

Roger Willemsen
Who We Were

“Where do we get all our ignorance?”

Hardcover, 60 pages

24 November 2016

S. Fischer Verlag

Roger Willemsen was working on a new book before he died. It was to be called “Who We Were” and would examine the present day from the perspective of the future. Roger Willemsen stopped working on the book when he fell ill in the summer of 2015, but by then he had already formulated the core ideas for “Who We Were” in a stirring “future speech”. More than simply a melancholic summing-up and a piece of keen analysis by an extraordinary contemporary of ours, it is also a passionate plea for a “break with the lightning speed of time”. It is an appeal to the next generation to declare its disagreement.

Who We Were

“Where do we get all our ignorance?”

Translated by Simon Pare

Never before has observing those around us, contemplating people in social situations involving traffic, entertainment, business, travel or communication, produced such an overwhelming impression that none of them are here. Having been ejected from the here and now, they are on the run, in limbo, on the move, atomized by a swarm of distractions, apathetic as their lives are increasingly hollowed out and decentralized.

They appear to be hostages to organized absence, having fled into the displays and molecular fog of other public spheres. I say this not in contemptuous criticism of technology, for in any event technology effortlessly disregards such criticism by dovetailing with our desires; I say it instead in an attempt to conceive of even the slightest notion of intellectual effectiveness, since this requires a unity of reflection, panoramic vision, astonishment, doubt, observation and, yes, imagination. In other words, we cannot discuss the consciousness-forming processes of culture without exploring the conditions in which consciousness can even arise nowadays.

Part of this is unquestionably a new kind of fleetingness. The time code of all experience has changed. Transit has become a principle, the wanderings of the *flâneur* have given way to the zoom and the accelerated approach, to the compression of complex interrelations into pictograms, signals and effects that appear as manifestations of pleasure/displeasure drives. Breakneck speed is our mode of existence. That is the therapeutic aspect of living through the medium of a smartphone. We are awaking into the golden age of restlessness and we will be able to say that the battle for our attention had already begun before we stepped out into the city streets. The fronts of buildings screamed at us, naked bodies beguiled us from shop windows, and there was always something languorous or ingratiating that we found more appealing than anything else in the world. Sheer close-up, sheer hyperbole. And ourselves caught in the middle, fought-over and battle-weary.

We didn't say that we couldn't carry on, that we are defeated and beyond salvation, living in a state of capitulation. We simply felt it, and there were products to counter this, moods and promises that one

could buy. Man had forfeited the right to be himself in public. Now he can only step outdoors by abjuring his worn-down, less than commanding self.

Moreover, we live as new people amid a proliferation of fresh distractions. Driving, eating, emailing, listening to music, writing and taking in the news all occur simultaneously. We know this; we build up a guilty conscience about our fleetingness, and we continue to cultivate it – the superficial attention that makes every detail seem less pregnant and also less significant.

There may be nothing new about a man looking more inquisitively at the clock's face than at his wife's. There may not even be anything new about a person peering with greater interest at a screen than at the world around him, and talking of the "virtual world" in a way that makes it sound at least semantically equivalent to the old analogue one. What *is* new are the "second-screen humans" for whom one screen is no longer enough, who need to be doing several things at once to be able to put up with the world and who, in the cloud of information, impulses and image-guided emotions, is a kind of sluggish self-headquarters, clumsily configured and somehow remote and inaccessible.

In the process we incriminated not just the present but also our own presence. We thought that rooms were not worth spending time in; we ourselves thought that we were not made to be and to stay here. Even public spaces contain less and less transit areas designed for waiting, and opportunities for non-efficient time and looming self-absorption are decreasing. Music intervenes, images flow and information whizzes by, unbidden.

New rooms are permanently opening – and new ones within those – for consumption and service offerings, and devices have set themselves free. What had once been there to open a voice connection had suddenly become a hall of mirrors packed with pictures. We carried huge stores of data around with us, meaningful-meaningless, useful-useless concentrated news agglomerates, incentives to buy, guidance proposals and wellness offers.

What used to be a telephone was now a mainframe, what used to be a shirt was now a thermometer, and a house had become a comfort machine. Every change led to this great convenience and availability, which we enjoyed for a short time, then barely registered any more before replacing it with a new state of living, comprising overload, deadening and surrender to disenfranchisement. Yes, the lack of friction burnt us out.

After a while, only the big city held enough attractions to nourish many of us. Villages scared us like forests or dead zones because, there, one noise stood out that had become unmistakable amid all the metropolitan noise: the quietness, the silence between people who had nothing to say to each other, uttering platitudes, substituting effects for impact and subtracting all traces of personal experience from language. We were partially lifeless, dead, controlled by urges whose authors we did not perceive ourselves to be, and felt ourselves increasingly as individuals who were ill equipped for this world. We grew aggressive, but this stemmed from defensiveness and anonymity; we declared that our defence reflexes were in self-defence, and tried hard not to draw ourselves to the attention of our age.

