

LUX EDMUNDI: CHRISTMAS, 2016

Stalin described writers as “engineers of human souls”. Their function - the function, indeed, of all creative and cultural activities under the Soviet system – was to help the workers make and mend themselves in character and in commitment the better to serve the Revolution, the State, the Party. Schools, too, were required to contribute to the development of the “new Soviet man”. “We must”, wrote one theorist, “make the young into a generation of Communists. ... We must nationalise them. From the earliest days of their little lives, they must find themselves under the beneficent influence of Communist schools. ...”.

The Nazis were also dedicated to the creation of a new humanity, purified of all influences, genetic and other, emanating from those categorised as “*untermenschen*”, sub-humans, whether individuals or whole peoples. In this, the National Socialist German Workers’ Party followed its understanding of the philosophy of Friedrich William Nietzsche (1844-1900) and, especially, of his notion of the *Übermensch*, the Overman, the Superman. For Hitler and his followers, the Superman would come from Aryan stock, from the brightest and best of the Nordic races, from the Germanic peoples especially. Their reading – some insist it is a misreading – of Nietzsche conflated his concept of the *Übermensch* and his image of “the blond beast”, a beast of prey, “a conqueror and master race which, organised for war ... unhesitatingly lays its terrible claws upon a populace”. This mish-mash of philosophical and genetic lies, half-truths and misconceptions supplied the frame of reference for education throughout the *Reich*. As Bernhard Rust, Minister for Science, Education and Cultural Affairs in Hitler’s government, put it: “The whole function of education is to create NAZIS”.

Capitalism, of course, does not come before the court of history with clean hands. It, too, has a view of the kind of person the education system should endeavour to produce and, in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), it has what is, to all intents and purposes, its own “Department of Education”, whose influence conditions – maybe, indeed, determines – governmental thinking on education across the globe, including in the Republic of Ireland. The OECD takes it as given that governments invest in education to serve the market. The purpose of such investment, consequently, is ensure that boys and girls, men and women, are taught and trained – and, to deconstruct its advocacy of life-long learning, re-trained, as and when the market requires – to be a kind of economic *homo habilis*, a person ready, willing and able to generate a better and better return on whatever is invested by whomsoever in her or his educational development. Unintentionally it may be, but this understanding of the means and modes of teaching and learning still cultivates the Wolf of Wall Street, so to speak, who thinks greed is good and has no real moral or other problem with a world in which, in effect, the Haves have more and more, the Have Nots, less and less.

These “isms” see the human person as a means to an end. The value of this human or that is calculated with reference, not to any inherent dignity, but to the extent to which this person contributes to the achievement of a given objective. The inevitable result is the instrumentalisation, the dehumanisation, the reification, of men and women, and, in the case of the “non-producers”, their utter marginalisation and, even, elimination.

The answer, the antidote, to this utterly reductive process lies before us in the Crib, the Holy Infant Jesus, the Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity, the Word of God, begotten of the Father before time began, born at the appointed time of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Light from Light, the Light of the Nations, the Light in which we see light. His is the only name given us under heaven by which we can be saved. He, and he alone, is the ground and the bulwark of human dignity. He is the means and the end of the (re)humanisation – of, indeed, the deification - of every single man and woman the world over. Let each and all of us involved in any way in Catholic education take time this Holy Season to kneel before the Crib, to acknowledge that this newborn Child is our *raison d’être*, that it is he who makes sense of what we are, and of what we do, in the service of youth for the sake of the Gospel. *Venite adoremus dominum!*