

## Digital Ghosts

In an old notebook of mine I found several quotes by Max Frisch: “We are always outraged when being right is not enough,” and: “We can even protest without risking our heads - only our protest is no use; in fact, as we well know, our protest serves the powers that be as proof of their tolerance.”

I look at these quotes, whose author has always meant so much to me, and they suddenly stare back at me like strangers.

Why is that? Max Frisch’s words pertain to the world I grew up in. Back then we took it for granted that the enemy was “the people at the top,” repressive conservative enemies who protected the old Nazis rather than homosexuals, women, poor people and immigrants, enemies whom the ever-growing enlightened segment of society would have to convert to a moral standpoint. Frisch’s “tolerant powers that be,” tolerating only their powerless critics, were ultimately cynics; you had to be outraged by them, because being right was not enough.

Back then, power and impotence seemed related like an authoritarian father and his rebellious son. There seemed to be no way to influence the powerful, and if we finally managed to vote them out of office or pension them off, other authoritarian geezers came to power, because only geezers were up for election.

All that changed, fundamentally, a long while ago. For a long time now our countries’ fates have ceased to be solely determined by fat old white men. The rebellious sons grew up, and the daughters came at last, knowing that power as such is not evil and that it can be right to strive for it. The Greens came, the women came, the gays finally came out, there were suddenly people in parliament in wheelchairs or with different skin colors. Sweeping political decisions could be reversed or prevented by grassroots movements, by citizens’ initiatives, demonstrations, referendums, because the “powers that be” actually did care what the people wanted. That’s why Austria chose to mothball a newly built nuclear plant, that’s why Germany refused to be sucked into the fateful Iraq War that precipitated so many of the hardships that haunt us today. And these are just two randomly chosen examples of many.

Over the past few decades our European world has become freer, more diverse, more democratic, the political structures have opened up - not just on a breathtaking scale, but with breathtaking speed, considering that the emperors abdicated in 1918, not so very long ago.

In 1989, when the Iron Curtain fell, I was nineteen. In my Vienna childhood, that “curtain” was right under our noses with its watchtowers and barbed wire. Through its geography, the bulk of Austria was thrust like a wedge into the former East Block; you grew up in a different atmosphere than in Cologne, Hamburg, Amsterdam, Paris or London, much closer to the fears felt in Berlin. But back in 1989, just as I was reaching adulthood and finally escaping that deadly fear of nuclear war, my generation was given a gift: the marvelous feeling that there’s nothing that can’t be changed. That thought, I’ve begun to realize, had just one

meaning for us, the positive, optimistic one: nothing bad is permanent, you can change and improve everything if you just try hard enough.

I didn't think it possible that good things, things already achieved, could vanish as well. Call me naive, but maybe harboring this naive, optimistic view of the future for nearly thirty years wasn't the worst biographical option. If it hadn't been for those thirty years, I might not be standing here today. Like many people, I might think that everything is pointless and that I'm only making a fool of myself.

Let us take another look at Max Frisch's words: "We are always outraged when being right is not enough" - isn't one tempted, these days, to turn that statement around? For instance to say: "It's quite enough to be right - so you can put a lid on all the outrage"? And as for the other statement - "We can even protest without risking our heads - only our protest is no use; in fact, as we well know, our protest serves the powers that be as proof of their tolerance" - what bearing can it have on our current reality, with outrage storms and Twitter edicts, with the mechanisms of institutional politics breaking up under the brunt of digital ghosts?

The world has become a place in which the democratic politicians who ushered in gay marriage, or who responded with empathy to the desperate plight of refugees from a civil war, are subjected to hatred and mockery, even hounded out of office, and we yearn to protect them. We wish we had the power to protect democratic processes and institutions like the constitutional state from the waves of the outraged who surge up with their pilfered battle cry "we are the people," claiming the right to destroy all these things. Their destructive force spreads like a neurotoxin: Can we believe anything anymore? Isn't everybody lying? Haven't they betrayed us and sold us down the river, the politicians, the evil elites, who naturally are always the others? Or, as trenchantly put by the political scientist Stephen Holmes, whom I admire greatly: Aren't they letting our identity and culture dissolve like a white lump of sugar in a big brown coffee?

