

Shut Up, I Explained



Mann mit Radio, Homo sapiens, Kurt Weinhold, 1929

So, I alter a Ring Lardner title, *Shut Up, He Explained*. There are times when it's pointless to argue, or to develop a reasoned response to someone else's absurd assertion, which implies the assertion was worthy of an answer instead of deserving of dismissal. When some fool or crypto-Nazi, for instance, tells you the Holocaust did not happen. Or a version of that, as when my wife was informed by a historically, culturally, and linguistically challenged alumnus with a martini, in a Manhattan Ivy-League club of all places, "Jews make too much of the Holocaust." I wasn't present to empty a glass on his head. Actually I'm not typically violent, instead saying something like "You're too bloody stupid to talk to, so just shut the hell up!"

I did service in sit-ins and marches when I was younger, and am proud that my alma mater, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, desegregated officially in 1955 (blacks made it to the Law School in 1951), well before the 1964 civil rights act. Had I been an administrator at UNC in 1988, when black students got the black student union they desired (let me rephrase that: "the *segregated* student union"), here is what I would have thought but would not have argued, because their position deserved no rebuttal but dismissal instead:

"Better men and women than you had long desired entrance to this beautiful campus and university and finally got it. It is disgusting and a betrayal of history that you should wish to be dramatically separated from the rest of the student body in any way other than the freedom to choose, of course, who your friends and favorite associates are, without making that choice some kind of goddamned pronunciamento." Which should have been unarguably obvious to everyone. Instead, I would have explained, "Shut up!" Actually what I did was cease paying alumni dues.

I am about to embark on a series of remarks of a polemical nature on race in the United States of America today, which ideally should be directed at both (1) black people (or a

significant lot of same) and (2) ostensibly right-thinking liberals (of all shades), who feel they must “Act Affirmatively” to do justice to the dominant group of American non-Caucasians—whose positions and plans are equally unworthy of rebuttal and deserving of “Shut up, I explain.” But I can’t really do that. For then the essay dies right here. Anyway, since I don’t expect that those to whom these remarks should be directed are likely to read them (or even to begin to read them before ceasing to listen), I resolve to invite other readers—quite probably members of a choir to whom I preach—to overhear what groups 1 and 2 will not.

I have in earlier essays made clear my objections to “Black Lives Matter”; and dismissed the notion that the U.S. suffers not just from pockets of racism but from *systemic racism*. I dismiss it because I know that it means—in spite of all evidence to the contrary— “this is a racist society we live in,” whites thoroughly afflicted, with their affliction evidenced by any objection to the BLM slogan or any denial of the adjective *systemic*, any refusal to “confess.” therapeutically like a good liberal would (no matter how dishonestly and un-seriously). I retired roughly five years ago from a university professorship after about half a century of teaching classes typically one half to three quarters black, and I know who I am and would even had my experience been different. So:

When I am told, as I am already being told that, because of the slavery that ended over 150 years ago and the segregation which is a legal dead issue (let us call it the “Bad Legacy”), my life (and my loved ones’) does not matter as much as someone’s whose great-great-grandpa could have been chattel, then *I am going to resent it*. When I was an academic serving on a committee seeking to hire a new faculty member, we—before we could hire anyone, qualifications be damned—would have to make sure about the availability of a black candidate before pulling the trigger, *I resented the hell out of it then, and I*

still do. When I know, or rather *since* I know, that professionally-staffed museums with the documented reputation of low minority attendance must find black staff (qualifications modified) and/or reconsider the “coloration” of the exhibits (aesthetic considerations modified), you might guess that I am wondering if publishing houses and cultural journals are next, and you might not be surprised if I answer that “next” implies the wrong tense for what is already occurring. And since I know that movies are potentially on the block now, as some from the past are already (think *Gone with the Wind*), just as university reading lists are ...! If I have focused in this paragraph on cultural phenomena it’s because that’s my bailiwick.

