

From Plato to Black Lives Matter

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"I see now more clearly than ever before that even our greatest troubles spring from something that is as admirable and sound as it is dangerous—from our impatience to better the lot of our fellows."

From the Preface to the second edition of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*.

To summarize one of the conclusions of this paper, the equal opportunity movement of modern times is valuable but the shift from equal opportunity to affirmative action is practically irresistible for people who are impatient to better the lot of their fellows. The shift may appear to be modest but it has converted the equal opportunity and anti-racist movement into a vehicle of racism, intolerance, division and destruction.

This paper suggests that some aspects of Plato's thought poisoned the well of western thought and the Black Lives Matter movement can be seen as one of the consequences.

How do we get from the works of the greatest philosopher of all time, the Divine Philosopher, to a movement that has triggered a deadly rampage of looting and arson with almost overwhelming approval among progressive leftwing people around the world?

Western philosophy has been described as footnotes to Plato and among the footnotes is *The Open Society and Its Enemies* with Popper's critique the totalitarian elements in Plato's later works, especially *Republic* and *Laws*. Popper found at last four elements of totalitarian thought in Plato.

First, "racialism" or "race thinking" as Barzun called it.

Second is the concept of collective justice that Plato proposed to replace individual justice that was customary in Athens or at least in the rhetoric of the Pericles and the Great Generation of Athenian democrats.

Third is revolutionary canvas cleaning to sweep away everything old and start again.

Fourth is fake news that Plato dignified with the title of Noble or Lordly Lies.

Noble lies

Starting with the last of the four, a noble lie can be defined as a myth or untruth knowingly propagated by an elite to maintain social harmony or to advance an agenda.

What is the empirical basis for BLM, what is the evidence that the deaths of blacks at the hands of the police are symptoms of racism?

In 2016 when the BLM movement was two years old Heather Mac Donald collated the official statistics to compare the homicide rates for blacks, whites and Hispanics.

She found that blacks were being killed at six times the rates for whites and Hispanics. In Los Angeles blacks between the ages of 20 and 24 were dying at a rate that was 20 to 30 times the national average. That is an alarming disparity and it is very important to realise that it was a function of the black crime rate because blacks themselves were committing homicide at eight times the rate of whites and Hispanics combined and eleven times the rate of whites alone.

Overwhelmingly blacks were being killed by other blacks, and not by the police. Only 4% of black homicide victims were killed by police, compared with 12% of all white and Homicide deaths caused by police. On that basis she suggested that a more appropriate slogan to raise concern about police killings would be White and Hispanic Lives Matter.

The point is that the “news” about systematic bias towards blacks, based on the statistics of black deaths, is fake. It has been transformed into a Noble or Lordly lie in the supposedly worthy cause of anti-racism.

Mac Donald explained that the main effect of the movement, two years on, was to reverse the decline in violent crime that had been achieved in some cities by innovations in evidence-based law enforcement, including rapid responses to incidents in problem areas and proactive strategies to defuse potentially dangerous situations.

Violent crime spiked upwards, especially in cities with large black populations like Baltimore, Nashville and Chicago. She called this “The Ferguson Effect” after Ferguson in Missouri where the BLM movement started after police shot a black teenager. No charges were laid and this triggering weeks of protest across the country. After five months of re-examination of witness statements, forensic reports and other evidence the Justice Department concluded that the officer fired in self-defence.

Last year the “George Floyd effect” went worldwide. The George Floyd case is supposed to be a paradigm of systematic racism expressed by white police killing blacks. The symbolism is powerful especially when it is taken up the mainstream media and social media as well but at bottom it is a gross distortion of the bigger picture.

As Forest Gump famously put it “Shit happens.” Violent crime is rampant in some black communities and police (black and white alike) have the thankless task of dealing with desperately dangerous situations.

Would the destructive and divisive activities of the BLM movement be vindicated if there are genuine cases of racist crimes by white police? No doubt there are. There are bad apples in every barrel (it was said, regarding a particular US police force, there are some good apples in every barrel as well). If white police murder people, black or white, armed or unarmed, they need to face the full force of the law, with due process.