We admired brave old Stéphane Hessel for his "Time for Outrage!", but since then global outrage has taken on a life of its own, as in the story of the sorcerer's apprentice. Today, someone who isn't outraged, who doesn't instantly throw a fit at the slightest disagreement, who doesn't take every little opportunity to feel offended, hurt, deprived of free speech or dishonored as a minority group and hence justified in striking back with all means at their disposal - someone like that isn't taken seriously, hardly even counts as sentient. Internet trolls around the world agree with the American president on this one.

The digital age, whose true reach and repercussions began to unfold just a very few years ago, is the age of communication explosion. Alongside all the benefits of these digital processes - above all, access to an inconceivable mass of information - they give every smartphone owner the opportunity to express themselves constantly to everyone about everything. Theoretically speaking, this means that a huge mass of people is carrying on a conversation with each other. But humanity's character has not improved with the same exponential speed as its processors,

with predictable results: never has the world seen so many lies, so much defamation, denunciation, manipulation and verbally propagated hatred.

On occasion I've been referred to as a critic of the internet. Herewith, in this stodgy, analogue way, revealing my face and my voice and thus my identity, I reject that designation: I am not criticizing "the internet," I am merely pointing out, like a broken record, that we cannot gauge its consequences for our psyche, our perceptions, or our behavior, any more than we can predict the consequences of new drugs or genetic engineering in medicine and agriculture. In the case of pharmaceuticals and genetic engineering, at least we are aware of the problem - here, however, we lack that awareness. We know that Marie Curie died of cancer because she didn't know about the carcinogenic effects of the rays she had just discovered. We know that a bit later carnivals would feature "x-ray artists" who used the new apparatuses to x-ray themselves and others on a daily basis, for money. They died young too. We know that years later workers in alarm-clock factories died of tongue cancer in droves, because the brushes they used to apply the radium paint had to be licked at intervals to produce a fine line. Analogously, I wonder what kind of adults today's children will become, the ones who have fits because the charging cable can't be found or the wifi in the vacation hotel is too weak. The ones who are used to re-ordering a broken toy with a few mouse-clicks and having it delivered to their doorstep the next day. The ones who are unable to go without anything or wait for anything, who never learn how to look forward to things.

I wonder if the blazes of hysteria and outrage around the world are stoked by our sense that everything and everyone directly affects us, that everything involves us, even when it's nowhere nearby, it's happening somewhere else entirely. No doubt about it, illusions of simultaneity and proximity alter our perceptions. They influence our emotions and reactions. Everything happening to other people seems to happen to us too. We succumb to the delusion that we can and maybe must react to everything. We like and share, and the world seems to belong to us, at least the world we can access via fiber optic cable. But don't we, in turn, dangle from these cables like marionettes, when you think of how a flurry of e-mails in Nordrhein-Westfalen, not even worth calling a shitstorm, managed to topple a designated foreign minister within a few hours? How Italian anti-terrorist units had to be deployed to quell a mass uprising instigated online - against measles shots? A shocking new study attests to the exorbitant rise in online anti-Semitism over the past decade. It concludes: "These developments in the virtual world correlate with real-world anti-Semitic harassment, slurs, threats and attacks." The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* comments that the internet "seems to have let open, seething hatred become an acceptable form of rhetoric."

As a writer, I naturally ask myself what it does to people, above and beyond the extremists, when this ongoing discussion can be tapped into everywhere and at all times. The world is huge: we could spend weeks crossing a desert or a mountain range. But the world is also as small as a smartphone: at almost any given moment we can see where our friends are having dinner, and what they're eating. Does

harmless, offline, private, secure communication even exist anymore? In Dave Eggers' critical near-future novel *The Circle*, whose technological visions have practically been rendered obsolete by this point, more and more politicians are wearing a device that records all their activities and streams them online. They can remove the device only when using the toilet or having sex. No secret agreements, no sleazy deals, no private lapses, nothing - everything is totally transparent, and so, supposedly, bad politicians will vanish from the world. In the novel, even those who are absolutely opposed quickly bow their heads to the digital yoke; otherwise they'd seem suspicious.

This permanent state of being suspicious, a suspect; the difficulty, indeed the impossibility of stepping out of line, declining to participate - that is a main feature of our new age.

