

The Danger of Stupid Idiots

“Stupidity comes dressed up as journalists, academics and even as men of God. Bonhoeffer states unequivocally that silence in the face of evil is itself evil, and not to speak is to speak as not to act is actually to act”.

By Pat Utomi

The danger of stupid idiots. If there is one thing Nigeria needs now, in the face of today's crisis, it is people who can speak truth to power as we are preyed on by state capture, creeping fascism and the criminal hijack of politics, and a collapse of the checks and balances of the estates of the realm. When people who were known for protests threaten to try those who follow in their footsteps for treason, you do not need to be told that there are snakes in the raffia roof. Before I get badgered by those unwilling to read or lacking in the discipline to digest concepts, let me announce upfront that no insults are intended by either the title, or the message below. But I have seen enough of the rush to abuse, by those who miss the meaning of concepts different from their everyday usage, that I suspect an upfront caveat may slow down the rush to conclusion by those who give meaning to the real insult; which is that the best way to hide something from most of us is to write it down in a book. The fear of reading should be overcome so we can find meaning and understanding. I know Nigeria is in grave danger from cleavages separating us from them, as emotion steps down reason, in many, including some very well educated and even a few I know of who built reputations as cosmopolitan thought leaders. These may sometime soon confront the puzzle and the shame the German elite dealt with after World War II. That was also the lot of some in Rwanda who were confronted with their past after the genocide and the triumph of Paul Kagame. I have chosen therefore to leave everyday meaning of the words idiot and stupid and use them in context, as conceptual expression of phenomena by philosophers and social scientists. To the wise men of Ancient Greece, we first turn for their typology of men in society. Those who think of themselves alone as the basis for engagement they called idiots. Not an insult. Just a category.

Those who think of and empathize with others so long as those others share parochial bonds, like blood lines, language or religion, they called tribesmen. As Joshua Greene elucidates in the book, *Moral Tribes*, exploring emotion, reason and the growing gap between us and them, the tribesman is threatened by outside groups and is



perpetually at war with those outside his tribe. When people mature to a universal sense of the dignity of the human person and live human solidarity, they move up to the category of citizen. All you need do is navigate social media today and you will encounter the reign of tribesmen in extant Nigeria. Make a trick statement and you will discover they don't read. Once your name fits those they are programmed to insult they hit the keyboard saying the same things they said yesterday. And the day before. Many were deployed there by politicians purportedly trying to build a nation. Then there is the concept of stupidity. Back in my days in Grad School in the late 1970s I was struck by the work of several academics at the

University of California, Berkeley. One was a public policy scholar, Aaron Wildavsky, and the other was Carlo M Cipolla. The former gave us the value of complex redundancy in policy formulation and the latter gave us the five laws of human stupidity.

Cipolla defined a stupid person as one who causes losses to others when he or she may not benefit from the action they chant for and may, in fact, suffer loss from that action. Cipolla studied human history and found a pervasive influence of stupid people. He then offers us the five laws of human stupidity. The first law is that we always underestimate the number of stupid people in circulation. The second is that the probability of stupidity in a person is independent of his other characteristics such as his education or wealth. The third is that this person supporting wrong that cause harm to others may not even think of personal benefit from that harm. Fourth is that non-stupid people always underestimate the danger of being associated with the stance of the stupid and how that underestimation will eventually impact them at very high cost. The fifth law states that the stupid person is a most dangerous person; often more dangerous than bandits. The Berkeley Economic historian had categorized man in society just like the Greeks did, and found four types of people: The Intelligent, the bandits, the unfortunate and the stupid. The Intelligent are those who aim to benefit themselves and others (win/win); the bandits are those who benefit themselves by harming others, the unfortunate are those who do harm while trying to benefit others, the stupid are those who seek harm to others without benefiting from it. Any time you see a person cheering passionately for a politician whose conduct does not make sense or who harms the common good, you are looking at a stupid person, no matter their other characteristics of education, wealth or social status. Even more troubling, as Cipolla tells us is that there are so many more of them than we like to believe. So take a good look at the fellow next to you.

When Idiots from the Greek typology become stupid, as in the Cipolla thesis, society is in grave crisis. All you have to do to recognize we live in dangerous times in Nigeria is to step back and examine the scene that is Nigeria today and you will see an army of stupid idiots marching as Hitler youth did, to the drums of harm to others. A few may be bandits but the majorities are simple stupid idiots. Please remember no insult is intended here. Just a social scientist pointing to phenomena that fit existing theory. Highly educated German professionals went that way with ultimately devastating costs to humanity and their country in the Weimar Republic as Hitler, powered by Goebbels propaganda, went to work. One of them stopped midway into his support of the words of harm to others, and began

to ask why, of the Nazis. It did not matter that he was once a supporter. The Lutheran Priest, Martin Niemoller, who questioned things, spent most of the war years in Concentration camps and prisons. After the war he spoke those immortal words of the imperative of speaking up... first they came for the socialists and I did not speak up because I was not a socialist... then they came for the Jews and I did not speak up... when finally, they came for me there was no one left to speak up. His moral imperative for speaking up in times of moral crisis has always led me to Dante's inferno and the hottest part of hell being reserved for those who in a moral crisis seek refuge in neutrality. But it is to Dietrich Bonhoeffer we must reserve the glory of the Quattro on this matter. He insists we have more to fear from stupid people than evil ones, for evil is easy to identify and fight but not so for stupidity. Stupidity comes dressed up as journalists, academics and even as men of God. Bonhoeffer states unequivocally that silence in the face of evil is itself evil, and not to speak is to speak as not to act is actually to act.

This is why I try to act not necessarily to be seen as acting but because as Bonhoeffer mused if you board the wrong train it is no use going to the corridor and start running in the opposite direction. With passionate commitment to the mantra that Nigeria will rise up again and the conviction that this phase will pass away, if we act right, I have laboured on. I have helped found the new tribe, a movement of Nigerians seeking a values driven society based on personal integrity, the work ethic, merit, inclusion and a push back on Gandhi's deadly social sins like politics without principles, wealth without work, education without character, etc. All who are minded to escape the stupid idiot tag are welcome to check the portal thenewtribe.ng and find a cohort to act in concert with. But a person can also act alone so long as they assert the dignity of the human person and seek the common good. If there is one thing Nigeria needs now, in the face of today's crisis, it is people who can speak truth to power as we are preyed on by state capture, creeping fascism and the criminal hijack of politics, and a collapse of the checks and balances of the estates of the realm. When people who were known for protests threaten to try those who follow in their footsteps for treason you do not need to be told that there are snakes in the raffia roof.

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