



Rules of the Game

Finding My Place in a Racialized World

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Abstract: This essay is an autobiographical examination of who and where I am on the plane of racial and ethnic relations. As such, it is written in a spirit of self exploration and scrutiny, measuring my beliefs and feelings against popular theories of race relations in the United States. I focus on specific historical incidents that I believe influenced my place in the racial world in which I live. In the first portion of the article I evaluate the influence demographics and family have had in my life from childhood through adulthood. I examine the beliefs of my parents and peers and how they might have influenced me growing up in middle-class suburbia. Despite the influence adults have on the development of personality, beliefs and attitudes are shaped further through adult interaction. Therefore, in the second portion of this article I describe the influence military service and post military employment in law enforcement has had on my understanding of race, racism, and discrimination. In conclusion, I argue, the idea that somehow the many racial groups and cultures in the United States will eventually merge into one coherent society seems like an improbable concept. There have been obstacles placed in the path of fairness and equality by institutions and persons who did not have the benefit of the science or reason of today. The concept of a level playing field is not one that I embrace, as I once did. The game started centuries ago and unfortunately there were no referees to make sure the rules of engagement were clear to every player. As such, the game has progressed in favor of the game's creators. The only way to level the playing field is to clearly redefine the rules of the game or to play a different game altogether. As in sports, it is a difficult task to convince the winner that he is winning unfairly if the reward for victory is wealth and power beyond imagination.

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have had in my life from childhood through adulthood. I will examine the beliefs of my parents and peers and how they might have influenced me growing up in middle-class suburbia. Despite the influence adults have on the development of personality, beliefs and attitudes are shaped further through adult interaction. Therefore, in the second portion of this article I will describe the influence military service and post military employment in law enforcement has had on

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Assimilation theory will be the instrument upon which I intend to measure these observations. I will suggest that assimilation theory is alone inadequate in explaining the racial tenor in the United States or at the very least, in the world in which I live. Assimilation theory describes “the more or less orderly adaptation of a migrating group to the ways and institutions of an established group” (Gallagher, 18). Assimilation according to Milton Gordon follows an almost mechanical flow from cultural assimilation through civic assimilation (Gallagher, 19). Is it possible that American society is still within a state of transition? Possibly, but despite J. Allen Williams and Suzanne Ortega’s observation that “assimilation varies considerably from one group to another” (Gallagher, 20), and that the mechanical flow may not always be orderly, the fact remains that United States institutions are yet to be dominated, or even populated, by any race other than white.

My mother and father are both from Massachusetts. My father, John J. Barrett Jr., was the son of John Sr., an immigrant Irishman and mother Violet, from Canada (also of Irish decent). He grew up in Newton, Massachusetts, while my mother, Elizabeth Neal, was raised in Framingham. Elizabeth was the daughter of George Neal, a firefighter, himself predominantly Irish and Dorothy a church organist and hair dresser. Both of my parents are post World War II ‘Baby Boomers.’ My father was a police officer in Wrentham, Massachusetts, where I now work in the same profession. Looking at my own family, which is predominantly Irish, one can see clearly the public service ties so closely linked to early Irish history in the United States. Roger Waldinger points out how the Irish penetrated the public sector at a time when “the public sector provided relatively few jobs” (Gallagher, 320). The ‘good old boy network’ soon took care of the Irish (especially in Boston), and persists to this day in many public sector jobs.

My mother is a nurse at Metro-West Medical Center in Framingham. They divorced when I was in 5th grade, but fortunately for my brother, two sisters and I, we never moved out of Wrentham. I went to elementary school in Wrentham, where I lived until I joined the military in 1988. The Thompson’s were the black family living in Wrentham at the time; at least, they were the only black people I knew growing up. Wrentham was a post World War II suburb like those described in the documentary film *Race: the Power of an Illusion*. I recall being very small and driving through the town with my father and having him point to the small houses he called ‘salt boxes.’ He told me these were homes built hastily for the returning WWII soldiers. All the houses were similar in appearance and structure. Clearly, Wrentham’s whiteness is a result of the governmental policies of the 1940s and 1950s which unfairly excluded minority populations.