But the cases of black deaths that we know about do not even start to establish a case for systemic racism. The cases that we know about where white police kill blacks in dubious circumstances are rare because if they were not rare we would be told a lot more about them by the BLM and its supporters and apologists. Some of the cases of unarmed black deaths at the hands of white police are tendentious in the extreme if you want to make a case for white racism. Consider the case of a black man who almost killed a police officer by running him down in a car before he was shot to protect the officer; the case of a black man who was killed after he kicked a policeman unconscious and turned on another officer, the case of a man wanted on firearms offences who took refuge in a building and threatened to blast the police to hell. When he ran out and charged the police he was shot because it was not immediately apparent if he was armed or not. Police have to be prepared to shoot criminals who are attacking them with knives because stabbing can be fatal and police often have to make very quick decisions in desperate situations.

The statistical evidence demonstrates that the problem of black deaths is overwhelmingly a problem of blacks killing other blacks. As Mac Donald put it, on the numbers, the more appropriate slogan regarding police killings would be "White and Hispanic Lives Matter."

Race thinking

Taking up the first theme on the list, this is not to suggest that reading *Republic* was the immediate inspiration for the protesters in the streets, we will get to that by way of Jacques Barzun.

Popper described what he called **racialism** in Plato's plan for a stratified society ruled by an elite group of philosopher kings. The rulers are essentially a master race and it was vital to maintain the purity of the race by selective breeding. "To this end, it is important that the master class should feel as one superior master race." And the race of the guardians must be kept pure.

The idea of a pure race of rulers combined with other ideas like the myth of the chosen people to produce the concept of the Aryan master race that underpinned the Nazi program of genocide and the thousand year Reich. That is probably the most publicised example of the pathological consequences of the "master race" meme but it is much more widespread as Barzun explained in *The French Race* (1932) and *Race: A Study of Superstition* (1937).

He proposed that one of the inflammatory and divisive factors leading up to the French Revolution was a protracted dispute in France over the “race” of the nobility versus the bourgeoisie as. Having identified the phenomenon that he called “race thinking” in that context he went on to argue that this way of thinking is a pervasive factor in the struggles between nations, political parties, religious faiths and social groups. For Barzun “race-thinking” is one of the ways to justify collective hostility and it is most dangerous and powerful when it operates in partnership with other motives such as the nationalism of the Nazi and the socialism of the communists.

Another factor in the mix is “the landmine in Western thought” articulated by Paul Craig Roberts. He wrote “The 18th century Enlightenment had two results that combined to produce a destructive formula. On the one hand, Christian moral fervor was secularised, which produced demands for the moral perfectibility of society. On the other hand, modern science called into question the reality of moral motives.” (Roberts 1991). These tendencies might appear to be contradictory but they have not balanced each other. The first drives demands for the immediate and comprehensive rectification of all the forms of injustice and inequality which are attributed to our traditional mores and the institutions of democratic capitalism. The other undermines any defence that might be offered for those mores and institutions. The result is an explosive mixture of moral indignation and moral relativism or scepticism.

Barzun continued his appraisal of the situation in the United States in the 1960s “We should not be misled by the clamour and the wailing. It is our success that has caused it.” (Barzun 1954, 17) An example of success was the marked narrowing of the differential between white and Afro American wages through the 1940s and the 1950s, before legislation for affirmative action. But a degree of success was not enough for the coercive utopians and they discovered the power of discovering social *crises*, even if the situation was improving, such as teenage pregnancy, poverty and the murder rate (Sowell 1988).

Sowell's international study of affirmative action described the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of preference policies and the pattern of events which he found around the world. Generally the demand for preferential policies came from well educated, 'new class' members of supposedly disadvantaged groups. The same people also become the main beneficiaries of preference policies which tend to further disadvantage the majority of their brethren. This was demonstrated in Malaysia where the gap between rich and poor Malays widened in the wake of preference policies for ethnic Malays (Sowell 1990, 49). One of the advocates of the program even admitted that this was the case but claimed that the Malays prefer to be exploited by their own kind.

Collective justice

Collective justice is another Platonic theme in the mix, that is, justice for groups rather than individuals. This fits like a glove with racist thinking as Barzun described it - "thinking of human groups without the vivid sense that groups consist of individuals and that individuals display the full range of human differences."

Traditional or individualistic justice, as described by Popper in his critique of Plato, "calls for equal treatment of the citizens before the law, provided, of course, that the laws show neither favour nor disfavour towards individual citizens or groups or classes." There are three main demands or proposals, namely (a) the proposal to eliminate 'natural privileges' (no special classes), (b) justice applies to individuals rather than groups and (c) a major function of the state to protect the freedom of the citizens.

