

The Thinker in the Supermarket

Mustard... mild mustard, hot mustard, classic yellow mustard, brown, with honey, with horseradish, piquant mustard, Dijon. The only way to choose the right one is to taste each of them, and surely in some other country, in some other market, there is a better choice. Maybe somewhere they put wine instead of vinegar; what is the natural taste of mustard? The essence of ketchup is not in tomatoes but in the word ketchup on the package. If the inscription says it is ketchup then it must be ketchup and at least a feeble connection with tomatoes is implied. The list of contents states clearly that there is also some sugar and some other abstract formulas, but when you sum it all up you have to believe the inscription. For if it were not ketchup, the word mustard would be written.

Packages – red, blue, silver, yellow, orange, the plastic ones, those from aluminum, bags, wrapping paper, cardboard, print, colours. Chips... it is interesting how a bag of chips always contains one half of chips and one half of air; it looks as if it were full of finely, precisely cut potatoes, but in fact it is a bag of packed air.

Juice, carbonated, non-carbonated, orange juice, with or without sugar, with or without fruit, with or without additives, with or without artificial colours, with or without pulp, but always for money.

Meat, fruit, clothes, shoes, tissue paper, toothpaste, plates, pots, anti-mucus gel, anti-wrinkle gel, antibiotics, aspirins, cream for dry skin, for oily skin, loudspeakers, blank CDs, DVDs with movies, computers, ear sticks – everything can be packaged.

Chocolates, candies, biscuits, piles of sweets in different variations, the things that a century ago were reserved only for noblemen to partake of, nowadays accessible to everyone in those multicoloured packages with letters and names that some people sitting at the tables pondered about and polished and perfected and made slogans and advertisements just as Shakespeare was sitting at some wooden desk, writing his plays. What is the connection between sugar and chocolate, where did the sugar come from, who cut the sugarcane, was it under blazing sun, was the man barefoot, did he have blisters on his hands, was it someone with wife and children or was it perhaps a kid who used his machete in some forest to get cocoa for this chocolate, was the forest cleared so that I could have my chocolate, which movie will I watch with this chocolate, no, I will take it to my job. It is so neatly packaged, it smells of civilization and reminds me of it.

Water packed in bottles. The air caught in a bag of chips, caught together with chips, no we don't eat air but they added it nevertheless, the air is free, it comes for free with that

little chips at the bottom of the bag. Will there come a time when the air will be sold in its separate, exclusive, delicately designed package – the air with a specific smell with its own bar code, the air that will have to pass through scanner, with a ‘beep’ when it passes.

They pack politicians in campaigns – just imagine politicians on the supermarket shelves, packed in boxes, compressed, so that you choose your favourite on the basis of package, slogan, logo, hair quality, the past that is implied on the label, and the lies that are said in packaged interviews on packaged TV channels in conversations with packaged presenters who speak packaged language.

Package has a long tradition and it always tends to be paid for, to occupy a smaller space, to protect the contents and to bring a profit whenever it is not a present, to be useful, to help the person who made the package and who took the contents from the earth, processed it with his work and put it in the box. That’s how they packaged the black people and sent them to America. How are the blacks packaged? The blacks are packaged so that some of them lie in rows parallel with the ship’s prow and some lie across so that more of them can be crammed into as small as possible space of the ship’s hold. Yes, many of them die during the voyage, from hunger and exhaustion, but in the final analysis of cost-benefit, it pays. At the end it is important that the owner gains profit, that industrial production goes on, that the capital circulates, and capital can consist of people too. Some five hundred Africans are packaged, a few dozens are thrown into the sea, and all of them get their nice package, their logo that will explain to everyone that they are unique products called slaves – their logo being their stamp, pressed into their skin with hot iron. Thus they are being laid as on the supermarket shelves, but in the hold.

The Nazis packed people in concentration camps, in gas chambers, they did that striving to be efficient, to put everything in one place, to throw the corpses easily and efficiently on a pile as on a dump or for recycling, because of ecological consciousness. The corpses should be somewhere aside, somewhere far away, behind fences, and the workers that pack those poor devils should be well-clothed, clean-shaven and combed. Packed nuclear waste, packed into the earth, but so that it should not touch the earth so it should not leak into the water we drink, that is why it needs superior package better than a tin can or vacuum.

People packed in skyscrapers, each person packed into his or her flat, apartment, between walls, with other packed people living below, under different surnames. Packed into cubicles in their working places, in their offices in front of their computers in which files are packed and the drawers in which documents are packed like thin slices of cheese, with the photographs of their families packed on the desks in front of them.

Human minds packed into usual mechanical flow of everyday or perhaps into a simple political-historical narrative that helps them explain each of their personal problems. Everything is nicely packed so that nothing protrudes, nothing leaks, so that there is no chaos, no quarrel, no contradictions, so that nothing is obvious and that there is no dispute, so that everything is in boxes with special plastic cap that keeps the juice fresh even after it is opened.

The air caught in a bag of chips. Packed nature, enclosed by private property, laws, fences, police, army. Nature prepared to be used within the package, to be turned into sugar, wheat, highway, shopping mall, into skyscrapers, into parking place for packed-up cars. If nature is packaged, we have every right to destroy the contents within the package, for as long as it is clear that it is our package, approved by all international, national and commercial regulations. Pack up the earth, bugs, grass, wild animals, wind, sunrays, water, pack it all up, cram it all into one package and then consume, devour, take and take again. Nature did not come into being as packed, once it is packed it becomes non-nature, a new nature that serves the man since the man has to pack up everything. One day, however, one day it will all start burning. Because package cannot encompass the wholeness of being, everything that exists is mightier than any package and it will destroy, without announcement, without pomp, only with silent steady fire it will destroy all the packages, logos, printed letters. That slow, non-dramatic, completely natural, spontaneous fire that burns and scorches and purges with great speed and with a lot of cosmic graciousness, with all the might it draws from oxygen, red fumes will slowly annihilate everything, they will spread slowly, leaving soot behind them and crushing everything that is neatly put onto shelves, put aside, everything that is enclosed...

Igor Simić
September 2012, Belgrade

Translated from Serbian by Professor Zoran Paunović