

# XXI – Bring Back Discrimination!

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By Butler Shaffer

Practices of this sort are usually defended, by school officials, as part of a "zero tolerance" policy for violence, or drug use, or sexual harassment. Unfortunately, what "zero tolerance" often comes down to in practice is an admission that "I am unable to think clearly and to make distinctions between an uninvited kiss and a violent assault, between a cough drop and a tablet of LSD, between boys pointing their gun-like fingers at one another and a full-blown knife fight." "Zero tolerance," in other words, becomes synonymous with "zero critical analysis."

When I was a youngster, the attempted criminalization of such conduct would likely have been met with questions about the competency of school officials to supervise the learning of children. It would have been understood that the process of growing up involves experimentation and testing of the boundaries of appropriate social conduct. It was also accepted that learning how to establish suitable relationships with others came about through trial and error, and the feeling out of the expectations of one's peers, more so than having one's conduct constantly micromanaged by supervising adults. Only if conduct morphed over into the realm of viciousness was it thought appropriate to consider the transgression in criminal terms.

The "spitballer" was given a six-day jail sentence — even though prosecutors reportedly sought an eight-year prison term; while the "cough-drop kid," the finger-pointing "gunman," and the "kindergarten kisser" may have to spend the rest of their lives acknowledging, to colleges or employers, their respective "offenses" of "drug-dealing," "attempted assault," and "sexual harassment." How does one satirize absurdity?

The underlying cause of such nonsense is not to be found in either wickedness or a penchant for being overly-protective. I suspect that the school administrators who engage in such Draconian measures truly mean to do well by the children entrusted to their care. The problem, instead, can be traced to one of the underlying shortcomings of our culture — one for which, coincidentally, government schools have been the primary culprits — the ongoing war against discrimination. We must remember that most of the school officials who cannot distinguish between a pointed finger and a .38 caliber revolver are, themselves, products of government school training.

There was a time when it was considered the highest compliment to tell another that he or she had a "discriminating" mind. Today, such is an accusation. One who learned to distinguish truth from fashion; to critically analyze a given set of events on the basis of intellectually sound criteria; to have both an empirical and rational basis for his or her

opinions; to be able to separate fact from fallacy; to have one's mind well grounded in such fields of study as the sciences, history, economics, the classics, psychology, and the humanities; and, above all else, to have both a sense of humility about what we know and a recognition of the human need for transcendent experiences, that person was worthy of being called a "discriminating" individual.

Not only are such qualities not developed in schools and colleges today, they are actively opposed. One who dares to suggest that the works of Shakespeare are superior to the folktales of some primitive tribe is likely to be charged with cultural chauvinism. To dissent from American foreign policy practices in the Middle East is to invite an accusation of "anti-Semitism" (even though truly discriminating minds would note that Arabs are also Semites). To challenge the legitimacy of welfare programs, "affirmative action," or any of a variety of other government policies, is to run the risk of being labeled a "racist" or peddler of "hate." Such absurdities helped to make up the world of "political correctness," a phrase that boils down to the failure of its practitioners to engage in discriminating thought.

At this point, some may respond that I am only setting up a straw man to knock over; that racial, ethnic, and religious bigotry exist in our world, making discrimination a problem to be overcome. I disagree. The person who uses race as a determining factor in deciding who to hire or otherwise associate with is not, in most instances, discriminating, but failing to discriminate!

"Discrimination" is closely tied to another misunderstood practice: "prejudice." Whenever we act, we do so on the basis of our prior experiences. We "prejudge," based upon the past events in our lives, what will occur in the future. Let us suppose that, while walking down a dark street one evening, I am mugged by a man wearing a purple hat. In the future, I might very well be fearful of men in purple hats, believing that there was some connection between hat color and my victimization. This is a common response of small children who, having once been frightened by a barking dog, might thereafter fear all dogs.

But as I encounter more and more people wearing purple hats who do not assault me, I begin to modify the basis for my prejudgment (i.e., "prejudice") about purple-hatted people. In a word, I learn to discriminate, based upon factors more directly relevant to my being victimized, and may eventually come to the conclusion that purple-hattedness has nothing to do with the commission of violent acts. Focusing upon purple hats becomes a distraction to clear thinking.

Our prejudices can serve us well or ill depending upon how proficient we become at making distinctions that help to further what we seek to accomplish. If, for instance, I would like to find a restaurant that sells pizzas, my past experiences lead me to prejudge that I am more likely to find pizza in an Italian than in a Szechuan restaurant. It may be the case that, in this

city, the best pizza is made at a Szechuan restaurant, but information costs being greater than the benefits I might derive from trying to locate such a place, I content myself with an Italian eatery.

