

Against Obvious Racism

Let's be honest about racism. It's here. And it's not going anywhere. But its prevalence is surprising, again, if we're being honest: we've been under the mistaken impression, for some time, now, outside the ghetto, outside poverty-stricken areas and urban centers (I'm using white code for places that black people live) that America is a fundamentally just society. We thought that we had judicial mechanisms sufficient to satisfy all segments of the population – if not *equally*, at least on some kind of sliding scale. We thought racism was on the downswing. Black comedians, rappers, and religious authorities seemed to be ministering to the disproportionate attention young black men attracted from police. Culturally, we'd accepted, on a broad level, that being black meant that you were more likely to go to prison or have trouble with law enforcement. We accepted similar things about the Hispanic population, and rarely thought anything about the Native American communities – they were wisely placed on reservations many years ago, and given responsibility over themselves, which meant that what happened to them was their fault, and not ours. Recently, the proverbial chickens have come home to roost. We've seen behind the curtain. And the truth is this: while the punishment and social opprobrium have discouraged certain obvious forms of racism, racism itself is as thick on American life as pond scum on a still pond.

When I was in Afghanistan, one of the most remarkable lessons was that justice, and governance, were largely arbitrary – matters of aesthetics. One village would be ruled by a pro-government militia (Afghan Police and Army rarely patrolled, much of what we called “government controlled” land in Afghanistan was, in fact, militia controlled). The militia would collect taxes of 10% or 15% from the population, and would take responsibility for adjudicating tribal disputes. In other words, they acted like the Police, and tribal mechanisms

(elders, etc.) acted like our judiciary. Another village, across a road, or some other terrain feature, would be ruled by the Taliban. The Taliban would collect taxes of 10% or 15% from the population, and would take responsibility for adjudicating tribal disputes using Sharia law – a Mullah would interpret crimes and, having established guilt or innocence, would impose punishment based on the Koran.

Whether a village accepted militia or Taliban rule was a combination of self-interest, security, group preference, and other variables that I do not claim to have understood, as an outsider. The important takeaway, for the purposes of this article, and understanding the role justice plays in our own society, is that *literally any* mechanism was preferable to none, and that the role of “justice” was to keep the peace, was to ensure social stability, and an absence of strife or struggle within a given community. Otherwise, war resulted. Without justice, tribes would go to war against one another over disputed resources, in a heartbeat. This was the situation on the border of Pakistan, territory the government didn’t even have the strength to dispute in 2007, let alone manage.

Our American justice system has been failing for a while, now, and the only reason it hasn’t been more obvious is that it’s only been failing certain portions of the population. For those individuals who are angry about this fact – that it took the well-publicized deaths of three consecutive black men under suspicious circumstances, and the refusal of a Grand Jury to acknowledge what our eyes and ears have shown reasonable people to be true – all I can say is that one knows what one knows. I can’t take responsibility for the past, but I can acknowledge the present, and agree with the obvious, logical assessment that things are not correct, things are not just. The system is creating unrest where it should be resolving unrest. The American justice system – and American society in general – is, in as fundamental a way as one can

imagine, broken.

The problem is not the police. I take great exception to the wealth of anger and opprobrium heaped upon our policemen and policewomen. The police are here to enforce our social standards, and they do so, quite effectively. Instead, we should be observing our own actions, and looking in the mirror to assess whether or not the problem lies within ourselves, the people of America. When you see a group of young black men, does part of you worry, does it provoke some nameless anxiety that is not felt when you're around a group of young white men? When you're sitting at a bar and a black man walks in, do you react differently from when a white man enters? Do you see a group of Hispanic people at a bus stop or in a parking lot and immediately draw conclusions about them, their motivations, their histories?

Of course you do. And when a young black man who stole a \$5 pack of swisher sweets cigarillos from a convenience store is shot by the police, when you breathe a silent sigh of relief: "one less scumbag who might get rape my wife and blast rap music loudly," that's not an indictment of the police, that's the police doing what you hoped they'd do. Ditto the hell-kid with the pistol replica, and the criminal giant who was blackly and horribly selling loose cigarettes for profit, illegally, on a street corner. *Not in my town, you think. Motherfucking property value killing monkeys.*

You can lie to me all you want, and you can also lie to yourself, if that's important to maintaining whatever fiction you're perpetuating. But a lie is a lie, and the truth is this: you're fine with the police hassling black people, because you think black people are criminals, and you want the police to hassle criminals. I feel the same way. We're in a safe place here, we can be honest with each other. I'm scared on the train when black and Hispanic people get on board on Bridgeport or Stamford – they rarely have tickets, and always have some cock-and-bull story about misplacing it, or

moving seats, or who knows what. My hypothesis? They're on the train to rob employed (this is white code for "white") people of their money and tickets.

So – but it's too obvious, now, that's the real problem with Ferguson and Eric Garner and "I can't breathe." The jig's up – people know who we are (white people, and specifically white men), and they know what we want, because they see our desires accomplished through our police. We need to make a change, so people stop rioting and burning the franchises that white people own, like CVS and Rite Aid and Family Dollar. We need to give the blacks justice – even if that means occasionally sacrificing a police officer to a kangaroo court. After all, this is really about *our* safety, and our ability to hold onto the grudges and stereotypes we cherish. If we don't feed the occasional officer to the wolves, it'll all be too obvious, and we'll actually have to change how we think about black people, and women, and Mexicans, and Chinese, and homosexuals. Police officers understand why they get paid overtime and hazardous duty – it's not so they should be safe – they're keeping *us* safe. And sometimes that means we have to hang a police officer up high, by the neck, to prevent the rabble from rioting, from getting on the train and stealing and looting and burning.