

Political Correctness Fiddles While The World Burns

Norway's government has taken action to force a change in **IKEA's furniture-assembly instructions**. The offending instructions consist of diagrams that show only male figures or figures whose sex is unclear, and this has excited many who are obsessed with political correctness. IKEA's defence:

Verdens Gang quoted an IKEA spokeswoman as saying: "We have to take account of cultural factors. In Muslim countries it's problematic to use women in instruction manuals."...

In the game of political correctness, this is an ace, and would normally win the trick. But on this occasion the Norwegian government has a trump:

"This isn't good enough," Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik was quoted on Thursday as telling the daily Verdens Gang. "It's important to promote attitudes for sexual equality, not least in Muslim nations."

We think that it is ridiculous – and yes, under these circumstances perhaps also immoral – to remove images of females from furniture instructions for fear of offending religious prudes. It is a form of immorality that should, in civilised countries in peacetime, be legal. But we are, in principle, open to a related argument that the Norwegian government *should* be making, namely that there's a war on and certain civil liberties – perhaps even the cherished freedom to publish sexist furniture manuals in order to curry favour with bigots – may need to be curtailed until it is won.

We do find this argument moderately persuasive in the case of the freedom to wear headscarves to state schools in France. But frankly, we are fairly sure that IKEA furniture instructions are going to be a very small part of any strategy to change Islamist attitudes toward women. Hence, the Norwegian government is wasting its time and effort by making all this fuss about furniture instructions when they could be doing something more effective, like perhaps prosecuting **Islamist terrorists** who live in their midst.

For the manuals, why not use stick figures that are dressed up in burqas?

by [invadesoda](#) on Sat, 03/12/2005 - 04:49 | [reply](#)

Can good economics be ridiculous?

I don't understand why it's ridiculous or immoral for a seller to remove images of women from their product instructions. Isn't it good for them to use their best market driven strategies, based upon their unique demographics and so forth, to make their business successful? They shouldn't offend their customer base should they? Until this publicity no one minded only male figures in the instructions and some people would mind the women in the figures, so why not do it the way all the customers can handle?

It seems reasonable to me that IKEA's best strategy, considering cost of making product instructions, and the markets they are in, and the attitudes of their customers about men vs women, and so forth could very well be for them to do the instructions the way they have.

by a reader on Sun, 03/13/2005 - 05:50 | [reply](#)

female chimps with sticks

I don't care if the diagrams are politically correct or not. This is one case where the end justifies the means. If I can assemble it with my female chimp brain thanks to clear instructions I am happy. Mouthing swedish and banging two sticks together in chimp glee.

by a reader on Sun, 03/13/2005 - 15:20 | [reply](#)

Freedoms long established

Freedoms long established should not be changed for light and transient causes. I agree with the World that libertarians tend to be too dogmatic, and don't understand that sometimes certain freedoms have to be compromised to protect freedom in general. But the fact that the World is open to the suggestion that publishing "sexist" manuals ought be outlawed in this time of "war" seems to be pushing the issue over the edge of any reasonable balance. I find the World posts usually quite good and insightful, but a number of objections can be raised to the reasoning followed in the above article:

1. The whole argument is implicitly based on the curious assumption that pictures of men, but no women, making furniture is not only sexist but promotes the subjugation of women. Now, IKEA does not need to defend their choice of pictures. And I would warn against **where this can lead to**. Freedom of expression precisely means defending the right of people to say things you find wholly objectionable. But if we were to get into this anyway, the World has got it completely backwards. More than 90% of IKEA furniture, I

would guess, is in fact put together by men and not by women. Like it or not, despite decades of propaganda, feminism is something that most women find ridiculous, because it's a **fantasy ideology** (based on the wish for men and women to be the same) which is opposed to the idea of men and women simply doing what they want but rather wants men and women to conform to some kind of forced role-equality. Of course the individualist type of feminism is precisely the opposite and is a good thing, as it stands for freedom of choice and equal rights and respect for men and women. But a fact of reality is, when the IKEA is delivered most women prefer to cook the dinner while the men put together the thing, and most men prefer it that way too. So the manuals as they are are much more realistic than a manual that would depict women putting together the stuff.