When factors such as race, religion, or ethnicity enter into our decision-making, however, there seems to be an enhanced likelihood that such considerations will prove detrimental to our objectives. More often than not, prejudging others on such grounds will fail to predict for outcomes that we favor. The employer who refuses to hire a woman, or a black, to operate a punch press because of such criteria — rather than the applicant's demonstrated skill at handling the machine — will have to forego the added profitability from having the most competent people working for him.

On the other hand, there are times when being prejudiced on the basis of race or other such factors is quite rational: I suspect that, when Spike Lee was casting for the Malcolm X film, neither Robert Redford nor Whoopi Goldberg were given the slightest consideration for the lead. Lee "discriminated" by casting Denzel Washington. Was Lee "prejudiced" in his decision? Of course: he "prejudged" that Denzel Washington would be a more believable Malcolm X — thus adding to the quality of the film — than would Robert Redford. He made a perfectly intelligent decision; he exhibited the qualities of a "discriminating" mind: he knew when race and gender were relevant factors in his decision-making.

Racial and ethnic bigots, on the other hand, fail to make such relevant distinctions. In their minds, such factors become central to all forms of decision-making. Percaled Ku Klux Klansmen and the most ardent champions of "affirmative action" programs have this in common: for each, another person's race or ethnicity is a deciding characteristic. The quantity of melanin in one's skin determines whether a targeted individual will be brutalized or given a preference, depending upon the nature of the group making the decision. It is not that such people discriminate, but that they do not know how to discriminate!

Nor is this problem confined to these more vulgar forms of expression. A friend of mine was a high-level executive for a major American corporation. One of their divisions was having major cost problems, and he was sent to find out what was wrong. His first act was to pull the personnel files on the top twenty or so executives in that division and discovered that each was a retired Naval officer. Upon further inquiry, he learned that the official in charge of hiring within that division was, himself, a retired Naval officer, and when he saw an applicant with such a background, that fact became the basis for his hiring decision. That there was no causal connection between being a Naval officer and a competent business executive led to employment policies that hindered corporate purposes.

The catastrophic events of 9/11 provided what has thus far proven to be a missed opportunity for clear, discriminating thinking. Rather than treating the attack as a criminal act, President Bush and other government officials reacted with unfocused anger against a vaguely defined "enemy" who, upon closer inspection, became "anyone who's not with us"

in a unilaterally declared "War on Terror." Without any evidence of Afghan involvement in the WTC attacks, the Bush Administration started bombing Afghanistan, and putting together lists of "enemies" and possible nuclear targets — whose identities were both interchangeable and subject to continuing amendment. A number of countries were identified as an "Axis of Evil," an appellation reflecting an unfamiliarity with basic geometry. Draconian police state measures were also announced that would greatly restrict individual liberties, but only for the duration of the "war" which was, of course, to go on forever!

Those who suggested that the WTC attacks might have been in response to American foreign policies and military actions were lambasted by the boobeise who, unable to distinguish between an explanation and a justification of events, accused such critics of defending the attacks! Bill Maher — host of the TV program, Politically Incorrect — offered one of his few genuinely "politically incorrect" observations when he noted similarities between "terrorist" and Air Force bombings. For his honest comments, he was pilloried by those whose inability to discriminate gets expressed in terms of distinctions without meaning.

These are just a few examples of the consequences of abandoning the pursuit of critical thinking. Analysis and reasoning have given way to flag-waving, bumper-sticker slogans, and public opinion polls. If you are unable to assess the propriety of a given course of action, then ask other equally confused people what they think. Let us pool the ignorance!

As the study of mob behavior informs us, when self-righteous rage suppresses intelligence, an unfocused mindlessness emerges. Collective insanity has a way of escalating quite rapidly. When top government officials in Washington can casually discuss "first strike" nuclear attacks against other nations, and warn dissenters to watch what they say, you can be assured that discriminating minds are not in charge.

Perhaps intelligent thinking will begin to assert itself over the official madness that now prevails. There may be sufficient remnants of discriminating thought within the life force itself to impress upon even the most rabid of Washington warmongers that, no matter how horrific and inhumane the attacks of 9/11, they do not justify either a massive police state or a nuclear firestorm capable of obliterating all of humanity.

Arthur Koestler suggested that mankind might have been an evolutionary mistake. A killer ape with a highly developed brain might not be a recipe for species longevity. That same brain, however, provides us the means to evaluate the nature of our behavior, and to make choices that either advance or diminish our lives. But how does one make choices without discriminating among alternatives? And if we are to make life-fulfilling choices, upon what grounds shall we discriminate? Do purple hats really matter?

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