This means that individuals should be treated according to their personal characteristics such as their fitness and qualifications for particular tasks, and the quality of their performance. As long as the qualities required for the tasks are not race-related there is no need to make race an issue. Barzun warned in that if race is made an issue in any process of selection or evaluation of people then "race-thinking" will continue and this will generate muddled thinking and inappropriate actions with potentially dangerous unintended consequences.

In 1965 Barzun's book on race, a study of superstition, was reprinted with a new Preface "Racism Today" to take account of the civil rights movement at the time. In the wake of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 he wrote that giving up race-thinking means equal opportunity but not affirmative action. He pointed out that because there are no positive or negative traits that are race-related it follows that "sentimental or indignant reversals of the racist proposition are false and dangerous... Race-thinking is bad thinking and that is all." (*ibid*, xiv)

On the topic of affirmative action he wrote "When injustice is redressed, the hitherto outcast and maligned group must not benefit in reverse from the racism they justly complained of. They do not suddenly possess, as a group, the virtues they were previously denied, and it is no sign of wisdom in the former oppressors to affect a contrite preference for those they once abused." (*ibid*, xv)

He recalled a report from a Fullbright scholar in Paris who witnessed a memorable celebration in the Latin Quarter. A contingent of white writers and artists led by Negro writers and accompanied by French and American students ceremonially burned the white race in effigy! He regarded that as an emblem of suicide by both parties because inverting the racial hierarchy leaves race-thinking intact and probably even stronger than before because it is sanctified by the self-righteous sense of correcting a great injustice.

That is the mood that has been engendered by the worldwide BLM movement. It has legitimized vandalism, arson and looting, as though this is going to correct injustice and

benefit people of colour. What does it do for a person of colour with a small business in Minneapolis who has their livelihood burned to the ground?

What is the case for collective white guilt and reparations for all blacks to be by whites here and now?

That will mean transfers to many people who are not in difficult circumstances from whites who could be worse off, who moreover had no involvement in the activities that are supposed to earn reparations for the benefit of people who have not personally suffered the disadvantages of the Jim Crow laws and the kind of naked prejudice that was rampant in generations past.

What about the white trash. Who cares about their disadvantage? Is anyone suggesting affirmative action policies for poor white males?

As for equal opportunity, nobody can reasonably object to the elimination of barriers to the advancement of females and other groups. But affirmative action is racist straight up and it not only disadvantages white males, it also places a question mark over the merit of successful members of the favoured groups. Favouritism is generally regarded as a bad thing, and that is for very good reasons. Favouritism is institutionalised by affirmative action and erodes the morale of organizations. It also undermines the integrity of the educational and selection systems that administer affirmative action programs.

Violent canvas-cleaning

Popper treated this in Chapter 9 of *The Open Society on Aestheticism, Perfectionism and Utopianism*, headed by an extract from a novel by Du Gard – “Everything has got to be smashed to start with. Our whole damned civilization has got to go, before we can bring any decency into the world.” He wrote about the way the Platonic artist-politician must proceed. He must eradicate the existing institutions and traditions. He must purify, purge, expel, banish, and kill, with a reference to “liquidation” as a modern term for it.

“Asked about the details of their draughtsmanship, Plato’s ‘Socrates’ gives the following striking reply: ‘They will take as their canvas a city and the characters of men, and they will, first of all, make their canvas clean—by no means an easy matter. Plato’s statement is indeed a true description of the uncompromising attitude of all forms of out-and-out radicalism—of the aestheticist’s refusal to compromise.’”

The idea of sweeping away the old to bring in the new in the most wide-ranging possible manner became a motif of the French Revolution and subsequent socialist revolutions including the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The current vogue of overturning historical monuments is a particularly vivid expression of the desire to clean the canvas and get rid of the past so we can start again, fresh and pure.

Conclusion

Consider the prima facie purpose of the BLM movement, to rectify the evils of racism, and especially the shooting of unarmed black men by white policemen. Are the means suited to the end? What evils can be corrected by looting and arson, overturning historical monuments, suppressing free speech and taking the police off the streets?

People who are familiar with the work of Jacques Barzun on racist thinking will see that the most obvious feature of the movement in addition to violence and intolerance is flamboyant and blatant racism. Based on Barzun's account of racial thinking, this movement is not going to eliminate or mitigate racist thinking, instead it is promoting racism and using it as a weapon for other agendas.

References

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