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Collectivist Thinking

In the United States, as in much of the rest of the world, people are frequently thought of in different ways depending on their skin color or perceived membership in this or that ethnic group. This happens for a variety of reasons. Sometimes people simply harbor a hatred for anyone who is a different color or ethnicity from themselves. Others have had a bad experience with another person and assume that all other people who share some superficial characteristic with this person will behave in a similar way. And there are people who are simply naïve and inexperienced and believe some inaccurate story that they have heard or read about people whose ancestry is unlike theirs.

Ideas, of course, lead to actions, and bigoted beliefs can result in discriminatory behaviors. These can range from some people's unwillingness to befriend, do business with, or live near people whose appearance or language they do not approve of, to physical attacks against people the assailants see as somehow alien and undeserving of the freedoms other people enjoy. While few people's prejudice is extreme enough to lead them to assault other people, great damage can be done to others when the bigotries of individuals are given a group expression through the state and the institutions it creates.

American governments have always practiced and promoted discrimination both directly and indirectly. They have legitimized, at various times, slavery, segregation, and prejudicial immigration practices. In addition, they have promoted unfair practices in the private sector by favoring businesses that practice discrimination while disenfranchising the targets of prejudice and preventing them from setting up alternative institutions of their own. It is nearly impossible, for instance, to start up an alternative to a bigoted store in one's community if the banks refuse credit and a government monopoly of money prevents alternative financing arrangements. Over the years, government action has resulted in far more inequitable and harmful treatment of people than any bigoted individuals could ever hope to inflict.

Ethnic Preferences and Social Engineering: How Not to Fix the Problem

Many people, of all colors and ethnic groups, reject discrimination and would like to see a society free of prejudice. Unfortunately, it is common for those who seek to eradicate bigotry to share some of the outlook of those they oppose, both in their view of differences between people and in the means they favor to eliminate ethnic inequity. They tend to share an unwillingness to see others as individuals instead of members of groups and both camps favor the use of government action and coercion to promote their agendas. Until such attitudes are replaced with a commitment to individuality and a rejection of force, efforts to create an equita-

ble society are doomed to failure.

Whether assigning people to groups is done with the intention of discriminating against or helping someone, classifying individuals based on the color of their skin or their parentage conflicts with the individualist idea that each person is unique. People's beliefs and behavior are not determined by such superficial traits as ethnicity or primary language, and to assume that they are can only lead to misunderstanding. Individual personalities, desires, and habits are the result of an enormous number of different influences and people shortchange others when they try to reduce them to simply a sample of a larger group.

Viewing people as representatives of some ethnic "community" instead of as individuals leads opponents of inequity to support solutions to discrimination such as affirmative action. In such schemes, diversity is seen as more important than individual merit or fitness, and in order to make the ethnic numbers look good, institutions like colleges and corporations will give people "points" for their skin color when making admission or hiring decisions. Once upon a time, "tokenism" was looked down upon as a misguided "liberal" attempt to mask systemic discrimination, but now when a law school seeks out black students as tokens representing other black people so that the resulting ethnic mix "improves" the educational environment for others, it is seen by many as virtuous. If affirmative action programs focused on improving the lot of capable individuals by eliminating discrimination in hiring and admissions decisions they would be a worthy endeavor. Instead the emphasis is on how many tokens of how many different groups can be added to the mix to produce the right percentages to qualify as "diverse."

The problem with such programs is that when someone is helped by assigning value to physical characteristics, others are necessarily disadvantaged. Discrimination is discrimination, and when people are judged and rewarded differentially because of their ancestry, not because of something they have done or achieved, a sort of injustice has been done. And anyone who holds an individualistic or any other humanistic outlook cannot but oppose such essentially illiberal behavior.

Some defenders of ethnic preferences in hiring and university admissions claim they are justified because non-white and non-asian-descended people are poorly prepared by horrid public schools¹ and therefore perform poorly on conventional measures of ability. Clearly this is true. But this does not justify giving preferences to less qualified people just because they have been subjected to a lousy school system pervaded by bigotry. When people of one color are expected to perform up to a certain standard in order to demonstrate their ability to do a job or complete a course of study, so should all others. Any other means of choosing

workers or students are discriminatory on their face.

