

THE INEVITABILITY OF PREJUDICE

AXEL DAVIES



*You see, Sir, that in this enlightened age I am bold enough to confess, that we are generally men of untaught feelings; that instead of casting away all our old prejudices, we cherish them to a very considerable degree ... we cherish them because they are prejudices; and the longer they have lasted, and the more generally they have prevailed, the more we cherish them. ... Prejudice is of ready application in the emergency; it does not leave the man hesitating in the moment of decision, sceptical, puzzled, and unresolved.*¹ — **Edmund Burke**

Although Burke's writings contain much wisdom, his view on the nature of prejudice as expressed in the above quotation would now be considered heretical by the Politically Correct commissars. During the last thirty years or so, with the rise of a culture of 'victimhood', much nonsense has been talked about discrimination, and 'prejudice' has become one of the most abused terms in the English language.² Yet if prejudice means to hold a preconceived opinion or to express a bias in favour or against something or other, then it is no more than a natural disposition characteristic of all men (including *Gaurdian* readers!).

PREJUDICE SAVES TIME

To express a prejudice merely means that one is expressing a preference. Not only is it a disposition common to all; it is a human trait we could not do without. Time is a precious commodity and so we hold preconceived notions about certain matters in order not to waste resources in the attempt to discover all conceivable facts concerning a situation.

Take musical tastes, for example. I'm not a Dixieland jazz fan and would rather spend what limited time I have listening to rock 'n' roll. I therefore don't waste my time listening to Dixieland jazz on the radio and neither do I purchase Dixieland jazz records when out shopping. Now I fully admit that I'm profoundly ignorant about Dixieland jazz, and I've never even

bothered to try to like it, or understand and appreciate its no doubt illustrious history in the annals of popular culture. In other words, I'm prejudiced against Dixieland jazz and this prejudice comes from ignorance. So what? That's my look-out. I'm even willing to admit that because of my prejudice I may be missing out on some of the most delightful tunes ever recorded in the twentieth century (but I doubt it). The point is, I'm not prepared to even make the effort drudging through hours of Dixieland jazz trying to find them. I'll spend my hours listening to rock 'n' roll instead. Some may call it laziness. I call it spending my time productively.

Now what pertains to Dixieland jazz also pertains to every other opinion or preference we may care to hold. We can't possibly spend all our time giving everybody and everything the benefit of the doubt, looking at all aspects of the matter and seeking out all the information necessary in order to reach a reasonable and balanced conclusion. There just aren't enough hours in the day. Therefore, we discriminate. Indeed, without our prejudiced opinions it would be difficult to function at all:

Try to imagine a man setting out for the day without a single prejudice. Let us suppose that he has 'confessed' his prejudices in the manner of confessing sins and has decided to start next morning with a fresh mind as the sinner would start with a new soul. The analogy is false. Inevitably he would be in a state of paralysis. He could not get up in the morning, or choose his necktie, or make his way to the office, or conduct his business affairs, or, to come right down to the essence of the thing, even maintain his identity. What he does in actuality is arise at his arbitrary 7:15, select the necktie which he is prejudiced in favour of, set off relatively happy with his head full of unreasoned judgements, conduct a successful day's business and return home the same man he was, with perhaps a mite or two added to his store of wisdom.³

DIFFERENT KINDS OF PREJUDICE

As Richard Weaver goes on to explain, there are a number of very good reasons why we function with so many prejudices swimming around in our heads:

First, there are those judgements whose verification has simply dropped out of memory. At one time they were reached in the same way as our 'logical' conclusions, but the details of the process have simply been forgotten. It is necessary to the 'economy of thought' that we retire from consciousness many of the facts that were once used to support our judgements. The judgements themselves remain as a kind of deposit of thought. They are not without foundation, though the foundation is no longer present to the mind with any particularity; and the very fact that we employ these judgements successfully from day to day is fair evidence that proof would be available if



Political Notes No. 108

ISSN 0267-7059 ISBN 1 85637 294 4

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

© 1995: Libertarian Alliance; Axel Davies.

Axel Kirk Davies received his BA (Hons) Government and Politics from the City of London Polytechnic in 1992. He graduated from University College London in 1994 with an MA in Legal and Political Theory.

The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

Director: Dr Chris R. Tame

Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb

FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

needed. The judgements are part of the learning we have assimilated in the process of developing a mind.

The second type of unreasoned judgements we hold are the opinions we adopt from others — our betters in some field of learning or experience. There is no need to labour the truth that we all appropriate such opinions on a considerable scale, and if we could not do so, books and institutions of learning would lose their utility. No man in a civilised society proves more than a small percentage of the judgements he operates on, and the more advanced or complex civilisation grows, the smaller this proportion must become. If every man found it necessary to verify each judgement he proceeds on, we would all be virtual paupers in knowledge.

