



**Alek Popov**

## Safety in uniqueness, or Why the man-in-the-street has had his day

As consumer culture permeates politics, the man-in-the street has slipped beyond the control of his creators and taken on a life of his own. According to Alek Popov, this ubiquitous character has performed his role in history and now needs to be removed from circulation.

I would like, with your indulgence, to begin with a recent example from the American presidential campaign. Not only because the subject is still topical, but because there are parallels in Europe and it is a vivid example of the paradoxes that I intend to dwell upon here. Amongst the eddies of the global media clamour that accompanied the race to the White House, one name floated up to the surface: that of Joe Wurzelbacher, more commonly known as Joe the Plumber.

I think I know what you're thinking.

Those of you who keenly followed the campaign will ask: What has that damned Wurzelbacher got to do with anything? Take pity on us, for goodness sake! On the other hand, those of you who are rather more Eurocentric in your thinking and indifferent to the historic debate that took place on the other side of the Ocean may not be familiar with the name of Joe Wurzelbacher. What on earth has some plumber—or-other got to do with anything? Let me explain.

Joe Wurzelbacher is a real person from the state of Ohio who had his fifteen minutes of fame when he managed to speak to Barak Obama and tell him that his proposed tax policy would stop him from buying the plumbing company he had so long dreamed about. During a subsequent televised debate, both presidential candidates repeatedly addressed Joe as a symbol of the American man-in-the-street. Persistently courting him for his vote, one candidate swore that he would not increase his taxes, while the other reassured him that this economic necessity would not get in the way of his childhood dream.

It later turned out, however, that Joe was not a plumber at all, or rather, was not licensed to carry out the profession. Neither he nor his employer possessed the license obligatory for the district in which they were working, nor was Wurzelbacher a member of the plumbers' union. Indeed, he had never even been trained in the profession. On top of all that, he earned so little that he shouldn't really have cared at all. There was, however, another winner in all this media chaos — a certain Joe Francis, owner of the domain name Joetheplumber.com. He sold it for 350 000 dollars.

A few years ago, if you recall, the figure of the Polish plumber emerged as a powerful symbol in France and then throughout the whole of western Europe. The press collectively howled in despair that he was the greatest threat to the national labour markets. The first former socialist countries had just become members of the European Union, with all the attendant rights and obligations. At the time I found it hard to understand the logic by which this unprepossessing figure had come to embody the image of the dynamic, multifaceted and creative Polish diaspora. What percentage of the diaspora were in fact plumbers? Are not the majority of them ambitious students, for example? Or seductive nurses? There was another question that troubled me. What percentage of the powerful French economy was comprised of plumbing services? Judging by the panic, quite a significant percentage. And there was I, naively thinking that the aeronautics and automobile sectors were bigger. The truth lies in the drains. Only a nation of plumbers could be frightened by an invasion of plumbers.

"The Airbus is no more than a façade!" That's something I've always suspected.

And so we come to the most important part. Why, given the diversity of our species, did the media and politicians decide to treat us all as plumbers? Not only on the two sides of the ocean and not only on the two sides of our so-called United Europe but in each individual European country? I wouldn't say I had any class prejudice — God Forbid! But it is still strange, to say the least. We are talking about an isolated professional group with a typical ethos and very specific domestic profession that has all of a sudden become endowed with uncharacteristically representative functions.

I'm reminded of the well-known satirical novel by Robert Escarpit — *The Literatron*. The Literatron is more or less a machine for creating texts similar to a computer. The idea of its creators was to generate the perfect novel based on the best images from world literature. In response to the highest of expectations, the machine produced a bestseller — *Virgin and Typesetter!* When the Literatron was asked to compose a political speech the outcome was even more scandalous. After processing the entire history of political rhetoric the machine spewed out a series of gaffs such as: "This politics thing the more it changes the more it stays the same... There are no two ways about it, the clever people are the most stupid of all... All you have to do is hang a few of them (politicians) and things will improve...". This line of thought fits perfectly with an eloquent phrase from the Bulgarian transition, wrought by another merciless critic of his time, the Bulgarian satirist Aleko Konstantinov: "They are all rogues, on both sides!" The speech generated by the literatron was welcomed with raptures by the electorate and the politician whose job it was to make it quickly became a star. Every attempt to deviate from the absurd scenario led to vigorous disapproval.

I can't remember what happened to the literatron, whether it was destroyed as a malicious invention or if it destroyed itself. What was more important was the principles on which the machine operated. Its aim was universality and in the process it purged all nuances, simplified the meaning and looked for an arithmetical mean. The aim was for the text to reach the widest possible audience. The greatest irony was that a message meant for all was in practice a message for no one. This undermined its purpose, since it would have left its audience completely indifferent. The literatron is clearly a metaphor for populism as a leading principle of the political machine. However, populism works. If it didn't, politicians wouldn't resort to it so often.