My America was an America envisioned by the Greatest Generation, and speaking more broadly, the America that the Founding Fathers envisioned as well. “Possessive investment in whiteness pervades public policy in the United States past and present—not just long ago during slavery and segregation, but in recent past and present as well—through covert but no less systematic racism inscribed within U.S. social democracy” (Gallagher, 140). The investment paid off in my small home town.

If entry into Wrentham by minority populations was near impossible in the 1940s and 50s, the probability is extraordinarily insurmountable in the 21st century. George Lipsitz, in describing the possessive investment in whiteness, describes a situation where suburban home equity has increased so much in the generations following WWII that minority populations find “themselves facing higher costs of entry into the market in addition to the traditional obstacles presented by the discriminatory practices of sellers, realtors and lenders” (Gallagher, 143). If assimilation into society

involves having the opportunity for inclusion into middle class America, Wrentham is an institutional hurdle which will not be easily overcome. Wrentham is by no means unique. Most of the towns surrounding Wrentham are as exclusionary in the very high cost of property and the limits set up by local governments restricting the use of land for low to moderate income housing.

My parents were not racist per se. My father never spoke of race when I was a child. I do not think he was necessarily colorblind, rather he was more likely fearful to evoke my mother's wrath. My mother on the other hand would comment frequently about the natural equality of blacks and whites. She would say, "Whites are no better than blacks and you should always remember that." This was my early education on race relations. In the late 1970s, my mother sat us down in front of the television each night to watch the television series, *Roots*. I was slack jawed. I clearly remember crying watching certain scenes in that movie. As profound an impact as the movie "Jaws" had on my perception of the dangers of the ocean, *Roots* instilled me with a feeling of awareness I have never lost. After *Roots*, race mattered. I never looked at the Thompson's in the same way.

As rudimentary as my understanding of racism was in my America, in High School, my understanding increased with my exposure and education. Unlike several of my current classroom peers who enjoyed a multi-cultural classroom environment, King Philip Regional High School in Wrentham may as well have been Levittown High. As I grew, I found the language used by adults becomes more relaxed and inclusive rather than the guarded type used around small children. My football coach would comment before a scrimmage with an urban school, "They might have a lot of blacks on the team, but we have more heart!" Loosely translated, "I am aware that black athletes are better than white athletes, but we can still win." No one ever seemed uncomfortable with these clearly racial com-

ments. According to Richard E. Lapchick, "Sport culture, as it is currently interpreted, now provides whites with the chance to talk about athletes in a way that reinforces...stereotypes of African Americans" (Gallagher, 429). The American Creed as Robert Merton describes "asserts the infeasible principle of human right to full equity—...justice, freedom and opportunity..." (Gallagher, 119). It does not assert, as Merton points out, the equality of capacity and endowment. Still ignorance, and the stereotypes bred by it, fueled my understanding of the American Creed.

Powerful stereotypes were presented by influential people in my life at the time. If my football coach said black athletes are biologically better than white athletes, then why shouldn't they be? This did not necessarily conflict with my early understanding of what it was to be white and black in America. After all, Kunta Kinte ran like the wind when he escaped from the plantation in *Roots*. Popeye the Sailor, in the parody of Alladin and the Magic Lamp, cast Bluto, Popeye's savagely dark, muscular, bearded and violent nemesis, in the role of the evil sultan. Such were my first impressions of southwest Asians. Bugs Bunny hunted the 'J—ps' and made fun of Native Americans on my morning television. Race Bannon, the blonde haired, ex-Special Forces co-star of Saturday morning's "Johnny Quest" protected Hadji and Johnny from South American and African 'savages' with gusto in my white living room. S. Robert Lichter and Daniel Amundson shed light on the controversial depiction of people of color in prime time television, which is clearly of historical significance. The black and Hispanic prime time actor represented the minstrel or criminal in most television programs from the middle to late twentieth century.