The previous sentence is too modest. What I called my bailiwick is, or was, America’s bailiwick. I mean we have been blessed with *America’s British Culture* (title of a Russell Kirk book), the culture that has been an American birth right—even for people not born this western side of the Atlantic—and perhaps no group has been more acculturated than African Americans, born here or immigrated to. “Until now” I should add. Think about, for instance, James Baldwin, whom no more radically “black” author can be imagined: his breakthrough book was *Notes of a Native Son*, which reminds me of no one so much as George Orwell. I could go on. We could go on.

The misnamed “multicultural” temptation (misnamed because it does not mean “multi,” but rather means “exclude the dominant culture”) is not the creation of hyphenated Americans (ethnic or racial). Its authors are liberal intellectuals mostly located in American universities, Ivy-Leaguish or with claims to excellence, predominately in the humanities and social science disciplines. I remember them well and my memories make me happy to be retired. They, having benefitted professionally from America’s British Culture, are so professedly enlightened that they don’t want that culture “imposed” on Blacks and such who deserve their “own” culture pure and simple, what’s “their

own" defined by the liberal profs. What the professors gain, in my recollection, is the worshipful admiration, convincing them of their virtue, of the very worst students available. Not worst because they are Black (I hasten to explain), but because they assume what the profs have in mind for them will be easier, less intellectually taxing than Aristotle, Shakespeare, Adam Smith, Einstein, and so forth.

But I'm a citizen as well as a culture buff. And when I notice, as I cannot help but notice, that our race-obsession, clearly institutionalized in the pleasant-sounding Affirmative Action (AA), seems totally embraced not only by race hustlers like the MSNBC-rejuvenated "Reverend" Al Sharpton (anyone know where the Rev got his theological training?) but also by most respectable Black leaders and spokespersons and recipients of AA largesse and TV talking heads. And speaking of *resentment* (not mine for a moment) there's none like that of the person whose job, position, success, or whatever, falls under suspicion of being the result of Affirmative Action, whether through quotas or vague liberal disposition, rather than as the reward of merit. In other words, there is a certain level of mendacity built into the AA phenomenon, and a certain protection of the phenomenon itself—for anyone harboring the suspicion or even its possibility will be considered a racist, and, *I resent that*. Do I exaggerate the significance of these matters that provoke me to resentment? Well. . . .

If one was truly listening the summer of 2020, one knows that the protests grew way beyond rage at the killing of George Floyd by a rogue policeman. I don't mean grew into riots and arson and theft ... but into something subtler and more lasting. I've mentioned or implied before the cultural assaults beyond museum and staff modifications (what the hell do they have to do with police brutality?) and such like. I have mentioned demands that Uncle Ben and the pretty lady on pancake labels step down ... but, really, it's too stupid and embarrassing. The

next time I visit a certain cultural institution in New York City, I'll not have to be offended that a literally statuesque black man and an Amerindian are afoot while *President* Teddy Roosevelt rides horseback. Lest I be charged with wasting time on a triviality, let's think symbolically a moment. Impossible to know how many people since 1939 have enjoyed James Earle Fraser's bronze sculpture, his *work of art*. But no one else will enjoy it. Not because of adverse art criticism. Rather, because it might offend the vulnerable sensitivity of some people. I don't like the poetry of Billy Collins, the most popular current American poet. What'll I do about it? I'll just not read him, that's all. But James Fraser will not be seen, not only by me but anyone else because his sculpture might disturb a few of a racial group that represents 13.4 percent of the national population, to hell with the other 86.6. I have no idea how many Blacks visit the American Museum of Natural History, and no one else does either. But that doesn't matter; anyone's visit now will be different from what it was before. Because ... There's something not right here, something terribly wrong here.

What's wrong? The U.S. is made up of minorities, including Hispanic, Jewish, Asian, perhaps soon even Germanic and Gaelic. Yet *these* and other minorities along with whatever makes up the ostensible majority must have their rights of cultural observation and enjoyment limited or dispensed with as another minority *takes advantage of the Bad Legacy* and throws its light weight around (light but made weightier by white progressive heft), instead of simply avoiding what it doesn't like—as other people, whatever their ethnicity, dislike and avoid classical music or rock and roll or what-have-you given their good or bad taste. I personally feel sorry for people who like gangster-rap but I'm not going to see to it that they don't hear it (unless they're visiting my home).

