“People Do Not Have Ideas: They Choose Them”

by Samuel Hux (September 2015)

So says historian John Lukacs—and he’s right. Same with prejudices, say I. Racial prejudices I specifically mean, which do after all qualify as “ideas,” whether held by the KKK or a Baltimore street thug—a subject central to a work-in-progress, a kind of philosophical memoir on the subject of race (“the obsession that will not shut its mouth,” I call it), of which this essay is an excerpt.

When I was nineteen, after one year of college, I joined the army and did basic training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, in a Charlie Company ninety percent southern. On my first day in Charlie the platoon sergeant, a cocky combat veteran named Bob Jacobs from Durham, North Carolina (my home state), ordered anyone with military training to announce himself. As I had done ROTC as a freshman I stepped forward, and a dozen or so of us were marched about as Jacobs barked commands. He then chose the recruit who would be his liaison, a kind of student “sergeant” to be his representative. Jacobs, a white man, chose the biggest African-American in the lot. We hicks were being put in our place.

Training was a two-step affair then: two months of basic infantry, a furlough, two months of a military specialty. Furlough over, I returned to Jackson with an auto which I parked just off base since private transport was forbidden to recruits. At the end of advanced training we all had another furlough before reporting to our assignments. So. . . .

“You pay for gas—I have the car,” I said to two mates from my home county. We put on civvies and were off. Their names have escaped me over the years; I didn’t know them before the army. One was a farmer a few years my senior. One was my age and black. Late at night somewhere near Florence, S.C.—in a south still segregated no matter what the law—I pulled my Plymouth into a truck stop. We all got out and walked in and sat down at the counter. The place got very, very quiet. Even after all these years I will swear—hand me a Bible!—to the “conversational” exchange. The counter-man leaned over toward me—I was closest

to him—and said, “What the hell you boys want?” “What do you mean?” I answered. “We want coffee and something to eat.” “Boy, I can tell by the way you talk you aint no Yankee. You ought to know better than this.” “What do you mean?” I repeated. “Boy, you can’t be that stupid. You know goddamned well we don’t serve niggers here!”

Oh my god! Good lord! This was no time or place for bravery, no place to make a “statement.” Indeed, we were not trying to make a statement. We quietly got up and walked out, got into the car as quickly as possible, and drove away. We did not speak. . . because we did not know what to say. I remember nothing else about that journey.

Consider: The three of us had lived all our civilian lives in a segregated society to whose basic tenets at least two of us had subscribed; and perhaps the third had subscribed unconsciously, although I will not presume to know. Yet after roughly four and a half months we three—a small-town white boy, a small-town black boy, and a rural white man—walked together into a segregated diner in South Carolina as if it were the most natural thing for us to do. And, I repeat, we did not do it defiantly. We did it because we had *forgotten* you could not do such a thing. *How* could we have forgotten the behavior of a lifetime. . . or three lifetimes? I intentionally misled the reader when I wrote that we had lived all our *civilian* lives in a segregated society, in order to tempt him to believe that there was something special about military culture that worked some strange magic upon our psyches. That is the easy answer which I herewith dismiss. The U.S. Army was fully integrated, the all-black unit a thing of the past, but it was not really racially egalitarian. I saw a few black officers although I was never commanded by one; more likely one would see black noncoms. One suspected a ceiling. And the military had a cunning capacity to live at peace with the civilian culture immediately surrounding it by respecting and not challenging or offending that culture. As I soon discovered to my immense discomfort.

Eventually I was assigned to Fort Benning, Georgia (“Benning’s School for Boys” we called it) and attached to the Infantry Officer Candidate School as a cadreman (that is, one of those who ran the everyday operations of OCS and/or trained the candidates). Early on at Benning I got into trouble. In quick strokes:

A black barracks mate was brutally beaten in Columbus (the city which abuts Benning) by cops on a rampage avenging some assault on a fellow officer. I wrote a letter protesting the beating to a local newspaper, ignoring the fact that this violated the military chain of command. Commanding general read the published letter and, I was told, choked on his breakfast. I was hauled before assembled officers of my regiment and threatened with court martial, which I was ultimately spared because, I assume, the officers and gentlemen must have felt some little shame for the fact that the army was not coming to any aid of a brutalized veteran who wore the Combat Infantryman's Badge. My barracks mate received no aid because the Benning command did not want to stir up bad feelings about race with their Georgian hosts. While I escaped court martial I did not escape an underhanded and cowardly sort of punishment. I learned much too late to do anything about it that after my *contretemps* with the brass my MOS (military occupation specialty) had been surreptitiously changed to one that put a definite ceiling on my rank. The only person who could have pulled that off was the colonel and regimental commander (whose clerk was my best friend)—not a West Pointer (the best!) by the way, but a South Carolina peckerwood out of the Clemson ROTC. So while for the greater extent of my time in the army I was doing a job that called for promotions up to Sergeant First Class and was put up for promotion every month I never got one at that job. My assistant outranked me! A shabby tale.

But not so shabby as my friend Corporal Jimmy Lee's story. He was willing to toss off his wounds (not the first he'd received!), but I and some other mates insisted he at least report the incident to the Military Police and have photos taken of his bruises and body (no facial) lacerations. Meanwhile my letter, which had appeared not in the letters column but on the front page, caused some discomfort to the city powers-that-be. The police who had pulled Jimmy over during their rampage charged that he had resisted interrogation and assaulted *them*—and Jimmy was hauled to court, where of course he made the counter-charge. I remember so well the judge demanding sneeringly, "If you were beaten where are the wounds?" to which Jimmy replied, about the open his shirt, "Right here, your honor," to which the judge replied "Don't bother, I can see from here," which he could not possibly have. The photo evidence? The MPs never made pictures available, if they ever really took them. Jimmy's counter-charge dismissed, the charges by the cops were withdrawn if the army would assure no more trouble from Cpl. Lee—which Benning in the largeness of its heart agreed to.

No, the military did not impose some subtle indoctrination whereby racial prejudice was suppressed or eliminated. I want to make this plain. The military experience, especially in the phases of basic and advanced training, was profoundly disorienting ("This aint you mama's house!") and provided on base no space for segregated business as usual. That's it. That's all. Which is not to say it's nothing, is only to say it's insufficient explanation of how one could so radically forget the business as usual of two decades. If one continues to look for the explanation in the institution one will get nowhere. Focusing on the individual is equally fruitless. I am not a forgetter, am not deficient in memory. I don't forget faces, baseball players and line-ups, insults and grudges. And I am haunted for life by every shabby thing I have ever done. The place to look is where my race-obsessed society cannot manage to look because to do so it would have to give up a basic and even comforting *prejudice*, as it were.

I have been told all my adult life that racial animosities, fears, distrusts, you-have-it, are so cripplingly ingrained in the human psyche that it may/could take generations to eradicate them, that they are beyond our powers to overcome, that in the meantime the only thing to do is face up to them and forthrightly and honestly try to control them as best we can, and never, never, deny their existence. Well, my experience does not allow me to believe a word of this. Rather:

We could so quickly and stunningly forget the ways and manners of a lifetime, the prejudices never questioned, all that racial claptrap, because, in spite of all the conventional wisdom, they did not after all go so very deep! It is my conviction that racial prejudice holding sway over the poor misguided misbehaver is an illusion. It *does not hold sway.* We *hold onto it.*

The reason for holding on will differ from person to person, but in all cases, I think, racial prejudice is a *conscious choice*. That is, although it may be inherited, we choose to accept or reject the inheritance. Need it be said I am talking about clinically sane people? Needed or not, I'll say it again: I am assuming clinical sanity. This conviction is no embrace of some notion that if we chose better we would discover universal brother-sister-hood. I don't subscribe to pollyannish nostrums, have never so much as wondered "Why can't we all just get along?" I think it is as natural to fear or distrust what is strange as it is to be cautiously curious about it, that is, to mediate between