That's where the universal medium — Joe the Plumber — came from. And he's not even a plumber!

Then again, no one likes his words to be thrown to the wind — especially those who expect unseemly profit from them. Populist messages have a clear addressee: His Excellency the Man-in-the-Street. They are created for him and he is created for them. What came first takes us back to the eternal dispute about the chicken and the egg. If we follow the path of the clichés with which secondary school education continues to fill our heads, then we might see this man-in-the-street as a representative of the people. And this is something that guarantees him a particular sort of immunity. None other than the same Aleko Konstantinov, wrote, in an unusually lofty tone: "Stop! Put your hands down! Don't touch the people! Take your hat off and bow down to this tormented sufferer, to this enduring martyr, to the person who gives you food and life, bow down to the Bulgarian people". This was in the far-off date of 1895, when the Bulgarian nation had just appeared on the historical scene — still young and untainted, held aloft by dreams and ambitions. We will no doubt find quotations with similar meanings in the writings of many other European authors who worked in the nineteenth century. Today they fill the textbooks and the speeches of local politicians and are repeated *ad nauseam* by the patriotic media like empty mantra.

Because much has happened in the meantime...

What the Bulgarian nation lived through during the twentieth century was in essence not vastly different from the trauma experienced by other nations at the same time. The pain and the specific circumstances no doubt make them unique for us. If we omit the details which are the stuff of literary works, then it boils down to the following: two national catastrophes, a civil war, totalitarian dictatorship and, to top it all — complete bankruptcy. Outwardly a trivial paradigm of history, but for those nations who have run its gauntlet, the result is fatal. Closets filled with skeletons, archives filled with secret reports, and Swiss banks filled with capital of shady origin. All the mortal sins were consummated: brother killed brother, spouse betrayed spouse, neighbour robbed neighbour. Entering into the mouth of the tunnel of the century as comrades-at-arms and singing as they went, the nations emerged from the other end as a bedraggled, downtrodden mass, with barely a thing uniting them apart from their language and a feeling of shame.

I find myself from time to time in the company of foreign journalists. One of their favourite questions used to be what Bulgarians expect from the EU. More recently they have been asking how Bulgarians feel in the EU. This question is inevitably accompanied by another: What do Bulgarians think about corruption? Until recently I answered, rather rashly, on behalf of the Bulgarian people by expressing my own point of view. I hope this hasn't damaged the people's image. Now, however, I'm rather more careful. I have to confess with a nuance of shame that I don't know what the people think about this matter or other matters. I'm not familiar with the people's strategy for survival in the present moment, or with its plans for a better life in the distant future. I just don't know the people. I can tell you what my friends, Matei or Stoyan, think. I have an inkling about the opinion of my colleague Ivan and I suppose that the taxi-driver who charges three levs per kilometre probably has quite the opposite views. But what the man at the newspaper stand thinks, I have absolutely no idea!

We don't even speak the same language.

At first glance our words may seem to be identical, but we find it harder and harder to achieve understanding, because we think in different cultural codes. We come from different histories, we reside in a different present and are travelling towards a different future. We find it easier to commune with foreigners who share our manner of living and value system than with fellow-citizens who pursue different modes and practices of living. We are already speaking of global nations defined by factors such as education, lifestyle, civil causes or sexual orientation. There is an irony in the logic of these processes: anti-globalists are united in global networks while extreme nationalists have developed something akin to an internationale. Another paradox is that those nations who have donated the least blood to the bankrupt bank of history are now enjoying the most stable national consensus and the greatest protection against populism. This is because blood does not create cohesion, despite the cries of the shamanic heralds of unity, but rather corrodes the dignity of nations.

I allowed myself to digress, in order to add strength to my thesis that the projection of the man-in-the-street has in essence little in common with the concept of a nation. He is a product of completely different social, political and economic conditions and is rather a testament to the crisis of national mythology: its inability *per se* to generate a context within which we can identify outside the formal framework of national festivities.

Today we are most powerfully unified, both at work and play, by the market. Even taking into account all our cultural differences and notwithstanding what particular version of the past, present or future we inhabit, the market is the level playing field upon which we inevitably meet. The man-in-the-street is a projection of the consumer society that developed after the Second World War — a marketing concept created for the purposes of the economy. His identity is defined in relation to the national consumer structure. The German man-in-the-street drives a Volkswagen. The French man-in-the-street drives a Renault. The Dutchman, a bicycle. The Bulgarian, a jeep. There are even mathematical calculations of the quantity of beer, wine, brandy, meat, coffee and newspapers consumed by the average representative of each nation, how many days holiday they take, what size of home they inhabit, and how often they replace their water heaters. And based on any possible change in the parameters of national consumption, we try to divine the direction of evolution of the national character. The history of the man-in-the-street is restricted solely to his credit rating, and his future delineated by his pension plan. He has been surgically deprived of everything that might divert him from his main task in life — to consume. He has even been deprived of his feeling of guilt. He is a foolish simpleton, married with two children — yet, although we constantly ridicule him, we identify with him every time we have to purchase a new cooker on hire-purchase.