In other words, much of the “cultural affirmative action,” so

to speak, such as the most famous, that statues be torn down to appease one racial minority, which is nothing less than censoring the rights of others to enjoy certain sculptures. Of course, black and liberal intellectuals will argue that a literally statuesque Robert E. Lee is a celebration of slavery, when it is in fact and intention a celebration of military courage. (Those who cannot grasp that, I both despise and pity: what must it be like to have such crippled minds pleased with themselves for correct opinions?) But much of the cultural affirmative action is a naked display of power which cannot be hidden. I have mentioned in another essay: an Ivy-Leaguish university theatre which bans all white playwrights for a season to produce only black playwrights (nine out of nine), playing to a white audience, no blacks observed: a black play during which white audience members are banned from the last few minutes of drama; demands that non-Caucasian actors be paid overtime if rehearsals run too long, that white directors of an age be retired to be replaced by people of color; and several etceteras. I kid you not. It was announced in August 2021 that Lincoln Center in New York City intends to expand its offerings beyond classical music and ballet (which of course means limiting those genre) to include Hip-Hop! (Who's going to attend? Black intellectuals? White liberals? Give me a break!) Liberals and liberal institutions seem incapable of saying "No! for Christ's sake!"

The United States (plural) were born disgraced with chattel slavery, which was erased when the United States (singular) was reborn, but reborn with the disgrace of segregation. In spite of the Bad Legacy, there was in the South, where the segregation was official and the second-class citizenship effective, quite often an intimacy between Blacks and Whites (the civilized ones if not the yahoos) which was something like love or at least affection (a paradoxical truth radical Blacks now will deny for ideological reasons). I know I felt it *for* and felt it *from* my childhood friend "Doot." My point is there was just enough hidden decency such that segregation

was doomed, so that when the civil rights movement took off—which thrilled me no end—its success was so much faster than anyone would have expected, as any sentient human being who observed, and lived with, segregation during Jim Crow and after it can attest. I haven't been in my home town for any extended visit in twenty years but, when I did, I drove to the house from which I walked to school during the second grade. A black man walked out, noticed me parked, and asked if he could be of any help. I confessed that my curiosity had driven me back to when I was seven, and he kindly invited me in to look around. But he was an elderly gentleman who knew what things had *been* like and how they, thankfully, were now.

There was a period of hope, call it M. L. King time, in spite of the radical black power shenanigans of Stokely Carmichael and Rap Brown and such, and in spite of the violent resistance of segregationist die-hards. But I sensed it was closing when I ceased (recall my earlier confession) paying my alumnus' dues to my alma mater: when the University of North Carolina, yielding to black student demands for racial separation, built a black student union! Everyone knows the feminist movement has two competing cadres: *women* satisfied with absolute equality with men, and *broads* fixed upon the power to make males pay for their past sins. In similar fashion, there are two different kinds of African Americans with respect to race relations: (1) those conversant with the elderly black gentleman in Greenville N.C. and those (2) who, while crying outrage at the death of George Floyd, were happy and excited to use that crime as an opportunity to make outrageous demands upon society as a whole, make claims of priority in what kinds of lives matter, crying foul at the notion that *all* matter, letting the nation know that "This is *our* time" (which syntactically and logically means "not yours"), who assume with confidence fed by establishment liberalism (fearful of being thought racist) that their fractious positions are virtuous and justified by the Bad Legacy, who scare the bejesus out of people frightened at the prospect of a *racial*

cold war in the States, and, I might add, who have achieved by choice a level of stupidity such that they do not know that they are a drag on the political party they profess to support for their legitimate needs.

There will be *no racial hot war* in the States because we all know where military power lies, thank God, in the branches of the profession of arms. But if establishmentarian liberalism and the “progressive” wing of the Democratic Party have their way, and the Affirmative-Action-addled wing of Black leadership continues to make unreasonable demands *of* and claim inappropriate rights *over* a majority, demands and rights impossible to be gained or achieved and thus a source of impotent anger, the United States, not so long ago on a seemingly sure path to racial harmony, is in danger of suffering a long, slow, debilitating, and tragic fragmentation of the citizenry. And that fragmentation could make 2020-2021 seem like a period of fellowship and peace.