The digital revolution has two affects on human behavior that seem to contradict each other, yet spring from the same root: affirmation and condemnation, celebration and hate are radicalized. This technology has brought forth the shitstorm, it has exponentially intensified angry outbursts and smear campaigns, along with the panicky fear of these things. In the process it has encouraged homogeneity, one-dimensional thinking, the inability even to tolerate contradictions, complexity and ambivalence, much less mentally process them.

You can tell me a hundred times over that digitization has vastly facilitated information access and exchange, lending whole new dimensions to our knowledge of the world. All that is true - and at the same time it has made people into lemmings. The digital world heightens the desire to belong, not to deviate, not to be a black sheep, to howl in the shitstorm as an anonymous wolf, but never to be the victim. It heightens this desire to an inhuman degree. And in the process, considered, balanced thinking drops out of the discourse - out of the offline discourse as well. The middle register has vanished.

And here we find the intersection with politics. The loss of the middle ground, the reinforcing of the extremes is everywhere. I have to admit that I've never had much interest in the right. Its explanation of the world has always been both evil and banal. It's so mind-numbingly simple to construct scapegoats - the refugees, the politicians, the EU - but it also provides a profound emotional satisfaction, offering you security and absolving you of your responsibility. It's so easy to clamor for a strong man, for a quick, harsh solution - close the borders, America first, exit the EU, kick Islam out of Germany - when you don't need to demonstrate their practical implementation. It's both malicious and effective to break ostensible taboos by, say, relativizing the Holocaust or defending the crimes of the Wehrmacht. It's always rather a pity to see how well the media and politicians have been trained to jump through the hoops, how they yell about "outrages" when it would be enough to mutter "bullshit."

But with the new technological tools, the power and influence of the new right-wing movement has ballooned to a degree that just recently would have seemed inconceivable. "*Flood them with shit,*" Steve Bannon is quoted as saying, having made it his mission to destroy rationality and credibility on a general, global level,

both in the media and in conventional politics. The flood of junk data and opinions that makes us hysterical, cynical and disoriented might have begun as a natural effect of digitization, but at this point the right is actively inflating it. This is new-style propaganda: rather than aiming for or against something, it aims in all directions at once. Thomas Assheuer writes: "The rightwing media don't need to attack democratic institutions directly; it's quite enough for them to swamp our political life with cynicism and weaken society's moral immune system." We must ask ourselves what point this process has already reached and whether it can even be reversed. From today's standpoint I can't venture to say.

It seems harder and harder to tell who is actually trying to solve problems and who is merely fishing for applause by raising a clamor. This is just as true of private discussions, which lately seem so apt to derail or end in hostilities. But someone who is reflective, informed, who weighs arguments against each other and is fundamentally able to amend their own arguments, yet still comes to a conclusion that doesn't suit you - that's a completely different category from those people who start each sentence with "There's no law against staying that..." only to aggressively start rattling off accusations.

If someone argues that many things have gone dangerously wrong in the handling of the refugee crisis, that is far from making them an AfD voter. If someone is convinced that every single shipwreck victim must be rescued, never mind where they can go after that, that person need not be a quixotic nutcase who hates their own culture. Put in such simple terms, this sounds banal and obvious. But we have lost sight of the obvious things. On all sides, arguments are dominated by sledgehammers.

On all sides: for me that's the most painful shift brought by the new age we've suddenly woken up in - our own people, our own camp, the liberals, especially the very young, are losing their liberalism, their openness and curiosity and above all their sense of humor, which used to be one of our advantages over the right. They are abandoning all this to embrace demands for literary purges and prohibitions on thought and speech, motivated by a misguided, extreme notion of consideration. This comes down to the familiar distinction between medicine and poison - it all depends on the dosage. And the dosage has gotten out of control. Discussions on diversity, for instance, have become "drunk on virtue," as the British writer Lionel Shriver argues in her widely read, widely hated *Spectator* column.

Some things sound like satire - friendships that founder on the question of gender-inclusive language, or a shitstorm that erupted over a thriller in which a dog had its paw cut off. This wasn't a splatter movie (which a worrier, in a pinch, might imagine inspiring imitators), but a book, a fictional text in which, as generally happens in thrillers, human beings are murdered too - incidentally, no one protested their fate.