To avoid this line of argument, other affirmative action supporters contend that conventional means of judging academic ability, SATs and such other old standbys, do not, in fact, predict either ability or future performance. If this is true, then such testing should be thrown out for all people since it is not a useful tool for evaluating differences between people or establishing whether someone is qualified for some job or educational program. Few recommend this, however, and advocates of ethnic favoritism instead propose to “race norm” such tests, so that people of latin ancestry, for instance, do not need to attain the same score as someone who is white in order to “qualify” on the basis of some exam. This method of discriminating between people based on their ancestry is, however, no better than any other, and holds no logical water. If a certain test is not a valid means of comparing a person of asian descent and a black american, it does not then become acceptable when used to compare individuals of the same ethnicity. Either hiring and admissions exams are valid assessment tools or they are not, and schools and employers should not pick and choose when to use them in order to promote what passes for “diversity.” Doing so simply substitutes one form of discrimination for another.

Historical Inequity and Reparations

In addition to other arguments by its supporters, some of the justification for affirmative action from the start has been that it is an inequitable, but necessary, remedy for the disadvantages black people were subjected to in the past. Advocates of this position assign the blame for the problems experienced by black americans on historical discrimination and the “legacy of slavery.” The thinking goes that there would be more integration and diversity today if slavery and other forms of now-outlawed discrimination had not existed in the past, and therefore the descendants of those who were once enslaved deserve special advantages now to make up for earlier mistreatment of their ancestors. Some of those who believe in this line of reasoning have taken their arguments even further, however, and propose that black american descendants of slaves should be given cash payouts as a reparation for the fact that their forbears were held in bondage.

There are a number of problems with such proposals. Most important, of course, is that none of the people who actually enslaved others are alive today, so it is not possible to obtain compensation from anyone who directly profited from slavery. Furthermore, many, if not most, americans are descended from people who never owned slaves. Recognizing the problems presented by these circumstances, those who support compensation for the descendants of slaves argue that non-black americans owe their present condition to an economic and social system created on the backs of enslaved black people, and therefore they owe something to the descendants of these slaves who generally are still less well-off than their non-black counterparts. But this argument is based on assumption that most americans, including millions of black people, are relatively affluent only because of the existence of slavery, an institution which ended in the united states nearly 150 years ago. Although slavery was key to the

american economy for centuries in the past, attribution of the impoverished condition of some black people alive today to their ancestors’ status as slaves is based on shaky ground. It is difficult to argue, whatever discrimination or other problems they encounter in making their way in the world today, that any person’s state in life is “caused” by events that took place generations ago and involved other people long dead.

In addition to the inadequacy of the justification underlying the call for reparations, suggestions for the implementation of a system to make amends present problems of their own. Since any attempt to force money out of millions of people individually would be impractical and likely unsuccessful, reparations activists generally call on the government to make the payouts. Of course the state has no money of its own, so reparations would be paid out of tax revenues, which are extorted from working people of all skin colors and ethnicities. The people thus forced to payoff claimants would include black, eskimo, american indian, and asian-descended people, as well as white people, whether that is what was intended or not. Those calling for monetary compensation for the depredations of slave-holders against the ancestors of black (and many white) americans would force people, at least some of whose ancestors were slaves, to turn over their hard-earned money to make amends to other people they never harmed, and who may well be better-off economically than they are. This is nothing if not involuntary servitude.

Here again, the root problem is seeing people as group members and not as autonomous individuals. For those with this outlook, the calculus is simple: some people in the past harmed other people and therefore the descendants of the wrongdoers, or at least people of the same skin color as they were, must be forced to make amends to the descendants of the victims. Such a program would declare all white people responsible for, or at least the beneficiaries of, the hardships of all black people, without any need to produce any evidence that any of the parties forced to hand over the cash had ever done anything harmful to the recipients.

Diversity or Freedom?

In a world without ethnic discrimination, it is likely that many of our neighborhoods, workplaces, and social spaces would be far more heterogeneous than they are today. But the fact that people are not segregated in housing or occupation by color or language is not necessarily a sign that bigotry has been eliminated. It could just as well be accomplished by social planners who direct or manipulate people to live in certain places, enter specific lines of work, or pursue some course of study, while dissuading or barring others from doing so, because they are of one ethnicity or another which the experts have decided is too common or too scarce in some setting. Such meddling in people’s choices may well bring about a sort of diversity, but only at the price of individual liberty.

When people are truly free to choose, which is what anarchists seek, they may decide to associate with a variety of other people, or may seek to isolate themselves among others with whom they feel more comfortable because they

share an ethnic background. There is no guarantee that opening up all areas of endeavor to all comers, regardless of color or ancestry would create the “diversity” sought by many who allegedly seek to root out discrimination. Living among people who differ from oneself in all sorts of ways may make life more interesting and satisfying for some, but will not suit everyone.

