

EDITORIAL

I once attended a real Punk concert in Los Angeles. The band did not wear safety pins or pink hair. They had ordinary, tidy haircuts and were dressed very neatly in black turtlenecks and trousers. Their faces were closed and a little pale. They looked Ivy League, and probably were. Then they started to play. They did not beat the drums, but banged them with a dull, monotonous rhythm, like a small child who ceaselessly bangs a table with a fork. All around them, people were "slam dancing", which means that nobody danced with each other, but each individual was "slamming" another with his or her body.

The whole scene was destructive, nihilistic — saying "give up, there's nothing". I found myself suddenly longing back to the delicious decadence of the late 60's, even though those were the days of flower power, drug-filled realms and sexual liberation. Baez, Dylan, Hendrix and Joplin. The message — love, brotherhood, freedom and equality — may have been ridiculously idealistic, but at least it was uplifting. With hindsight, it was exactly this message which became the redeeming defect of that era.

Punk may now be past tense, but this frightening "individuality" still remains. A friend with a teenage daughter recently told me that there is no such thing as a "wall flower" anymore. Good, one thinks — mindful of those "rather die than not be asked to dance" days. But, the sting is that nowadays you don't have to worry about that; everybody simply goes and dances by him- or herself.

Allan Bloom in his highly acclaimed book *The Closing of the American Mind* describes American culture as a culture which absolutises the self. In therapy, one finds "oneself". Socialisation and education are geared towards the expression, the fulfillment of "self". The Lockean marketplace philosophy is all about enlightened "self-interest". Woody Allen's comedies are nothing but a set of variations on the theme of the man who does not have a real "self" or "identity", and feels superior to the inauthentically self-satisfied people because he is conscious of his situation and at the same time inferior to them because they are "adjusted".

The irony of the whole matter, Bloom tells us, is that this language of "self" and "identity" can easily be traced back to Nietzsche's attack on modern democracy, which is supposed to be far more popular with the socialist Left. Nietzsche, with utmost gravity, told modern man that he was freefalling in the abyss of nihilism. Modern man's rationalism, egalitarianism, relativism, "inner-directedness" and absorption with "self" and "identity" were contrary to creativity and thus led to emptiness, entropy, and nihilism. Nobody believed in anything anymore, and everyone spent his life in frenzied work and frenzied play so as not to face this fact, not to look into the abyss. Thus his statement "God is dead".

For Nietzsche this was great existential pathos; Americans, typically, made nihilism and all its bywords as natural as chewing gum. German philosophy was popularised and mass-marketed, unaware of the profundity of the message or the dangers, if misunderstood. Many people, for instance, do not know that the great hit "Mack the Knife" by old Satchmo, is a translation from the German song sung in the Weimar Republic's *Threepenny Opera*, and was written by Brecht and Weill of the artistic Left. It was originally inspired by Nietzsche's story about a neurotic murderer who killed because he lusted after "the joy of the knife".

The intention of this little essay is not to offend (our American readers), but to prod our scientific, "inquiring", "critical" minds a little. Are we wary enough of borrowed, vicarious disciplines, concepts and cultures? Do we accept or imitate them uncritically in our lecture halls, our media, our screens and stages? Do we know where they came from?

We are communication scientists and we deal with open systems, not with thousands of floating little islands of selves. The question is whether we still try to understand and share meaning, or whether we are merely displaying our second-hand symbols in the great confectionary of nothing?

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