Of course, this is how people in transit speak, those who are almost vanquished, and those who have been crushed by their times. Everyone steps into this zone at some point, but everyone may ask themselves how consciousness is to take shape in these conditions, and how ideas can be put into action so that consciousness can fulfil its ambition to sustain life. No navigation system can set a route that steers us around these questions!

Yes, we then say like veterans, we too had our ideals, for a time. For as with everything else, we too were bored among the same unchanging ideas, the same unchanging goals. It may not have been primarily the adversity of our times that dictated these to us; it may also have been our boredom with familiar ideas. So they came to nought, and one after the other they collapsed once more like product marketing campaigns. Yes, we lived amid campaigns for ideas, each with its own particular jargon.

Sometimes we wanted a feminine, metrosexual, understanding man for who doesn't need a woman merely to show off his softer side. Yet in the same breath, a preference emerged for the ruthless, rabid alpha male who is determined to go it alone. And the same was true of our fellow man. A whore. A fighting dog. A car. We couldn't abide to be stuck in a single, continual reality, even if it was a continuity of vital destruction.

Sometimes we were for growth, sometimes for work-life balance, sometimes for competition, sometimes for sustainability, sometimes even for progress, but also for deceleration, for empathy, then for toughness, for God, for Bush, for animal rights. In language too we kept cultivating new sensitivities, and proscribed words such as "nigger", "gypsy", "harelip", "weed", "mongoloid". Yes, we were highly sensitive machines and every linguistic transgression set alarm bells

ringing inside us. Signalling what? We bristled at the idea that beneath the spoken words there might lie some implication, something unprocessed, something vile that might one day break free of the mass of preconscious and repressed material and become controversial. All this took place more in language than in the world of political facts, consumer decisions and acts of collective destruction, which we acknowledged with less pain.

We reacted less sensitively to warnings and maxims about communal life than to the suspicion that the visible person might be merely a dummy concealing another person who refused to show his face, who would not step forward. The secrets that had once defined the personal, the private and the intimate, had suddenly become a threat. We declared war on them, not because they might be dangerous, but precisely because they were secret, and the only people who still had secrets were those with something to hide.

The disciplinarian society creates violations, transgressions and possibilities to be expelled, not to belong, to give oneself away, to be exposed. Everyone is a sleeper: say a word out of place and turn lethal, destroyers, revealing their true nature. The demand for discipline in every field produces grouchers, hysterics, the enraged, frenzied attackers; and the pressure to perform produces losers, burnouts, depressives, people who fail in their quest for self-realization and slip through the gap between the public parameters to the refrain of “I can’t go on, I can’t go on.”

We came from a time with a high opinion of something we referred to as “the private sphere”, shying away from observation, coy about displaying our intimate, familiar, personal moments. We surrendered them. The self could no longer be protected. It was a time when the outdoors became hostile. *Horror vacui*. We took a deep breath when we left our homes, observed by cameras, and eavesdropped upon by our appliances. Every technical device was a potential surveillance point, an assault on the sanctity of our integrity. The outdoors became a zone that had to be overcome before distraction and shopping took over: the contemplation of a shoe.

And the shoe took over. No reason not to take it personally and to show it off to the world as part of our identity. We exposed ourselves, discovered the serialized novel of our lives and projected it into the world. I have eaten, I was ill, I travelled; this was the view from my hotel room: a house, a dog, a shoe, weather.

To make something public no longer required epics and ideas, legitimacy and relevance, no more intermediaries, journalists or

biographers. We were sufficient unto ourselves. A gigantic autobiographical world emerged, a confetti shower of pictures, data, feelings. We didn't only become see-through from the outside; we rendered ourselves transparent.

No era has ever been able to dissect its public life so microscopically and precisely, or magnify its details, as this one. This has also altered the notion of the addressee of a literary message or the recipient of pathetic enlightenment ideas. Our stories proliferated infinitely, but our empathy was not as well developed. Who should, and who would, still participate? Eventually, speakers, dispatchers and those who claimed to be important were everywhere. The sphere of those who remained silent, did not participate, made themselves small and allowed themselves to be overlooked, became an absolute idyll.

These movements took place in parallel. Sovereignty was transferred from states to financial systems and corporations; autonomy was confined to ever smaller areas and – in the most radical assessment – unthinkable. Simultaneously, however, the individual was inflated by an unprecedented and previously unimaginable quantity of data from a single life, which quickly became one great coordinated mass life, waltzing through the streets in mass choreographies. And while all this was happening, his own ego wilted and succumbed to fatigue and self-weariness, which it fed helplessly with the latest selfies.

We were like the countryside – retreating. We could do nothing to resist our own disappearance, yet we wore ourselves down within the narrow confines of a job that was supposed to make a company stronger, more successful and more effective, but that would not answer any existential questions or help to guarantee our survival. Looking into the past, we spied only progress. Looking into the future, we saw nothing but decadence. We were those who knew but did not understand, who grasped but could not imagine, filled with information but devoid of insight, crammed with knowledge but scant of experience. So we went, no longer detained by ourselves.