befuddled attraction and awed repulsion in trying to judge wherein the strangeness lies. And we call strangers “strangers” because they are strange. I think it natural to be unnerved by “the Other.” Imagine that I were staring at a tribe of Bushmen, and was disturbed by the extraordinary differentness of them compared to me, and doubted the possibility of any significant cultural reach between us, and then was stunned by the memory of the anthropological theory that these people so different and distant may indeed be the first humans, the oldest of *us,* and then in awe at that ironic possibility could not stifle a visible shudder. Imagine as well that a garden-variety liberal were watching me watching them and observed that shudder. He, confident of the ruling prejudice about the depth of racial fears-etcetera, would take it as a certainty that the shudder was because of the blackness of the Bushman. Such a paucity of imagination. How very, very boring. Shakespeare understood. Othello was not “Other” because he was black (if he was black) but because he had travelled to “antres vast and deserts idle / Rough quarries, rocks, and hills whose heads touched heaven,” and lived among “the Cannibals that each other eat, / The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders.”

Anyone who grew up in the South when I did and returns now to visit or reside cannot fail to notice the profound difference which no one would have predicted five or six decades ago. It is not just that Fifth Street has become Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, or that a black family occupies the house from which I walked every school-day in the second grade. Anyone who says he sees no real and deep difference is either lying in his teeth or is too stupid for his mental flutterings to be called thoughts. How did all this happen? Well, I think I have said.

Racial prejudice may be inherited, but the inheritance is retained only by an act of the will, a choice. I understand that this is a radical notion, so casually accepted is the conventional wisdom that certain prejudices are almost unreachable, almost a part of the soul’s texture; so I don’t expect most people to agree with me, with my minority opinion. But I do expect wide agreement with the principle upon which my opinion depends: *the reality of human choice*. This in spite of the fact that a sizeable intellectual minority doubts that reality. One might have thought that the intellectual battles between adherents of “free will” and those of “determinism” one recalls from college courses and midnight dormitory bull-sessions had been settled in the interim, but that is not the

case. My argument that racism is a choice obviously makes no sense without free will, and so to that issue I turn. Actually the subject for a longer treatment, here I hit only the high spots.

In an interesting book of reflections on mortality entitled *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (which also means "the nothingness which threatens us") Julian Barnes makes an interesting remark. "[Gotthold Ephraim] Lessing described history as putting accidents in order, and a human life strikes me as a reduced version of this: a span of consciousness during which certain things happen, some predictable, others not; where certain patterns repeat themselves, where the operations of chance and what we may as well for the moment call free will interact. . . ." Lessing's definition of history reminds me of a remark Clive James made in an essay on Anna Akhmatova in *Cultural Amnesia*, observing that her Stalinist-imposed misery did not *just have to be.* "That's what history is: the story of everything that needn't have been like that." Or as Jack Beatty says in *The Lost History of 1914: How the Great War Was Not Inevitable,* "Historical inevitability is a doctrine for history without people." But I am also struck by what I may as well for the moment call Barnes's reticence when he refers to "what we may as well for the moment call free will." Why the reticence? Nothing in his book suggests that he doubts the existence of free will for a moment. But in spite of the fact that "the free-will theory of popular sense" as William James calls it in "The Dilemma of Determinism" remains the "popular" view, it is constantly under siege. The "free-will view" is too awkward; from now on I shall refer to it as the "Jamesean view," since I don't think anyone has ever made a better defense of the notion that we possess freedom of the will and are therefore responsible agents in the moral universe.

Apparently contradicting the Jamesean view, *apparently* I say, is the ancient and primarily Christian argument of "Divine Foreknowledge" consonant with the assumption of "Divine Omniscience," an idea that Saint Augustine for one struggled with in *The City of God.* Since God is omniscient He knows present, past, and future, and knowing the future He knows what you will do, and since He knows what you will do you *have* to do that, for if you didn't then God would be wrong and therefore not omniscient and so not divine; and since that thought is blasphemous, you do indeed have to do what He foresees, and so you are not really free to choose your own actions (and thoughts)—and so on and therefore and etcetera. Augustine has several solutions to the "problem," all of which are

more worthy than a witty friend of mine’s (Since God is omnipotent He surely has the power to close His eyes so as not to see what you will do). The most prominent answer is that God is free of past-present-future since He is infinite, which means after all *beyond and not subject to time*