2. Ironically I believe the World is completely missing an important point here. I would hypothesize that this issue is not about Islam at all, but is about the West. That is, my guess is that the depiction of males in IKEA's manuals has very little to do with trying to please the Muslim market, but rather has to do with pleasing the Western market. I suspect this is simply an opportunistic claim made by IKEA in an appeal to politically correct Westerners, which backfired. Contrary to the World, as far as I understand it IKEA did not "remove" any female images from their instructions. The fact is that it has always been customary in the West to depict males in these types of instruction booklets. This was done long before there was a significant market in the Muslim world for these products and long before there were any appreciable numbers of Muslims in the West. And so it was, and still is, done not for the benefit of Arab Muslims but for the benefit of the cultural ideas of Westerners - as many in the West also believe putting furniture together is a man's job. I haven't checked the stats but I would guess even now the Muslim market for IKEA is less than 10% of their sales. So if the demand of the Western market was for pictures of females, they would depict women in their manuals. IKEA does not admit they depict men to please Westerners, because such would be seen as sexist and wrong. Their hope was that by shifting the argument to a non-western minority group they would appeal to the politically correct idea that the west is bad and the non-west is good. But of course IKEA miscalculated. A few years ago this would have worked, but things have changed a bit since 9/11 and the feminist political correctness has won from the non-western political correctness.

3. To be sure, in many cases Islamic treatment of women is disrespectful and should be fought against, but surely depicting men rather than women as putting furniture together can hardly be interpreted as disrespectful of women by any stretch of the imagination. Quite the opposite is the case. Putting furniture together is not a particularly fun job, so I'm sure women all over the world will be quite happy if the idea is promoted that their husbands keep doing that job rather than themselves. Men doing hard work for women is not wicked but galant, on par with men giving flowers to their wives, and that's quite the opposite of such evils as Muslim men hitting their wives. And showing books with women putting the stuff together while in reality mostly men are

doing that work, is an insult to men. Now if IKEA were publishing pictures of men hitting women, that would be a different thing (why doesn't the World speak out for a ban on all books and movies which depict **real** violence against women?).

4.It's bad enough that there are people who would want a national identification obligation, erosions of the rule of law and other police state measures all in the name of the war on drugs and terrorism. But despite the fact that those are all bad measures which will do nothing to help the war on terror or crime, at least they are attempts which are supposed to be aimed at the criminals and terrorists. But making laws to force people to depict women doing certain jobs is not even aimed at catching criminals against women. It's based on the far weaker hypothesis that promoting false equality is going to prevent crimes against women. But crimes against women have nothing to do with one's views on whether or not men and women are **equal** (i.e. equally interested in the job of putting furniture together), but rather it has to do with one's views of whether or not men and women have **equal rights**, which is something entirely different.

5.The whole idea of a war creating unusual circumstances for freedom is completeley misused here. War circumstances would apply if there were a real war, the kind with tanks and whatnot, going on in Norway. And it would mean things like that for practical purposes you can't have a court case every time a soldier wants to shoot the enemy. It does not mean abolishing freedom of speech, and certainly not cases of freedom of speech which don't promote violence, oppression or defend the actions of terrorists.

6.If any idea of freedom is to remain, then surely it would be the freedom to publish pictures of men in a manual. If you accept that this maybe should be forbidden because there may be some connection between this and supporting Islamic maltreatment or terrorism or other evils, then the door is wide open to just about any suppression of freedom. And that doesn't even require a terrorist problem. One might even argue that any politically incorrect book should be forbidden even in peace time, on the grounds that some man might rape a woman because he thinks women are inferior because he sees a man driving a truck or whatever.

7.If freedom is about anything, then it surely means that people don't have any positive obligations to do altruistic good to the world. Just as people should not be forced to pay for socialist policies helping the poor, so too companies should not be forced to publish politically correct manuals which supposedly would help the emancipation of women (but if fact would do no such thing). The business of business is simply to sell, business is not a vehicle for government cultural propaganda.

8.It is the perfect right of Ikea or any other company to sell their product to anybody (except if we're talking about selling arms to terrorists or whatever). If in Christian countries that means taking the sex scenes out of a movie, then we don't go about forbidding that on the grounds that they are thereby supporting the supression

of sexual freedom by Christians. We don't forbid selling washing soap in the west by commercials with women cleaning on the grounds that that's sexist. In the same way we should not be forbidding pictures of men (because that sells better than pictures of women for certain products) on the grounds that that's sexist.

