

The populists of today, the despots of tomorrow
by Radka Denemarková

Opening speech for the exhibition THEY SHOULDN'T BE ABLE TO PRETEND THEY
DIDN'T KNOW ANYTHING – Guerrilla of Enlightenment

It is the big question that plagues us all. It reads: Individual or crowd, closed society or open democracy, totalitarianism or freedom? In our world the borders not only run between ethnic groups, nations, denominations, but also between world views, attitudes towards the world, between reason and fanaticism, tolerance and hysteria, creativity and censorship. “Antihumanism as new pragmatism,” as Olga Flor puts it. But this is already the result. The process that precedes this is called dehumanization.

György Konrád, who fought against the communist regime in Hungary, has stated that although he considers Viktor Orbán to be “not a good democrat”, he must “unfortunately admit” that Orbán is “right” with regard to his policy towards immigrants—i.e. sealing off borders, building fences and warning of the dangers associated with refugees. In other words: What is wrong with Orbán is his illiberal attitude towards the citizens of the country he rules, but what is right is his illiberal attitude towards people who seek salvation from tyranny, murderous persecution or inhuman poverty in this country.

Taken as a whole, these insinuations and slanders—which as a rule are hardly or not at all supported by factual information—lead first and foremost to the dehumanization of the newcomers.

Dehumanization paves the way for their exclusion from the category of legitimate holders of human rights and leads to a shift of the migration problem into the field of crime. Even the language used to describe migrants is at best mechanical, at worst dehumanizing.

With such individuals as Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland, Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Vladimir Putin in Russia, Miloš Zeman or former President Václav Klaus in the Czech Republic, our preference for partisan advantages has also survived. The position of the president is that of a monarch, it is the bacillus of the East that has got stuck in us, the fear of civil society, the tendency to take advantage of others. To pretend that we are not a part of Europe, that Europe is somewhere outside of us, as if we could make a fool of it with impunity. This isolation is dangerous, this self-centredness, which shows no interest in knowing what is happening on one's own doorstep. There is a lack of humility, curiosity and

humanity. We in the Czech Republic expelled three million people back then, we can now take in three million people.

I also sense the proud anthropocentrism of modern people, who are convinced that they can identify and order everything, somewhere in the background of the current crisis. It seems to me that if the world is to change for the better, something in human consciousness must change. Humans must free themselves from this terrible entanglement in all the obvious and hidden mechanisms of totality, from consumption to repression and advertising through to manipulation by all media. They must rebel against their roles as powerless parts of a gigantic machine racing who knows where. And find some deeper responsibility for the world within themselves again.

Today, power unintentionally betrays its very own intention again: to make life uniform, to surgically extract from it everything that is a little different, idiosyncratic, independent or unclassifiable.

Sometimes I sink into depression because of aggressive people who repeat prejudices and who are—like in every epoch—the majority. I then calm myself by comparing them to mosquitoes. Radka, while you are being stung by them, wipe them off calmly and elegantly! At first glance, this sounds terribly devout. But you'll be amazed how it helps after a while. They will sting in exactly the same way, but it will cease to bother you. And you will stay calm and keep your dignity. You cannot swat them all—there are too many of them, you would only hit yourself.

When an acquaintance of mine, a very good writer, moved into a new apartment in Berlin, she went to a flower shop. “And where are you from? From France?” – “No, from Romania.” – “Oh, well, never mind.” I experience the same reactions. Such sorting of people is what adults teach children at home and at school, this vicious circle cannot be broken. It is in the nature of humankind to see its perception of the world as the only possible and correct one. But there are countless possibilities of perception, we can “wipe” the words with which we think and use them “differently”, we can live “differently”, because creative freedom is boundless.

The struggle for freedom and critical thinking is difficult at all times and never ends, and nationalism today takes on even more monstrous forms because it spits out only one question: “And where are you from? Let us ask ourselves another, more important question: “Who are we?” The measure of our provocative hope is the measure of our ability to strive for something because it is moral, not just because it is guaranteed to succeed. After all, there is only one boundary: the

boundary between one person and the other. I'll keep my fingers crossed for all of us. We just keep going.

Excerpt from the speech held by Radka Denemarková on the occasion of the exhibition opening on 14 June 2018. From September 2017, Radka Denemarková was writer-in-residence in Graz for one year. She lives and works in Prague.