But there are far more serious incidents: eminent scholars defamed as Nazis; poets as sexists; linguists who study resentments and prejudice defamed on that very basis as *spreaders* of prejudice. In most cases the instigators are students, that is,

young people who are intelligent, well-educated, networked, creative in their protests, but evidently unable to recognize their own militant intolerance.

In an interview the great British writer Ian McEwan recounted how he recently fell victim to “a frenetic Twitter storm of libelous proportions.” It was sparked by a remark about Harvey Weinstein: McEwan said that he considered him to be a moral monster, but as to whether he was really a rapist, he would wait for the outcome of the trial. Now, in this interview, he asked tersely and acerbically: “What do these people want? To send someone to prison without a trial?”

I refuse to refer to these things as “political correctness,” not even “misguided political correctness,” because I don’t want to pile on as a positive idea is twisted into fighting words. Admittedly this is a laughable, helpless act of resistance, but I insist on it; I choose to go on believing in the power of little steps.

Let’s recall that “political correctness” used to mean a kind of verbal inclusion, the effort to use words more sensitively, to sound them out for hidden prejudices, for their potential to do harm, and, if necessary, replace them with new, neutral words. When I was young, it was normal to say “deaf and dumb” instead of “hearing-impaired,” “mongoloid” instead of “Down Syndrome,” “faggot” instead of “homosexual” and “gypsy” instead of “Roma and/or Sinti.” There’s no cause to be nostalgic for those times; in most of these discredited words, the derogatory quality is clear. Not in all, admittedly. But as we know, the resonance, the aura of words changes over time or simply through the context in which they are spoken. These days “queer” and “Jew” are not generally used as insults, but in schoolyards, sadly, they still are. To the ears of very old people both words still sound dangerous, as sheer words, not because of what they refer to. And of course for certain people, old or young, these words still count as insults.

Thirty years ago, if you wanted to say that someone was doing something with undue intensity, to the point of physical collapse, you used the expression *bis zur Vergasung*, “to the gassing point”. And many other expressions fell through the cracks - or *durch den Rost*, “through the grate,” as people said, evidently ignoring that locution’s vile associations with gas chambers and crematoriums. In Austria, at any rate, these expressions went unchallenged as late as the 1980s.

All the same: “political correctness” originated as a guide to linguistic etiquette, as recommendations rather than prescriptions. As a child you learn the rules of proper behavior, but later on you decide the extent to which you use them. That, too, is freedom. Anyone nowadays who insists on belching or hawking and spitting every few minutes - common behavior in previous centuries or on other continents - will have to live with the social consequences. You see, there’s freedom of choice on both sides. So people like that probably won’t be invited back to dinner any time soon, but maybe - analogous to politics - other hawkers-and-spitters will rally around them, finding this behavior marvelously primal and liberating. That is one level, the private level. Which, on the other hand, has no bearing on the desirability or permissibility of portraying that sort of lout in a film, play or book.

These distinctions - between then and now, private and public, art and politics, serious and satirical, suggestion and prohibition - have all been swept away by a tsunami of simplifications. Thumbs up, thumbs down, like or dislike, permitted or

forbidden, acclaimed or proscribed. This simplifies all the confusion, but it makes a once-liberal society tangibly more restrictive and inquisitorial.

Here I'd like to cite a text that I warmly recommend. You're all carrying your little devices - though not yet as yokes around your necks - so please note, for further reading, an essay by the writer Tina Uebel entitled "The Great Loss." You can find it online:

*I'm sitting at a pub table with an editor and two translators. The translators discuss their work on a novel from the 1950s that uses the word 'negroes'; I argue innocently that the historically correct translation of the word should be the equally outdated German word Neger, and the editor snarls that I shouldn't say 'Neger,' I should say 'the n-word'. [...] How are we supposed to communicate with each other - and diagnose instances of racism! - if the prevailing view has a word's meaning being determined by the bare sequence of vowels and consonants, not by the context and the intent? To call someone a 'half-Neger' is a whole slur. To discuss the transformation of the word 'Neger' is to communicate. To insist on the outdated term 'Neger kiss' for a chocolate-covered marshmallow is malicious and unfeeling. To describe the popular 1970s 'Neger doll' as '80 centimeters of racism,' as Sarah Kuttner did in a novel - the word prompted someone to call the police at one of her readings - is anti-racism. To give a book the title *Those People Sure Can Sing! A Manual for Neger Fans* is satire. Of course, that didn't stop the student council of the University of Leipzig from conferring their "anti-prize" for racism on the book's author, the black comedian Marius Jung.*