But I would argue the impact Saturday morning cartoons have had on generations of young minds is far more tragic. If programs like "Amos and Andy" and "Good Times" are the main course in the media's racial meal, then cartoons are definitely the

appetizer. “We Are All Suspects Now,” by Tram Nguyen, demonstrates in many ways the power of the media in naming the ‘evil empire.’ Nguyen points to the stark images of 9-11 and the impact those images have had on Middle Eastern peoples both documented and undocumented. “After 9/11 it was just unbelievable, the scale with which specific populations started being targeted...It went from courtrooms being incredibly diverse, Chinese, Caribbean, all people of color—to being all Pakistani, all Yemeni, all Egyptian from September until June of 2002” (Nguyen, 7).

In 1988 I joined the Army after proving myself too immature for college life. My father accompanied me from the recruiter’s office through the entire process. Himself a Vietnam Veteran, he was skeptical (and rightly so) of recruiters and false promises. My entrance scores qualified me for any job the military had to offer up through Monterey, California’s famous interpreter/interrogator school of language. My dad was more concerned with getting me money for college after I was discharged, and with getting me overseas. He believed the most important aspect of military service was the ability to travel and see parts of the world you might never see again. I scored a contract which provided the Army College Fund and a duty station in Europe. This was, provided I was successfully assimilated into the ‘camouflaged race.’

The U.S. Army was my first true exposure to racial diversity, and was I ever surprised. Whites, African Americans, Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Samoans, Dominicans and more are proud members of the U.S. armed forces. Everyone I met during Basic Training joined for similar reasons. Just about everyone yearned for a piece of the American Dream. The Army was perceived to be one way in which race was not necessarily a qualifier for success. In the Army, I learned more about race and racism from people with whom I lived, worked, fought and mourned.

It is important that I point out that, at

least from my point of view, the military is still racialized. ‘Line units’ as they are called are the military units who are on the front lines when actual combat begins. My unit, the Second Armored Cavalry Regiment, was not a racial cross section of American society. The Second Armored Cavalry was a line unit. Roughly 50% of the squadron I served with was comprised of people of color. There are probably many reasons for this, but there is one in particular I am sure of. Like the criminal justice system, the U.S. military in the late 1980s and early 1990s operated in a similar fashion. Angela Davis aptly describes a capitalist drive for a convict labor force which preys upon ‘at risk’ and disenfranchised populations, specifically the black population. Similar to Davis’ view of the “punishment industry” (Gallagher, 250), the American military has historically exploited the same community, turning the desperation of minority people into the ranks of military fodder, often forced into the front lines of combat and the least desirable jobs the military has to offer. So many of the African and Latin Americans I knew in my time in the Army fled the streets, gangs, poverty, violence and despair to find themselves in situations I found frightening at times, they would tell me, “J.B., This aint shit bro!”

Elijah Anderson discussed the “Code of the Streets.” Like many white youths in suburbia, I had seen the movie *Colors* with Sean Penn and Robert DuVall. If *Roots* demonstrated the promise for a better tomorrow, *Colors* showed us that tomorrow was still a long way off. My friends of color in the Army told me stories that made *Colors* look like *Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood*. One thing I learned about the lives of my peers in the service was that Anderson was not very far off in his description of a conflicted society. Anderson writes of the inner city, “Above all, this environment means that even youngsters whose home lives reflect mainstream values—and the majority of homes in the community do—must be able to handle themselves in a street-oriented environ-

ment" (Gallagher, 392).

