

Planet of the Hats



I know you will not believe me, but I swear it's true: I'm not of this earth. I fled here years ago because my home planet was driving me crazy. Let me explain.

My home world is very much like this one. It's populated by billions of bipedal primates, who are just like people here: sometimes foolish, sometimes wise, sometimes hateful, sometimes generous. They are grouped into cities and nations, and sometimes they have wars, and sometimes they cooperate. You really would have a hard time telling our two planets apart, except for one thing.

The hats.

My people are obsessed with hats. Almost everyone wears them, and a lot of their identity is wrapped up in their particular style. Some people always wear cowboy hats, for instance, and others wear bowlers, and each think the other is exceedingly funny-looking, and would never consider switching. They have elaborate ceremonies for their children in which they confer the hats, and kids often go to special schools once a week where they learn about the history and significance of their hats. Everyone has the importance of hats drilled into them from birth to death.

The particular type of hat was critical. Individuals only rarely changed hat styles, and when they did, it was considered grounds for sorrow by those who wore the abandoned style, and cause for rejoicing by those wearing the newly adopted style.

Sometimes people would invent new kinds of hats, which were typically regarded as bizarre when one person was wearing it, but once a sufficient number switched to the new style, they were respected automatically. It meant that streets of our more cosmopolitan cities were filled with strange and comical hats bobbing along, but no one laughed. Laughing at a hat was considered a heinous crime.



It sounds very silly, I know. A minority on my planet also find it pointless, myself among them, and didn't bother with wearing a hat. This is tolerated in the more civilized nations, although there are places where wearing no hat, or a strange hat, can get you killed. And honestly, many people in my country only bothered to wear their hat once a week, although the rest of the time they would keep them on ornate hatstands in their home, and attached much significance to their presence.



Now why should mere excesses of fashion compel someone to flee many light years to escape? There was something more. There was a near-universal notion of remarkable absurdity: most people believed that an important portion of their minds actually resided in their hats. The locus of their ethical sense was not believed to be in their brains, but somehow intertwined in the fabric of their hats.

This led to strange customs: witnesses in trials were required to wear their hats to give testimony; soldiers were thought to be cowards without their hats; politicians vied to see who could wear the most ostentatious versions of their hats; sex was considered a filthy practice because people would take off their hats to do it. There was no scientific evidence for any of this, and the evidence actually contradicted the belief, but since it was hallowed by tradition, it persisted.





Hatters, milliners, and haberdashers were highly regarded professionals, and every town would have numerous hatshops. Their numbers proliferated, because obviously you could not have the person who crafted miters also making berets, or vice versa, but still they prospered because, not only were the majority sinking a significant proportion of their income into the purchase and care of their hats, but the occupation was considered too dignified to be taxed.

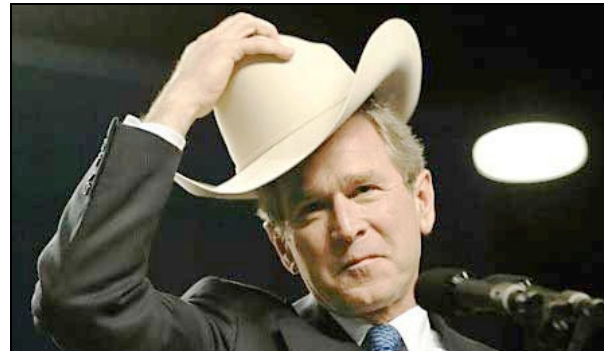


Huge sums of money were poured into hatteries, and the people considered this to be a virtuous act that made them more noble and right. The president of my country listened very closely to his council of hatters, and no television punditry was complete without a haberdasher to use his vast hat-based wisdom to pontificate on domestic and foreign policy. They were all talking out of their hats, which was considered a very good thing.

I couldn't help noticing, though, that the very idea that ethical thought was localized to a hat was a

ridiculous notion, and that hatless people could be just as good and kind and wise as those with the most ornate hat (and that hatless people could also be wretched and cruel, of course, as could the hatted.)

Our president had a rhinestone-covered 20 gallon cowboy hat with an airhorn and flashing strobe, and he seemed far less virtuous than my neighbor, with her simple and unostentatious cap. Hats obviously had nothing to do with morality, except perhaps in an inverse way: those who spent the most effort polishing the geegaws and flash on their hats usually put the least effort into honing their minds.



I could see the writing on the wall. Being hatless myself meant my chances for promotion were limited, but even more worrisome was that the height of one's hat was becoming the sole measure of nobility of purpose, and the genuine leaders were being replaced with loud poseurs who knew how to stretch a crown and use a Be-Dazzler. When the People of the Easter Bonnet started encouraging war with the Chadon Wearers, citing deep philosophical differences, I bundled my family into our rocketship and flew away.

We stayed briefly at the Planet of Shoes, but found the same problems there, so now we've settled here on Earth where, clearly, the situation is *completely different*.

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