Playing with Fire

One of the greatest plays of the 20th century, at least of those known to me, is Max Frisch's *The Fire Raisers* (1953). Written in the aftermath of the Second World War as an attempt to explain (and to warn) how a patent evil like Nazism can triumph in a civilized society, this play does what only great literature can do: suggest the universal while using the particular.

Its protagonist, Biedermann, is a comfortable bourgeois living in a town that is beset by several mysterious acts of arson. He is visited at home by Schmitz, a hawker, who half-persuades, half-intimidates his way into an invitation to lodge in Biedermann's attic, and who soon brings a second hawker, Eisenring, to stay in the house.

Gradually it becomes clear that Schmitz and Eisenring are the ones setting the fires in the town, but Biedermann refuses to acknowledge it. His blindness arises from moral and physical cowardice, and from wishful thinking—the hope that what he sees does not really mean what it obviously means. Schmitz and Eisenring bring barrels of gasoline into the house and Biedermann, pusillanimous to the last, helps them make the fuses and gives them the matches with which they burn his house down.

Now most of us have worked for organizations or institutions that have acceded to changes we think immoral or deleterious and which, if extended in the same direction, could lead to disaster. At what point do we resist? We do not have the luxury of knowing how it all turns out. We don't want to be Biedermann; on the other hand, we can't resist to the last ditch every change with which we disagree. There is no one so tiresome or ineffectual as the permanent, uncompromising oppositionist who sees in every slight phenomenon of which he disapproves the slippery slope to human damnation. Not every

slippery slope is slid down; and in any case, experience shows us, or should show us, our judgment is fallible.

Nevertheless, I could not help but think of Biedermann recently as I read an account in *Le Monde*, the French newspaper of record, of the Greece versus Turkey soccer match held in Istanbul in the presence of the two countries' prime ministers. The event was supposed to symbolize political reconciliation between these historically antagonistic countries.

Personally, I have never been fully convinced that international sport serves to improve relations between nations. Such gestures strike me as often bordering on emotional kitsch. Not only that, they can have the reverse effect: that of bringing out the crudest nationalist feelings in crowds.

What happened on this occasion was even worse than that. When a minute's silence was called for before the match as a mark of respect or mourning for the victims of the November 13 terrorist attacks in Paris, it provoked a counter-demonstration. The crowd—what proportion of it will never be known—began to whistle and to chant *Allahu akbar*, "God is great."

The most obvious interpretation of this disgusting episode is that a considerable public feeling exists in Turkey (whose extent is necessarily unknown) that rejoices in the mass murder of "infidels." But the *Le Monde* reporter struggled, or rather squirmed, to avoid this most obvious interpretation. Biedermann himself could not have done better.

This is what the article said, *inter alia*:

> The [Turkish] prime minister, Davutoglu, did not react. 'The martyrs are eternal, the country is indivisible!' chanted the supporters. We don't know if this hostility was directed at the victims of the attacks of November 13, or

> at the Greek prime minister, or both. The slogan in question is usually chanted by Turkish patriots whenever a Turkish soldier (called ‘martyr’) is killed by rebel Kurds of the PKK [the Kurdish Workers’ Party]. With the recrudescence of hostilities between the PKK and the Turkish Army, this kind of slogan has returned to the streets and stadiums with a vengeance. On 13 October, at a qualifying match for the European Cup in Konya, a conservative city in central Anatolia, shouts of ‘Allahu akbar’ rang out from the stands to break the minute’s silence observed to commemorate the 102 victims (all militants of the left-wing pro-Kurdish party) of the double suicide bombing in Ankara three days earlier. The combination of ‘Allahu akbar’ and ‘The country is indivisible’ signals the return to the ideology of the ultra- nationalists in vogue in the 1970s . . .

But it is perfectly obvious that the attacks in Paris had nothing whatever to do with Turkish nationalism (no suspect was Turkish, and Turkish nationals were more likely to be victims of the attacks than perpetrators of them), nor were the victims targeted because they were pro-Kurdish. If anything, the perpetrators would have been anti-Turkish nationalism, in so far as such nationalism is competitive with Islamic fundamentalism.

The chant of ‘Allahu akbar’ during the minute’s silence before the soccer match expressed a religious, not a nationalistic, sentiment. This is so perfectly obvious that one wonders why the author of the article assiduously avoided saying it.

The parallel with Frisch’s hapless protagonist is not exact, of course, because two of the interlopers he let in his house, whose activities he was at such dishonest pains to deny, were fire-raisers. We have no means of knowing what percentage of Muslims in France and the rest of Europe abominate, approve, or support what was done in Paris. But Biedermann’s state of denial of and that of the *Le Monde* reporter are eerily

similar, and similarly dangerous. We should not allow such evasion—a mere 13 days after the bombings!—to go unremarked.

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