In her essay, Tina Uebel cites many staggering examples of the new verbal and literary taboos. A book on the dying culture of the Inuit got a rancorous reception solely on the basis of its title: *Today We're Going Whale-Hunting*. Uebel herself, who has worked for years as a travel journalist, had to remove a passage about cockfights in an article about Columbia to preempt the omnipresent threat of the shitstorm. That passage and others had to go because, once again in Tina Uebel's lucid words, it seems that we're "now supposed to be restricted to a distorted image of other cultures that reflects our cultural preferences."

These aberrations have long since left the realm of political correctness and become a "pseudo-correct inquisition," in my own personal phrase (abbreviated as PSI, to hark back to far more innocuous esoteric doctrines from the 1980s).

Yes, I am convinced that art is far less free than it was just a few years ago. This development dismays and alarms me. No one could have predicted it in 1989, that great turning point in the blissful pre-digital era. But today it would be virtually inconceivable for Nabokov's *Lolita* - one of the great tour de forces of literature - to be published, although and because it describes in detail the abuse of a child. The novel's mastery does not lie in explicit depictions - there are none - but rather in the uncannily precise psychological studies of all the characters involved. Back in 1955, Nabokov had considerable difficulties getting the book published. Today he would be getting nothing less than death threats.

And as I recently reread Wolfgang Herrndorf's pitch-dark thriller *Sand*, I winced at the character Lundgren's nasty thoughts about the Arabs. The first time I laughed

out loud - not at the Arabs, but at the prejudice-ridden Lundgren, who ends up dying the death of a fool. “In my experience, it has become almost impossible to communicate the fact that the views of the protagonist can be different or even opposite to those of the author,” writes Tina Uebel.

By this point, it has become equally impossible to communicate the difference between an actor accused of sexual abuse and the film the actor has appeared in - nowadays both the person and the film (a collaboration, incidentally, with many other people) are subjected to the same collective judgement, which, as Ian McEwan noted, is generally passed long before any trial has taken place. It has become impossible to communicate the difference between lines of poetry in which the word “admirer” appears in the vicinity of the word “women”; paintings showing scantily dressed young women; and, in a completely different category, men who use raw force to rape women or men. These days everything, from the poem to the painting to the would-be compliment to a grope to a rape is casually bundled under one single hashtag - i.e., #MeToo, which by this point has been misused almost beyond salvaging. Here, too, an upswelling of hysteria has done immense damage to an important discussion. And the time span it takes to run through all these stages is growing shorter and shorter.

I am saying these things at the risk of applause from the wrong side. I discussed the wrong side earlier: intellectually and substance-wise, it holds little interest for me. It takes a short, brazen, sledgehammered path to the black-and-white world that the pseudocorrect inquisitors have reached by a long, reflective path that has led them far astray. The result is the same black and white.

Today, then, one rule is more important than ever before: if you think something is right, if you can calmly state your reasons for it, you must say it, never mind who applauds and who protests, never mind the shitstorm.

You should say it, not yell it.

You should write it, not tweet it.

One way or the other, the wrong people on all sides will merely winnow out the quotes that serve as grist for their respective mills. The process of weighing arguments, informing ourselves and making an honest effort to grasp problems in their complexity, will take a while to prevail. Here, at the end, we return to the beginning, to those words by Max Frisch that through no fault of his suddenly seem so archaic. We find that, at this point, applause and protest are often equally appalling. Neither is worth striving for, both are suspect. And that tempts us to fall silent, to stop writing longer texts, to reduce ourselves to the length of a tweet and wait for a brave new world in which all that is ugly and evil will supposedly be headed off even before it can be thought, before it can be done, definitely before it can be discussed, described, painted or filmed. While the others yell and rabble-rouse all the louder, breaching all conventions and taking a new, old cruel pleasure in reviling everyone who doesn't lick their boots.

But that is exactly why silence is not an alternative. We are not at the point of falling silent out of fear - we have not reached that point yet.