

# Nobel Laureate Peter Handke: A Man of Culture with a Straight Back

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Theme: [History](#)

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*I have never been able to give much consideration to the Nobel Prize in recent years, but it must be recognized that some assignments have given tasty satisfactions to those who have at heart the independence of human thought.*

It is the case of the great and poliedric literary author Peter Handke, playwright, novelist, essayist, poet, but especially *intellectual* with independent pen and back straight, who repeatedly advocated the need to cancel the Nobel Prize. But today they awarded him, just with the Nobel.

Although the term *intellectual* was first used by Diderot in the *Lettre sur la liberté de la presse*, used in Russia as *intelligentsia* to define the imperial officials of noble origin who occupied public positions, for the purposes of our small controversy, it is useful to remember that the word was spread with Dreyfus affaire.

Georges Clemenceau – journalist at that time, then future prime minister – used it to define all those who – like Zola – sided for the innocence of Dreyfus. From Clemenceau, the vulgate of the French Catholic Right of the time identified in the intellectuals “presumptuous pedants, who consider themselves the aristocracy of the spirit and who have lost all, who more or less, the national mentality”[1].

It became fashionable, therefore, for certain power factions, to cling this despicable narrative to all those awkward intellectuals who stood up to independently contradict the dominant narrative.

Even today, the voice of the same is ready to accuse of pedantry all those who deviate from the common sense of Western public official morality.

If so, this definition of *intellectual* constitutes a real decoration to merit, for men of culture who do not bend to what in our days is called mainstream : that toxic narrative, that catalogues good and bad according to the needs of power.

In this sense, in his acts and writings, Peter Handke was an *intellectual*, with full credit.

I am certainly not able to discuss his literary merits, but I know Peter Handke for being one of the few voices that stood up against the planned disintegration of former Yugoslavia, promoted by the West through the systematic persecution and defamation of the Serbian population.

He was an Austrian citizen. His mother, who belonged to the Slovenian minority in Carinthia,

committed suicide when Handke was still a little boy. The writer paid tribute to her memory in the almost autobiographical novel *Wunschloses Unglück, Unhappiness Without Desires*, of 1972. Perhaps also for this reason, Handke maintained an almost physical and sentimental bond with the Karst and Balkan lands and their peoples.

He dedicated three long reports to the situation in former Yugoslavia, and refused the Buchner Prize for solidarity with the Serbian people, who were experimenting criminal bombings on civilian population by the West Coalition.

On 18 March 2006, Peter Handke went to the funeral of Slobodan Milosevic.

To his straight back I want to dedicate his speech, transmitted by himself to the German newspaper *Focus* and here taken from the website of the Italian National Coordination for Yugoslavia [2].

“I wish I hadn’t been the only writer here in Pozarevac. I would have liked to have been at the side of another writer, for example Harold Pinter. That would have been strong words. I have nothing but words of weakness. But weakness prevails today, in this place. It is a day not only for strong words, but also for words of weakness.

“(What follows has been pronounced in Serbocroatian – text drafted by myself! – and I later retract myself in German). The world, what is called the world, knows all about Yugoslavia, on Serbia. The world, what is called the world, knows everything on Slobodan Milosevic. What is called the world knows the truth. That’s why what is called the world today is absent, and not only today, and not only here. What comes called the world is not the world. I know I do not know. I do not know the truth. But I look. I listen. I hear. I remember. I ask. That is why I am present today, with Yugoslavia, with Slobodan Milosevic.”

That final spike on the expression *“That’s why what is called the world today is absent, and not only today, and not only here”* contains all the feel of Handke towards the dominant narrative of contemporary society. The globalization of the market imposes a globalization of thought, an equal feeling of all those who are subject to it. In the logic of standardization, there can be no room for real critical thinking. This world accepts well those who repeat the various polemics customs-cleared and diffused by the mainstream, good for the fans of the trained theatres, but all false. This world does not accept those who rise up to protect doubt, navigating the uncomfortable route of objectivity, facts, political, economic and social relations.

For Handke, it is precisely the words of the Power that are “journalistic language”, “dominant language”, we might add ourselves: defamatory language. The language of the man of culture, conversely, becomes “non dominant language”, when uncomfortable and because inconvenient, when true and as true.

In place of the contemptuous definition of Clemenceau’s Times, Aristotle defined intellectual virtues as science, wisdom, intelligence and art, which allowed the intellectual soul to reach the truth. Kant instead reminded that the student should not learn thoughts, but to think. You should not carry him, but drive him, if you want later he will be able to walk alone”[3].

Peter Handke was certainly a good captain, because he followed these virtuous routes.

To this uncommon courage, to this straight back, I pay tribute today, on the occasion of the award of that prize, Handke wanted to delete, perhaps because he felt it as a “dominant prize”.

The conformists stand up against this Nobel Prize award.

This is what really makes it a real award.

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#### Notes

[1] Maurice Paleologue, Journal de l’affaire Dreyfus, Plon, 1955, p. 236.

[2] <http://www.cnj.it/CULTURA/handke.htm#milos>

[3] I. Kant, Antologia di Scritti Pedagogici, Il Segno dei Gabrielli, Verona 2004, p. 152 e ss.

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