Should this not be obvious beyond the possibility of miscomprehension? Need I really explain?

I sincerely hope my fear is not prophetic. But I despair in any case, for even were the notion of systemic racism to die of its own inanity, we as a nation remain race-obsessed—the obsession that will not shut its mouth. And why can't it shut its mouth? What is gained by its garrulousness? Certainly not justice!

At the risk of repeating myself, I choose to sum up some basic truths. Segregation in all its official forms is now illegal and forbidden. And that remains true no matter how many racist yahoos strut about. All that *can* be against the law *is* against the law. But that is not enough for the victimologists. They want certain attitudes *verboten*. And as long as that cannot be the case, they will feel victimized. Everyone wants to be respected, but not everyone is capable of giving respect. “Everyone” (I excepted) wants to be universally loved, but not

everyone *can* love. I “except” myself because there are some people whose love it would be insulting to be the recipient of considering who they are. (I tried to make that sentence as appropriately awkward as possible.) I wouldn’t even want my beloved loved by some people who are not worthy of knowing her.

Universal love is not a realistic expectation, probably not even a desirable expectation: Paradise would probably be a boring place. But *not to love* is not necessarily *to hate*. It can be simply *to dislike*, which is not subject to governance. *De gustibus non est disputandum*. And often what appears, especially to victims, to be hatred, is not quite *that* precise thing. Republicans have been accused of trying to limit the chances of black voters voting. But that’s not because that party hates blacks; it’s because that party, like any party, hates *losing*. Of course some do hate blacks, but that does not mean the insatiable desire to win is the same thing as racial prejudice. O.K.—that need not make the intended victim feel happy; but it should not make him or her paranoid either.

Universal liking is no more reasonable than universal love. So what? So why expect it? If someone doesn’t like you, forget about it or spit in his eye and move on. People dislike people for reasons having nothing to do with race. We are very inventive. And we need not understand what we’ve invented. Iago famously does not like, or rather hates, Othello. But there’s no suggestion by Shakespeare that it’s a racist animosity. Indeed, Iago doesn’t know why himself, and spends much of the play trying to figure it out. The great English essayist William Hazlitt called Iago “a motiveless malignity in search of a motive.” And Iago was a hell of a lot smarter than most of us. On the other hand, he’s a lot dumber—if stupidity can mean taking an action for reasons you don’t grasp. And taking an action is one form of making a policy. If we’re talking about loving-hating-liking-disliking,

then *policies*, political positions and such, are all that need matter ... not attitudes!

And attitudes are not always crystal clear, subject to precise identification. Thinking of *The Bard* can be a deepening thing to do. Iago? Oliver Parker's 1995 *Othello* with Laurence Fishburne and Irène Jacob may be the best *Othello* film ever; Kenneth Branagh is certainly the best Iago ever—you don't have to have seen others to know that! This might have been Parker's insight-invention but I feel confident it was Branagh's in the scene when Iago has finally convinced Othello of innocent Desdemona's "perfidy": Othello and Iago embrace in dramatic male fellowship; camera focuses on Iago as viewers expect to see a look of triumph on Iago's face; instead, what one would never expect, but knows immediately "My God! This is right!" Iago-Branagh's facial expression is profoundly *sad!*—as if this "motiveless malignity" is ashamed of what he's accomplished and is even tender toward his hated victim. This one scene itself is worth the price of the film—and not only for reasons of the artistic extraordinary, but for its possible insights into human nature, that fluid phenomenon.

The point is that human emotions—not limited to love and hate and their lesser variations—are too various, ambivalent, ambiguous, complex, rich, subtle, blatant while obscure at the same time—are too deep for simplicity. It comes to my mind something I mentioned in an earlier essay: the old black man in Guy Davenport's essay in *The Geography of the Imagination*. Davenport and his father Guy Senior, back in the 1930s, are guests temporarily of an elderly black man also surnamed Davenport. After a pleasant conversation: "Oh Mr. Guy, don't you wish it was them good old slavery days again?" I'll think about that mystery the rest of my life. But I'll not assume it was a true wish, nor an instance of slave morality, nor some ironic twisted put-down of Davenport's father; nor will I assume with confidence the most pleasant assumption: that it was of necessity a matter of the old black gent being so

pleased with hosting and conversing with a slightly younger white gent with whom he shared a surname that he expressed his pleasure in an extreme fashion he knew would never be forgotten, and he did this thing—a gift—because he was a gentleman. But mostly I will assume what I have confessed thinking somewhere else before: most of the time we discuss race we don't know what the hell we're talking about.

