



Mike Nicol

Seven Short Takes on the 'Civilised World'

Take 1

Cape Town. A letter arrives from the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst inviting me to spend the next year in Berlin on a writer's grant. I am immensely excited, so is my partner. It does, however, mean that we have to apply for year-long visas but, given the circumstances, this would surely be a mere formality? Surely?

About a week after we've submitted our visa applications through the local German consulate my partner takes a phone call from the consul offices.

'Mr Nicol's visa is no problem,' she is told, 'but your application has been refused.'

My partner laughs, although somewhat nervously thinking this must be joke.

'No, it is no joke,' says the consul official.

'But why?' asks a nonplussed and near to tears, Lynette (not her real name which is being withheld for reasons of paranoia and the fear of the alien's black list.)

'It is because you are not married,' comes the reply.

'But this is 1996. We've been living together for sixteen years,' Lynette bursts out. 'We have joint bank accounts. We have joint wills.' 'This does not matter,' she is told. 'You are not married. I am afraid your name has been put on the black list.'

Take 2

Berlin. (Lynette has 'got in' but her name does not appear on the list of occupants' names at the street door, nor is she registered with the police, as I am. We wonder if the police do random inspections to see who is staying where.)

I am standing in the check-out queue in Kaisers, the superette round the corner from our apartment. All my life I have been shopping in supermarkets and I have never spoken to anyone in the check-out queue, let alone been insulted or shouted at by a fellow queuer.

Yet as I stack my few purchases on the conveyor belt I catch the eye of the woman behind me. Her face is puce with pent-up rancour and resentment. She

explodes, berating me. I look at her completely astonished by the outburst. The cashier ignores the diatribe, those in the queue behind the demented woman appear to be doing mental arithmetic.

Such is the woman's hostility that I try to catch words in a desperate effort to understand what rules I have unwittingly broken. I hear Krankenhaus, but the rest is just so much German. Whether she is going to the Krankenhaus, or thinks I should go to the Kraukenhaus, it is impossible to say. I tell her in my few words of German that I can't understand. She goes on and on. Hastily I pay the cashier – who still acts as if nothing out of the ordinary is happening – and even more hastily stuff my groceries into a bag. Then flee.

Take 3

I am on a bus on my way to Tegel airport. The luggage area is packed with suitcases so I have had to place mine in the area normally reserved for children's prams. I stand next to it because the bus is full. At some stage a young woman with a pram gets on. She assesses the situation, sensibly deciding not to break my ankles in the pursuit of lawfulness. But this isn't good enough for another passenger who turns on me and begins shouting at my careless flouting of the rules.

I have no clue what she's saying, although she says quite a lot of it. However, I get the drift. Yet the more I ignore her the more incensed she becomes, soliciting support from her compatriots, even appealing to the driver to arbitrate at this gross violation of human rights. The young mother smiles vaguely at me in what I take to be embarrassment. The outraged woman continues to be outraged. Even while she's getting off the bus she admonishes me. As the bus pulls away I can see her animatedly discussing my 'misdemeanour' with her fellow-travellers.

Take 4

London, Heathrow. My third visit to see friends this year. The immigration officer looks at me, looks at my passport, flips through the pages which are adorned with visas. Every time I want to leave home I have to get a visa, it's a costly business but I treasure my visa hoard much as philatelists do their stamp collections.

'You were here in May,' says the officer astutely. Two months previously.

I nod. Say, 'Yes,' with a dry mouth. I don't do customs well, I always feel there's something's going on that I don't understand.

'And in March!'

There is triumph in his voice, as if he's picking up a pattern here.

Again I nod.

'Why?'

'To see friends.'

'How long are you here for?'

'A week.'

'You're going back to Germany.'

'Yes.'

He stamps me in for six months. Gives the passport back to me with the sort of look that says 'We know all about you, my friend.'

Take 5

Back in Berlin. A pavement cafe at the bottom of the Ku'damm on a summer's evening. Lynette and I are sitting with two Weissbiers watching the Berliners being humiliated by a prankster in a shabby grey suit.

He falls into step behind a strolling native, adopts his manner of walking, the slope of his shoulders, even his expressions. The cafe erupts with laughter, the Berliner looks round, the mimer shadowing his movements, undaunted that he has been caught out. With a tolerant smile and a nod, the Berliner continues his walk. No gesticulating, no shouting, no abuse.

I watch the prankster sidle up to a couple, slip between them and put his arm around the woman. Assuming it is her husband she lets him continue in this familiar way before looking to her side and seeing a tramp beaming at her. Again: no hysterical scream, no anger. Merely a smile and a shake of her head as she disengages herself from him.

Take 6

It is a hot August evening. We've been out most of the day and are footsore and eager to get home. We buy ice-creams while we wait for a bus.

Soon one comes and we step on.

'No, no, no,' shouts the bus driver, shaking his finger from side to side. 'No eating on the bus.'

Embarrassed we retreat, two bemused, grey-haired, forty-something people, left behind like castigated children on the pavement.

Take 7

I am standing with a visiting imbongi – a Xhosa praise-singer – on a Kreuzberg street watching the carnival. This is his first trip to Europe. He is dressed in jeans and a colourful Mandela-style shirt, sandals, a camera slung over his shoulder. He is also wearing a tall headpiece made of porcupine quills and is carrying a carved walking stick. We are both as fascinated by the floats as by the crowds.

Suddenly he grabs my arm.

'Look at that! Look at that!' he exclaims, pointing at a small tribe of natives – men, women and children – heading towards us. They are a motley crew in hippy-type garments, flowing cottons and leather waist coats. Some have shaven heads painted red, some have their hair cut in Mohican style, dyed green. Their arms are tattoo'd. They have metal rings – lots of them – in their

ears, and through their lips, eyebrows, noses. Some of the metal ornamentation is sizeable.

'I must take a photograph,' says my friend, slinging off his camera.

Simultaneously one of the elders of the tribe notices him and has much the same thought about photographs. He brings up his camera. A shutter clicks: 'civilised.'

A shutter clicks: 'primitive.'

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