Equality of opportunity for all individuals regardless of skin color or ethnicity should be the goal of freedom-seekers. But it is far from clear that even if this was achieved, every group, occupation, or institution would be made up of various sorts of people in numbers that reflect the exact percentages of people of different ethnicities in the population of the region or city or world at large. And there is nothing necessarily wrong with this. Black people make up a higher proportion of players in the National Basketball Association than is true of American society at large, while white people are similarly over-represented among those in the National Hockey League. Since there is no evidence that this is the result of racism in the recruiting practices of either organization, their relative lack of “diversity” harms no one.

Anarchists and Ethnic Politics

Unfortunately, anarchists are not immune to the appeal of group-based identity politics. In the American libertarian movement today there are some who embrace the nonsense of “whiteness” theory and call for the abolition of the white “race.” Others recently organized a “people of color” conference which excluded white anarchists, while a forum this month in New York will present the case for a “black” anarchism. And though much is written in the anarchist press about discrimination and bigotry, all too often these writings, even those by people who reject separatism and anti-white bias, reflect the view that people fit into nice “racial” categories and that meaningful things can be said about people based on their ethnicity, without bothering to evaluate them as individuals. Such an uncritical acceptance of the ethnic politics so prevalent in this country is inconsistent with the anarchist traditions of promoting individuality and rejecting such manifestations of group think as ethnic bigotry, nationalism, separatism, and statism.

Being an anarchist and an individualist, I believe that people should be free to associate with or avoid whomever they like. While I prefer to live, work, and socialize among people of all sorts, if others, including some anarchists, want to live or do business only with others of the same ethnicity, there is no reason they should not be free to do so, as long as they do not interfere with the equal freedom of others to live differently. The fact that libertarians tolerate such voluntary discrimination, however, does not mean we approve of it, and those of us who seek to eliminate bigotry will continue to speak out against anyone who seeks to classify and divide people based on their ethnicity.

An anarchist society would encompass people of many kinds, some of whom would continue to harbor ethnic prejudices, but the lack of a coercive apparatus by which some could disadvantage others would make it unlikely that individuals’ bigotry would result in real harm to others. However, we do not yet live in a free society, and voluntary

association or avoidance is not always an option. Many of the institutions we encounter today coerce people into participation in their workings and then proceed to treat them in discriminatory ways. Such bigoted practices should be strongly opposed.

Not surprisingly, the worst offender is the state. Government obtains its lifeblood, the taxes it imposes on working people, by threat of force, and does so whatever skin color a person has, their immigration status, or the language they speak at home. Since the state robs us all indiscriminately, it should not then be free to treat people differently based on some superficial characteristic. Nor should certain other enterprises and businesspeople, such as chartered banks, landlords, and monopoly businesses, since it is difficult or impossible to avoid doing business with these entities which owe their continued existence to the state. Thus, a bank that won’t loan to black people, a hospital that bars employees from speaking Spanish, or a landlord that won’t rent to a person from the Philippines are all practicing forms of discrimination that anarchists would oppose. But so is a law school which accepts government money and discriminates against white people in its admission practices, or a state-funded university which provides dormitories segregated on the basis of skin color.

It is ironic that so many who wish to end bigotry turn to government to accomplish their goal, when getting rid of the state would be the best means of solving much of the problem. Without government laws, regulations, and police, banks could not red-line, landlords could not deny people a home, and no one would work for a business that presumed to tell them what language they could or could not speak. In addition, universities would not be able to maintain their monopoly on training for certain lines of work, which allows them to pick and choose who they believe is worthy to pursue what career. And, perhaps most important, the loathsome public school system, which provides lousy and discriminatory education and lays the foundation for much of the inequity people face later in life, would be eliminated. As noted above, an anarchist society would not necessarily be free of people with bigoted ideas, but without a state to empower the haters, they would not be able to persecute those they dislike. If some institution in a libertarian community wished to exclude someone based on their skin color, those who felt differently would be free to create their own, non-discriminatory enterprise.

Although most of those who work for a society free of discrimination and bigotry turn to the state to fix the problem, it is, in fact, the state which allows ethnic discrimination to impoverish so many people and prevent them from improving their living conditions. Only by abolishing the state can we hope to abolish the harm caused by ethnic hatred and inequity. This is the insight that anarchists have to contribute to the debate about bigotry and its remedies.

Note

1. In the US sense, i.e. schools run by the State.