My roommate, Tracy Moss, an African American from Atlanta, Georgia, would keep me up late at night talking about racism and how naïve I was to it. Moss was not condescending, but I think he saw in me an opportunity to confide what it meant for him to be black in America. One night, very late, Moss asked me, "J.B.? Would you ever marry a black girl?" Without any thought I said, "No." Moss was married to a white woman, but was separated at the time. His silence at my response made me uncomfortable. Moss told me my answer was part of the problem in America today. I never pressed him to explain what he meant by that, but the memory came to me reading Frank Wu's article on intermarriage. The opening sentence in Wu's article spoke to me. "When I was a boy, I once asked my mother if she would love me if I married an American girl. She answered that she would love me if I married a foreigner. But she added that she would love me more if I married a Chinese girl" (Gallagher, 546). The power of family and of what it means to feel a sense of belonging within the unit is what caused me to blurt out my answer to Moss. In class discussions where a student suggested that even if he fell in love with a woman from another race, he would not marry her because his family would not approve or be accepting validated Moss's judgment. My answer was, in fact, part of the problem.

Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracey wrestled with the idea of intermarriage in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* In the movie we observed the discomfort felt on many levels by every major character in the film except for Joey and the Catholic Monsignor. Joey's surreal naivety to the very real feelings shared by her fiancé and her parents represents the purest form of color blindness. Love was the prime motivator for Joey and John which holds to Maria Root's truths about interracial marriage. "The motives behind interracial marriage seldom include the desire to rebel or to make a political or social statement" (Gallagher, 572). At the

same time the film demonstrated the act of so-called 'border patrolling' described by Wu. Both the articles by Wu and Root were able to help me identify my own earlier answer to Moss's question about interracial marriage. If assimilation is the inevitable end result in the United States, then why in the 21st century are we still wrestling with the concept of a color blind marriage? Both Joey and John described *love* as the driving force or, as John called it, "the little problem," which created the tension in the film. Spencer Tracy's character (Joey's father), typifies what Merton considered the 'Fair Weather Illiberal'. As the wealthy owner of a newspaper, Tracy's character found it easy to talk about racial equality publicly, but at the end of the day, as the Catholic Monsignor clearly pointed out, Tracy was a "man of prejudice who does not believe in the creed but conforms to it in practice through fear of sanctions which might otherwise be visited upon him" (Gallagher, 122).

What the film did not address, but something that is clearly important to note is the role of class and its effect on the way John was treated by Tracy and Hepburn. Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn's characters are both social elites. Sidney Poitier's, John Prentice, is a physician. His profession becomes a positive qualifier throughout the film, mentioned several times by peripheral characters and by Tracy and Hepburn.

Both of my parents taught me to be racially tolerant and unbiased, but they also made it clear that they wanted me to marry a woman who "was professionally motivated." Parental pressure to not only stray outside of one's particular ethnic group but to be mindful of whom you take to dinner are of significant import. I would have no problem dating an African American woman, but familial impact and pressure influenced my response when asked about it then.

In 1994 I became a police officer in my home town of Wrentham. It wasn't that I wanted necessarily to *be* a police officer rather that I was earning so little as a custodian I

seized the opportunity. I would be doing the law enforcement community a disservice if I wrote that all cops are bad. They are not. But some are. Finding my place in the racialized United States became difficult being indoctrinated into the very machine that helps to perpetuate discrimination and hatred in our society.

Douglas Massey describes one of the problems facing black Americans today. "As a result of their prolonged exposure to high rates of neighborhood poverty, blacks experience much higher risks of educational failure, joblessness, unwed childbearing, crime and premature death compared with other groups" (Gallagher, 374). This is relevant to the law enforcement community when trying to understand the anger and distrust of public institutions, including the criminal justice system, when the system itself has failed them as a group of people.