9. What's next? Forbidding TV-series where the nurses are women? Forbidding books where the firemen are men? Forbidding 90% of all human activities or censoring 90% of all the internet on the grounds that one can always make up some indirect connection between some picture or word and some act of violence somewhere?

10. Treating a picture of a man as on the same level as advocating suppression of women in a Mosque sermon is an example of **moral equivalence**. And if even our most ordinary and simple freedoms are to be abandoned on the most flimsy politically correct superstition, then why do we even fight the Moslim terrorists? Why not simply take over their culture, which is based on the very idea that governments are there to insure that everybody lives wholesome and decent and politically correct lives? We should not give up the fight of freedom versus oppression and replace it by a fight between two different versions of politically correct oppression ("it is immoral for women to put together furniture" versus "it is immoral for women **not** to put together furniture").

Henry Sturman

by **Henry Sturman** on Sun, 03/13/2005 - 15:23 | [reply](#)

Market-Driven Strategies

Isn't it good for them to use their best market driven strategies, based upon their unique demographics and so forth, to make their business successful? They shouldn't offend their customer base should they?

One cannot tell from economic theory alone whether they should offend some of their customers or not. That is a matter of morality as well as economics.

The fallacy in the above analysis by a reader is that both the policy he advocates (pandering to the bigots) and the one we advocate (defying them) are equally 'market-based'. For a market transaction requires a willing buyer and a willing seller at a given price. Whether the seller will be willing depends, among other things, on the seller's opinion of the morality of the transaction. Hence, one can decide what one's best 'market-based' strategy is only *after* one has decided issues of right and wrong. One cannot infer that something is right just because someone, with some moral values, would consider it right.

by **Editor** on Sun, 03/13/2005 - 17:23 | [reply](#)

I'm surprised and disturbed (

I'm surprised and disturbed (and offended) that everyone accepts

at face value the assertion that the well-established international symbol of a Stick Figure on the instructions in question is a picture of a "man". The Stick Figure is an abstraction and represents all humans; I deeply resent these underhanded efforts to claim it for "men" only.

Seeing as how the Stick Figure is by design intentionally drawn so as to lack genitalia of either or any type (just as it is drawn to leave its race and body type and (dis)ability-level vague), I can't help but wonder why/how people are coming to this conclusion. Could it be, perhaps, because the Stick Figures in question are depicted *putting together furniture*, which is traditionally considered a "man's" task? For shame, for shame. I cannot think of anything more sexist than to look at Ikea's instruction booklets and decide that its Stick Figures are all "men". *The people lodging these complaints obviously haven't risen above gender stereotypes themselves.* The irony!

by Blixa on Sun, 03/13/2005 - 17:54 | [reply](#)

Morality?

"Whether the seller will be willing depends, among other things, on the seller's opinion of the morality of the transaction. Hence, one can decide what one's best 'market-based' strategy is only after one has decided issues of right and wrong."

Absurdity reaches new heights. The IKEA example is a pointed one in that it points out how easily humans are drawn into debate. A debate about assembly instructions containing figures and diagrams seems absurd in light of the comment about morality preceding 'market-based' strategy.

Considering the sale of bomb making materials to foreign countries would be an example of serious moral questions preceding 'market-based' strategy. The styling of IKEA bookcase assembly instructions are not on the same moral level. Bombing and bookcase building are not usually moral equivalents. Absurd as the minutiae of the IKEA example is, the debate has moral worth in that it helps to challenge our reasoning about what is moral and what is market-based. It is not easily sorted however into what moral questions of right or wrong we might first ask, nor would it seem to be a decision which should be left to the public sphere.

I ask where lies the public harm and where lies the public good?

by a reader on Sun, 03/13/2005 - 19:46 | [reply](#)

We Do Not Endorse The Norwegian Government's Intervention

We apologise for not having made it clear in the article that we oppose the Norwegian Government's intervention in this matter.

by [Editor](#) on Sun, 03/13/2005 - 20:10 | [reply](#)

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