

The Battleground of Equality



Decoy (detail), Ishii Shigeo, 1961

Recent events in South Africa have led some Americans to compare the pattern or possible evolution of their country to that of South Africa. The woke left has routinely used the word apartheid, South Africa's program of racial separation from 1948 to 1994, in describing American food availability, medicine, schooling, and other policies. After witnessing recent coverage of protests there, observers here see little more than a repetition, on even a larger scale, of our 2020 destruction in Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Seattle, and many other cities.

For more than a week in July, the country of South Africa was the scene of rioting and looting. Roughly 200 shopping malls (not individual stores, but malls) were looted. More than

1,400 ATM machines were looted. There were more than 200 deaths and more than 2,000 arrests. Even schools and medical offices were damaged or destroyed. Parts of the infrastructure such as network towers were destroyed. There was some question whether what was involved was in fact an attempted coup to replace the government. After very substantial destruction, the military restored order using somewhat limited force.

The cause of this disorder was, at least superficially, the arrest of the previous president on corruption related charges. An underlying cause was that the previous president and the current one are from different tribal groups. Widespread hunger and widespread deaths from the coronavirus were also promoted as at least underlying factors.

The threat of disorder of this type has been ever-present since the end of the country's apartheid status. Although universally condemned, the apartheid era saw strong economic growth, general advancement, and exceptional accomplishments such as the world's first successful heart transplant.

Currently the country's population is 60 million, and the fragmentation of this populace is a cause for instability. The various tribal groups make up about 80 percent of the population; mixed race individuals, referred to as colored, are nine percent; the remaining parts are white South Africans at eight percent and the small but influential group of Asians, primarily from India. Among black South Africans, 64 percent are poor by the country's standards; measured poverty among the white group currently may be as low as one percent. One of three South Africans is unemployed, and among young people the figure is now three of four. A *Washington Post* story written during the rioting said that South Africa was "hobbled by corruption, state failure, and tribalism."

The peoples of South Africa have been a democracy—of a kind—for nearly 30 years, and an important part of that has been a policy called Broad Based Black Economic Employment

(BBBEE). If you have heard demands for equity in the United States, BBBEE is simply its African variety. Companies are given a BBBEE scorecard and score by hiring, promoting, and including in ownership black South Africans. Common sense would indicate the last of these three is the most important: a foreign company is about to make a large investment; a government official is offered inclusion as a partner; a loan is arranged to finance the official's inclusion in the investment; the arrangement nearly guarantees that the official will profit from the deal. In return the company is favored in government contracts and tax assessments. Eskom, the country's nationalized electrical supplier, is cited as an example of racial set asides leading to cost overruns and broad mismanagement. Racial empowerment creates distortions throughout the electricity process from the development of generating plants to securing coal as fuel. In addition to Eskom, other examples of corruption are the airline, broadcasting, and rail-freight industries (all state owned), as well as government agencies involved in finance, natural resources, and so on.

The BBBEE arrangement combines the racial equity and socialist economics so often demanded in the narration we hear, and when South African failures occur they are attributed to prejudice and racism just as American failures are. There has been in South Africa a clear progression toward seizing property from the minority racial group owners and giving it to those demanding redistribution.

As a late July article from the website Revolver News titled "South Africa—the First Country Built on 'Critical Race Theory' —Officially Implodes" notes, South Africa has fully embraced Ibram X. Kendi's ideology that any racial inequality can only be caused by racism and cured by direct action. When the direct action, however, is merely a theft of what a more capable culture had accomplished, it is nothing more than a formula for failure.

Although it has not achieved the fame and success of Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist*, a book titled *In Defense of Looting* seems to have a place in our time. Almost needless to say, the rioters of Durban, Johannesburg, and so on don't require a written defense any more than the rioters of American cities do; but someone went to the trouble of preparing such a vindication, and its worth was described by the review publication *Publisher's Weekly* as "a bracing rethink of the goals and methods of protest." An interviewer at National Public Radio indulgently asked the author about looting being a "loaded" word and about the myths and tropes associated with looting and offered the summary that "looting is a powerful tool to bring about real, lasting change in society."

Traditionalists or true conservatives would not be especially concerned with verbal arguments against this form of anarchy. A direct application of law and order would be, if allowed, the response.

To return to the element of comparison, looting of property in one place is not that different than in another. Emptying and destroying a pharmacy in Durban or Johannesburg is very similar to emptying and destroying one in the United States. Using the arrest of a completely corrupt politician as an excuse for looting is very similar to using the arrest of a street hoodlum as an excuse.

Under the title "Gross inequality stoked the violence in South Africa. It's a warning to us all," a *Guardian* article of July 18 argued that the dissolution of the social contract had now left only two replacements:

Events in the country demonstrate a phenomenon ... we are witnessing in different ways and in degrees of severity across the globe: the old order breaking down, with little to fill the void but sectarian movements or identity politics.

Is this actually anything more than a struggle of the capable and the incapable?

The battleline between the contesting ideas concerning how we collectively live our lives will always center on the principle of equality. The battleline has varied slightly, but that is where the contesting ideas must face each other.