The third class of judgements comprises those which have subconscious origin. The material that furnishes their support does not reach the focal point of consciousness, but psychology insists upon its existence. The intuitions, innuendoes, and shadowy suggestions which combine to form our opinion about say, a character, could never be made public and formal in any convincing way. Yet only the most absurd doctrinaire would hold that they are therefore founded upon error. In some situations the mind uses a sort of oracular touchstone for testing what cannot be tested in any other way. My judgement that Mr. Blank, though a well-spoken and plausible gentleman, will one day betray his office is a conclusion I cannot afford to put aside, even though at the present moment I have no publicly verifiable facts which would prove it to another.⁴

RACIAL PREJUDICE DOESN'T MEAN FAVOURING GENOCIDE

Having established that we all hold opinions and degrees of preferences concerning nearly all we come across in our daily lives, then we must also accept that we hold those same degrees of preferences concerning groups of people, types of individual and certain cultural habits. We all have preferences, whether it be for people who are thin or fat, tall or short, male or female, quick or slow, fit or unfit, lazy or studious, and for some those preferences also relate to whether people are black, white, yellow, brown or any colour in between. Indeed, not only are prejudices natural (and therefore ineradicable, for it would require the elimination of an important facet of our mental capability), but in many cases we would be foolish not to use them. Professor David Stove makes the valid point that a refusal to differentiate between racial groups in certain circumstances would be a gross derogation of plain common sense:

Japanese are inferior to Scandinavians in the ability to produce red-haired children. Scandinavians are inferior to African Negroes in the ability to produce frizzy-haired children. A Malaysian is almost certain to be inferior both in height and weight to a Maori. An Ethiopian is more likely than an Eskimo to have a physique adapted for long-distance running. Arabs are less noted for industriousness than Chinese are. If you are recruiting potential basketball champions, you would be mad not to be more interested in American Negroes than in Vietnamese. If you are recruiting people of business ability in Fiji, you would be mad not to favour Indian Fijians over native Fijians. Any rational person, recruiting an army, will be more interested in Germans than in Italians. If what you want in people is aptitude for forming stable family ties, you will prefer Italians or Chinese to American Negroes. Pronounced mathematical ability is more likely to occur in an Indian or a Hungarian than in an Australian Aboriginal. If you are recruiting workers, and you value docility above every other trait in a worker, you should prefer Chinese to White Americans. And so on.⁵

Yet, as David Stove realises, to admit such truisms in these hysterical times opens one up to the accusation that you are advocating a return to National Socialist genocidal practices:

It seems to be often believed that, if you admit truths of the kind which I listed above, consistency requires that you try to murder entire races of people. I do not know what one can say of a belief as ridiculous as this, except that it is extremely ridiculous.⁶

PREFERENCES AND CONSEQUENCES

Not only do we all discriminate and express certain prejudices. We are also constantly discriminated against throughout our lives for any number of reasons. It's a fact of life that, due to the statistical proportion of young people in car accidents, as a twenty-five-year-old I have to pay a higher car insurance than individuals aged thirty or over even though I've never been in an accident. Examples could be multiplied. Until very recently I would have been unable to join that admirable organisation, The Townswomen's Guild, because of my gender. The list of activities closed to me because of who or what I am (or rather because I am not something else) is almost endless. Big deal! I'll find other activities open to me.

And now we come to the crunch of my argument. Racial prejudice as expressed by individuals is just one prejudice amongst many others we may all face on an everyday basis. It's no better or worse than any other type of prejudice individuals may suffer when it is the product of individual behaviour in a free market. In other words, a man is merely expressing a personal preference about who he associates with, employs, serves, works for, and the rest. And as a result he will enjoy the benefits or suffer the consequences of his decisions, as is his right.

How people conduct their own affairs, whom they choose to associate with, their likes or dislikes, their prejudices, are their own business, not mine. Indeed, I generally take a laissez-faire attitude to other people's preferences. If cases do arise where I think somebody's opinion does appear unreasonable in the circumstances, then I will remonstrate with that individual in a non-coercive manner. What I will strenuously oppose is any attempt by the state to interfere with the private lives or personal conduct of citizens through racial legislation, whether it be an attempt to enforce racial division or impose racial integration.

What I hope to have shown during the course of this essay is that prejudice is neither all good nor all bad. It is a natural mental habit we all possess, and therefore ineradicable. Racial prejudice is but one of an infinite number of 'unreasonable' opinions we can hold and it is folly to think that it can ever be effectively legislated against in any way. No! I will go even further. It is positively wrong for the attempt to be made, for it is no less than an attempt to interfere with the private conduct of individuals in their daily affairs.

THE LIBERTARIAN FOCUS ON THE INDIVIDUAL

I will end by suggesting that although there is no inconsistency in reconciling libertarian beliefs with racial prejudice, in practice I believe that a libertarian polity would generally be a more tolerant one also. Whereas collectivists give prominence to nation states, racial characteristics or classes in their respective ideologies, the basic unit of sociological analysis in libertarian thought is the individual.

NOTES

1. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1969, p. 183.
2. For an analysis of the rising culture of 'victimhood' see Charles Sykes, "The Ideology of Sensitivity", *Imprimis*, Volume 21 No. 7, Hillsdale College, Michigan, 1992; Robert Hughes, *The Culture of Complaint*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993.
3. Richard Weaver, "Life Without Prejudice", in *Modern Age* (George Panichas, ed.), Liberty Press, Indianapolis, 1988, p. 16.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.
5. David Stove, "Enlightenment, Racism and Racial Prejudice", *Salisbury Review*, Volume 8, No. 4, 1990, p. 19.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 19.