters were cleaning the soiled walls and glaziers were busily repairing the broken windows, and I rejoiced in recovering my old planet, the same as ever under the sun. For these affairs always end in the same way: things must be restored by those who clean, sweep, mend and repair. And they have always been the same.

I asked these good people who they stood for and which side they supported in the concluded quarrel, now that they were engaged in removing all traces from the fight.

— What is it you are trying to sell? asked one of them?

— Listen, added another, if it's trouble you are looking for, it's just too bad. It's all over now. We are here to work

— Or have you come to lend us a hand, maybe?

Now one was handing me a shovel, another a paint brush, a third a sweep. Everyone was bent on getting me to work.

I think we ought to educate the people. They are loosing respect.

Diogènes