And we certainly don't when victimologists insist, and liberals agree, that racism in America today is not just the possession of pockets of the population but is instead *systemic*. In a pig's eye. I don't expect any significant change—or even insignificant change—in American society as long as it remains misgoverned by a garrulous *race-obsession*. And since it won't, it is hard for me to know when to shut my own mouth. Of course I'd like to have the last word, but that's not very likely. The obsessed just keep on keeping on. And I don't want to spend the rest of my life adding paragraph after paragraph, knowing the obsessional inanities will not end. But I'll add one more observation and then drop into silence even while knowing that within a week—

I have long wondered why if Brad or Bette each has one Black parent and one White, both will be called “Black,” even though ethnically-racially speaking both are as “White” (Caucasoid) as “Black” (Negroid). It makes sense visually of course if both are obviously dark skinned, as let us imagine Brad is—but what if, suppose, Bette is obviously very light skinned, so that there is no evidence even suggesting “Mulatto?” Bette is still a Black Woman. What kind of obsession is this that a mixed-race person is not a mixed-race person but a Black person? It is certainly not a White-racist-judgment since the identification will be insisted on by Blacks. But Brad and Bette are useful fictions; let me get specific.

Meghan Markle is a mixed-race American, but you only know that because you've been told by print or TV. There is no visual evidence that her mother is Black, plenty that her father is

White. Visually, she could be Italian, Jewish, French, whatever; she could be as Irish as her name Meghan. But if you witnessed her extravagant royal wedding to Prince Harry you know that she is famously a Black Woman. No need to believe your lying eyes. But if you had understandably ignored the fact that she is as White as Harry, you'd be reminded otherwise by the March 2021 royal scandal revealed by the famous interview with Oprah Winfrey. Poor Meghan, it seems, was so depressed that despite enormous riches and elegant leisure and the fame of royalty (such a hard-to-bear fate?) she contemplated suicide—which you doubt at your own expense. Evidently, or rather “evidently,” some unidentified member of the royal family (can you believe this shocking thing?) wondered out loud how dark her and Harry's first child might be. I suppose that period (.) should be an exclamation point (!). That punctuation was written all over Oprah's face (you'd better believe it real) when Harry's Dame revealed the evidence of racial prejudice in Buckingham Palace. Both black and white liberal talking heads and interviewees were shocked at such injustice suffered by a Black Woman—who looked a hell of a lot more like Prince Harry than Queen Oprah.

How is one to understand this inanity? Which has several parts. You know, because much has been made of it, that an “interracial” couple are expecting a child, and you simply assume the child will conform to the color of the White father? Why would you assume that? Could you not be accused of some sort of White preference? The race-obsessed would surely suspect you of that. On the other hand, you don't assume anything but wonder instead if the child's color will conform to a real possibility in the mother's genetic make-up. Could you not be congratulated on some sort of Black preference? Why then would you be accused of pro-White racial prejudice? Why cannot the following be the case? You know that so much has been made of the fact that the father is White and the mother, although as light as rain, is famously Black, that you quite naturally wonder—it simply occurs to you—whether the child

will look more like the father or more like the mother, especially in an institution where offspring have traditionally looked more or less like both the father and the mother. How could this be thought racist? It is simply curiosity. Are we to believe that natural curiosity is necessarily race based? My God and Good Grief and What the Hell. I'll answer my own question, how this could be thought racist: by the race-obsessed who cannot shut their mouths.

But I wish they'd shut their mouths at my command, "Shut up, I explained." For there is nothing I have said in this essay that is not obvious and clear as rain if one is blessed with reason and the power of observation and free of reverse-racist sentiments and liberal nonsense.