Created as a means to revive the collapsing post-war economies, a barrier to the recidivism of history and dubious ideologies, the man-in-the-street plays his role to perfection. However, like every artificial invention, he has slipped beyond the control of his creators and taken on a life of his own. Like Frankenstein's monster, he has suddenly realized his own strength and begun to dictate the rules of the game. He is constantly discovering new desires and needs, kindly recommended by the market conjuncture. He no longer consumes solely cars, cookers and vacuum cleaners, but is hungry for media, art and politics.

Democracy has frequently been compared to the free market, and vice versa, the market has been compared with democracy. In his polemic "Intellectuals and Socialism", Friedrich Hayek claimed that every day the market subjects manufacturers to a referendum; the purchasing of one or other product is a form of democratic choice in which each of us votes directly with his wallet. In other words, money becomes a ballot slip. This does not mean that, sine qua non, democracy needs to function as a market, but in practice this is the case. Politicians attempt to market their goods in the form of programmes, projects and laws, while the voter finds himself in the role of a shopper in the supermarket of ideas. At a given moment his vote becomes transformed into a means of payment, whether he physically drops his slip into a box, or votes "virtually" on the internet. It is not by chance that contemporary political jargon contains an abundance of expressions borrowed from the language of commerce. We say of a party trying to promote an old programme that it is "past its sell-by date", "selling a law", "selling an economic plan", or "selling a message". George W. Bush, for example, who was reputed to be a very average businessman, managed to sell Joe the Plumber an entire war.

How did we get here?

The consumer culture of the man-in-the-street has been transferred directly onto politics. He tends to shop on credit and is convinced that he can always return his purchase if it is defective or doesn't fit. This happens quite often; the dealers of power are not significantly different from used-car dealers or household goods salesmen. They sell you a quick, little war which the PR men claim will rid you of a terrible, big enemy and revive the economy. It is these same PR men which advertise the Gillette products that you have always been satisfied with. However, the war turned out to be quite a long one and dragged the economy into a profound recession. So what — it happens. Except that, when you want to get a refund on the basis of the reasonable argument that the product suffers from structural defects and is not what you borrowed the money for, you find that you can't. "Sorry, no refund policy!" So there's nothing left for you to do but to carry on with the weekly payments, and you swear that you will never buy anything from that rotten shop again. Not even a coffee maker! But then elections come along again with that same fateful inevitability. You have to fill your fridge and there's nothing can be done about it — you will go shopping again, albeit to another shop. They've got a two for the price of one deal going on. There might even be a third concealed somewhere. You'll see that when you get home and undo the packaging. Because the laws of political marketing never change.

No one can force you to buy anything you don't want to, but you can always let yourself be deceived. The man-in-the-street is easily deceived — that's why he was invented, for the convenience of the manufacturers. No one ever supposed that one day he would leave the shops and head for the ballot boxes. We can't ask him not to think when he takes out a loan for a new car, but to think when he votes for parliament. Everything has a price — thinking included. But are we prepared to pay for it? The global financial crisis has shown that populism in the economy can be extremely expensive. Do we have to suffer another crisis to re-examine our consumer practices in politics? Now we've successfully recycled our armies on the battlefield into armies of happy consumers, perhaps the time has come to demobilize the armies themselves. Do we really need them? Is it worth the money and efforts we're spending to keep them in a state of constant shopping-readiness?

I believe that universal demobilization is just a matter of time. Before that, however, we have to debunk the myth of the man-in-the-street. He has performed his role in history and now needs to be deconstructed and removed from circulation. And then we will see the real man with his particular nuances illuminating all his desires, problems and dreams. Our uniqueness is our safety net against populism at all levels. More than likely this will lead to a collapse of mass production and a slowdown of commercial turnover — but it will guarantee a new quality of life. I think that we — the people — deserve it.

Still, we have to educate ourselves that our small habits and everyday life are not our selves. The notion of national identity should not be reduced to the exotic items we sell to tourists or to the exotic items we buy from exotic places. Plato claims that ideas are bigger and more perfect than their projections in reality. However, the man-in-the-street project makes us smaller than we are in fact.

Because... it is simply not our project.

*This article is based on a speech given at the conference, "Citizen Education Facing Nationalism and Education in Europe", in Sofia in November 2008.*

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Published 2008-12-12  
Original in Bulgarian  
Translation by David Mossop  
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