

The New Convention

By Theodore Dalrymple

Convention is like nature: You throw it out with a pitchfork, yet it will return. The very attempt to escape it *as such*, merely because it *is* convention, is itself deeply conventional.

This is not to say, either, that convention ought to be blindly followed just because it is convention. Conventions can be bad; but they are bad not because they are conventions, but because they are stupid, cruel, etc. No one should go out looking for conventions to slay.

This is all but a preliminary to describing something that I saw and read recently in the French newspaper for aging bourgeois leftists, *Libération*. It was a full-page article about someone called Marie Patouillet, of whom I had not previously heard. She won a gold medal at the Paris Paralympic Games, that modern substitute for the dearly missed Victorian freak show in which exceptionally fat ladies (exceptionally fat for their time, that is; they would hardly be noticed nowadays) or people with striking deformities or abnormalities would be exhibited to the prurient gaze of a public ever in search—as it still is—of a dose of sensation.



I should here point out that I am, of course, in favor of assistance to the handicapped to help them do and achieve as much as possible. I learned this lesson very early in life when my best friend at the time, from whom I was inseparable, was one of the last people in the country to be struck down and rendered paraplegic by polio. His mother was a Christian Scientist and had a rather peculiar attitude to illness, not really believing in its reality (she died of cancer not many years later, at what then seemed to me a great age, but what would now seem to me no age at all). My parents, as I recall it, were admirable in the face of my friend's paraplegia: While they did everything that they could for him, they did not make a fuss, but accepted his difficulties as they accepted the weather, and he was included in everything that he could be included in. He was neither lionized, condescended to, nor insulted. As a result of all this, he had a

distinguished career, overcoming much of his handicap to a remarkable degree.

Marie Patouillet seems to be, by contrast, the very model of a modern upright citizen. Besides her disability—apparently, she cannot walk or run fast or far without crutches—she is lesbian, tattooed, shaven-headed, pro-Palestinian, married to an actress, and against discrimination and stereotyping. Could virtue go further?

Since winning her medal, she has given up competitive cycling. She used to train ten hours a day, which is to say, “the relentless effort to gain a tenth of a second,” which strikes me as perhaps admirable in its determination but as rather stupid and worthless as to its end.

The photograph accompanying the article shows her looking pensive, her tattoos peeping out from below the sleeve of what appears to be a close-fitting football shirt, her fair hair cropped in a masculine fashion, or as someone trying to rid herself of head lice, her two little round earrings more redolent of piercing than of jewelry, holding hands with her “wife” while resting her head on that person’s heavily tattooed leg.

What does she do with her time now that she no longer cycles competitively? Among other things, she gives talks, either for nothing or paid by businesses, about sexism, “LGBTphobias,” and inclusion. There are, she says, still too many problematic stereotypes repeated and taught in sport.

Such as what? That, for example, women are no good at football, at any rate by comparison with men? This is an evident fact, not a stereotype. A very moderate men’s team, or even male youth team, can defeat the very best women’s team. The fact is that women were not made for football, and no sensible person would think any the less of them for that. Their attempt to play is perfectly within their rights, of

course; but there seems to have been a concerted, almost ideologically inspired effort recently to convince the public that women's football is an exciting rather than a dispiriting spectacle. For example, in Charles de Gaulle Airport a couple of weeks ago, I observed huge liquid-crystal screens showing a short clip over and over again of ponytailed women footballers behaving exactly like their male counterparts, jumping for joy and embracing one another after scoring a goal (one did not see the goal itself, which no doubt would have revealed the very moderate qualities of women in the sport). Poor Charles de Gaulle, that his name should be associated with this display, the modern Western equivalent of North Korean propaganda!

What is rather peculiar about the subject of this article is that, while excoriating stereotypes, she should herself cleave so closely to a stereotype that so many people have of the masculinized lesbian. Evidently, she has not the imagination to see herself as others—many others—might see her. Although inclusive, she would not include *them* in her otherwise all-inclusive inclusivity, even if they constituted a majority. If they said that they found her appearance unnecessarily ugly, she would ascribe their judgment not to an aesthetic faculty, but to mere social prejudice. If you don't like the appearance of someone, it can only be because you are suffering from some kind of phobia, an irrational fear of them. Anything goes, so long as it does not partake of, or derive from, former conventions. This is the new convention of conventions.

Reading the article made me almost long for the days of Ivy Compton-Burnett and C.V. Wedgwood. The former was a truly original novelist, successful in her day, and the second a serious but also highly popular historian of the 17th century. Both were in long-term lesbian relationships with women of distinction, and everyone knew that they were, but no one remarked on it or said anything about it. It was none of anyone's business, and the two were known and respected for

their work. This now seems to have been a time of prelapsarian sophistication by comparison with modern coarseness.

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