I mention this because before taking this course or reading books by Joel Dyer and Christian Parenti, I was somewhat skeptical of the 'plight of the black man' in this country. Dyer and Parenti each investigate corporate and political motivations respectively for perpetuating a culture of racism in America. In the police academy, in-service training, and in the station itself, there is a culture of discrimination. Cops are paid to discriminate or to be discriminating. I think, even for myself, separating my feelings from a professional determination become cloudy at times. There is a fine line between discriminating for justice's sake and discriminating for power's sake. This is probably because much of what I do in the course of my work relies on gut instincts. Instincts that are formed over time and experience that tell you someone is lying or something bad is going on.

This is clearly the most difficult portion of this essay for me to wrestle with. As I progress through my education, I begin to see things differently. Massey's article on segregation, the documentary films depicting the terrible treatment of the slave populations, Angela Davis pointing out the capi-

talist criminal justice machine, have all become small pieces of conscience, chipping away at the criminal justice world as I knew it.

The Wrentham Police Department was regarded by the state as being one of the top agencies for minority to police interactions. There are many variables that the numbers do not account for in the State study, one of which is the large premium outlet mall that opened several years ago. The mall has generated incredible volumes of traffic from places all along the east coast. But despite this, the number of motor vehicle citations issued to minority drivers is disproportionate. I am not sure how many police officers in my community, if any, actually consider race before engaging with the public. The police encounter is always one of confrontation. There is no equality in an encounter with a police officer; they are the living representatives of the law. As such, the police represent different things to different people depending upon where they see themselves within the social order. Control, restraint, oppression, and discrimination all come to mind when I think of a police encounter.

Finding my place, in an agency where racist and sexist remarks and jokes are common, is a very difficult endeavor. The 'cop culture' is as powerful as it is old. I cannot help but think of Merton's classifications of race relations when I try to place myself. I am certainly not the 'fair weather liberal' nor am I the 'fair weather illiberal.' I have always shunned the idea of racial discrimination, but find myself in a work environment that embraces racial tension. To speak out against a colleague could bring the wrath of the entire agency to bear upon an officer. The influence one's family has over decisions we make regarding matters of the heart, ala "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," is similar when talking about problems within the law enforcement community. There are circumstances in police work, unlike any other profession, that demand social acceptance. These circumstances refer to incidents and things the general public does

not deal with on a regular basis. From issues of child molestation, brutal assaults, fatal motor vehicle crashes, emotional and high pressured domestic situations all require a structure of co-dependence and family. I could write volumes about the problems facing law enforcement, and hope that someday, when I am back on the outside, I can do that. This is a chapter in my life that is still being written.

In conclusion, the idea that somehow the many racial groups and cultures in the United States will eventually merge into one coherent society seems like an improbable concept. There have been obstacles placed in the path of fairness and equality by institutions and persons who did not have the benefit of the science or reason of today. The concept of a level playing field is not one that I embrace, as I once did. The game started centuries ago and unfortunately there were no referees to make sure the rules of engagement were clear to every player. As such, the game has progressed in favor of the game's creators. The only way to level the playing field is to clearly redefine the rules of the game or to play a different game altogether. As in sports, it is a difficult task to convince the winner that he is winning unfairly if the reward for victory is wealth and power beyond imagination.

Sometimes, what is needed is for the participants to just leave the game entirely for the cheater to realize his error. Games need participants who can come together in the hope that there are rewards to be won by playing fairly. Right now in the United States, the rules are established by the wealthiest and most powerful among us. The concept of rugged individualism does not evenly apply to Americans of color. History has relegated the African American into a position of severe disadvantage. "We have no way of testing the behavior of whites and blacks toward one another under favorable conditions—...All of the conditions for black and white in...America were the opposite of that" (Gallagher, 53), said Howard Zinn of the historical nature of racism.

Because history cannot be re-written, then concessions must be made to account for the historical disparity. Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro suggest institutional changes in the way the American economy operates to create possibilities for minority citizens. "To say that current inequality is the result of discrimination against blacks is to state half the problem. The other half—is discrimination in favor of the whites" (Gallagher, 609). A redistribution of wealth is part of the solution, but only when paired with a new equality of opportunity for everyone.

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