

The Need for Rational Debate on Racism

by Michael Curtis



Va pensiero, sull'all dorate. Go, thought on wings of gold.

The chorus of disapproval and anger for the death of the unarmed African-American George Floyd by a white Minneapolis police officer resounded after seeing the video of the victim being choked to death. All have condemned the brutality of the officer and participation of other officers in the indefensible use of force, abuse of power, and racial oppression. The event has brought the opportunity to examine in a rational way and to challenge the extent of racism, the observance of principles of equal justice for all, treating people with dignity and respect, and adherence to constitutional rights.

Racial inequity in the U.S. has been endemic, from slavery, segregation, Jim Crow laws, separate but equal schools, political gerrymandering, and prohibitions on owning property.

Unquestionably the most devastating insult in contemporary times is to be accused of being a racist. A problem therefore is that besides being unfair and usually irrelevant to individuals smeared with the appellation, the accusation has made an honest unemotional discussion of the race issue in the United States difficult, if not out totally of bounds. However, as a result of the death of George Floyd, the opportunity has come in the U.S. and indeed elsewhere in the world to begin the long overdue conversation on the race issue, and racial justice.

The start could have been in the appropriate peaceful protest demonstrations in cities in the U.S. and around the globe. However, five initial problems are present, delaying rational debate on race: the precise objectives of the protests; these protests have become complex and somewhat unfocused; they have been accompanied by smaller but violent, non-peaceful protests by both diffuse and organized agitators in a way that is unacceptable and seemingly hostile to Western traditions; political differences have limited opportunities for genuine discussion as has been shown by the turmoil and resignations in the staff in *The New York Times* over its publication of an Op Ed by Senator Tom Colton (R-Ark) who called for the use of force to deter law breakers and to restore order in the streets; the spread of protests internationally.

The initial objective of the protests was to protest police brutality, honor Mr. Floyd and to call for justice regarding his death, another example of police misconduct as in the case of the black 17 year-old Trayvon Martin whose murder gave rise to the general slogan, Black Lives Matter. In unusual fashion Floyd has been honored by people, including some police, "taking the knee", a concept initiated by a black football

player, some kneeling for the exact amount of time a police officer knelt on his neck as he was pleading to be able to breathe. But he has also been dishonored by the less peaceful protests of diverse participants, some organized, that have deteriorated into riots, violence, and looting. Stealing from Chanel, Gucci, Louis Vuitton, does not contribute to racial justice.

The protests raise the issue of purpose, of motivation, and of expectation. No one can deny the discrimination against and persecution of black people, or can dismiss the calls for elimination of racial injustice. The need for change is undisputed. But the accusation of "systemic racism" must be clarified. It is not clear whether this accusation is confined to general police behavior and misconduct and enforcement of the law, to the criminal justice system, or to American society as a whole based on the origin of the nation as ensuring rights for white people. Should the actions taken in recent years to deal with discrimination and inequality be ignored? They include civil rights legislation, affirmative action programs, charter schools, public housing projects, food stamps, subsidies. These may be insufficient but they suggest that "systemic racism" may be too strong a term for the reality.

Three comments are pertinent on the issue. The first is that remedies for racial segregation do not require violence. On the contrary it is likely to be counterproductive, and delay opportunities for reform. A second factor is that few positive proposals have been made , and they mainly focus on defunding , decreasing and even dismantling of police departments, or to directing funds intended for public safety to social programs. Obviously, changes have to be made in police procedures regarding black citizens. There are two difficulties with concentration on these proposals: one is that implementing them may lead to the higher crime rates of fifty years ago in homicide, arson, burglary, car stealing, and property damage.

The second difficulty is that this concentration on police misconduct neglects the more significant inquiry into civil rights, on issues such as education, housing, employment opportunities, higher paying jobs, safe neighborhoods.

A third factor is the surprisingly widespread nature of peaceful protests abroad to show solidarity with the U.S., in countries including France, Italy, Spain, Australia, Brazil, Hong Kong, and Israel. Some actions have followed those in the U.S. No one is surprised that the Governor of Virginia has agreed to remove a statue of Robert E. Lee, the Confederate leader, from the grounds of the state capital. More surprising have been similar action abroad. In Ireland there have been calls to take down the statue of Oliver Cromwell in London. In Bristol the bronze statue built in 1895 of Edward Colston, the 17th century slave dealer was destroyed and thrown into the harbor. Colston was head of the Royal African company which had a monopoly of the West African trade , and had transported 84,000 from Africa to slavery in the U.S. and the Caribbean. But Colston had also been a philanthropist, funding schools , churches, almshouses, and hospitals in his native city, and was seen as a public spirited merchant.

But two events were particularly outrageous. One can understand the peaceful protest at the U.S. Embassy in London. However, an attempt was made in London to set the Union Jack flag on the Cenotaph on fire, on the 76th anniversary of D-Day; and the statue of Winston Churchill in Parliament Square was defaced by spray paint. We are informed that Winston is a "racist." Statues of other controversial figures are in danger: Cecil Rhodes at Oxford and Robert Clive outside the foreign office in Westminster, or Lord Melville in Edinburgh.

While it may seem trivial in comparison to what is currently happening in the U.S., the importance of how using the right words in talking about serious acts of oppression can result in misunderstanding can be illustrated by events in the life

of the British writer, P.G. Wodehouse. Admirers of American musicals will recall the musical carnival, *Show Boat*, composed by Jerome Kern with lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II. But an additional song, *Bill*, in the show was written by Wodehouse who wrote many other lyrics which are not well known because they are integrated into the narratives of the plots of his shows rather than as ballads of the kind in most musicals.

No one is likely to argue that the lyrics of Wodehouse who had written songs, some in collaboration with Guy Bolton, for Broadway and Hollywood were the equivalent of Lorenz Hart or Ira Gershwin. He did help Cole Porter polish a song in *Anything Goes*. Yet Richard Rodgers did say that "before Larry Hart, only P.G. Wodehouse had made any real assault on the intelligence of the song-listening public."

It is more certain that P.G. (Pelham Grenville) Wodehouse , 1881-1975, had made an impact on the public with his literary output, of 40 plays, hundreds of short stories, and 96 books. A master of comic fiction he was the creator of an idyllic, somewhat sardonic, world , mainly of inept aristocratic characters and their escapades. Violence is rarely or ever mentioned in the stories.

It was surprising that Wodehouse became involved in a sordid episode in World War II. He and his wife had been living in Le Touquet, France since 1935 to avoid British taxes. In 1940 he was arrested by the Nazis, who had conquered France, and sent to internment camps, Loos, suburb of Lille, and Tost, now Toszek in Poland, for a year, and then to the luxurious Hotel Adlon in Berlin. At that time, he gave six radio broadcasts aimed at the U.S., of comic presentations of his life and internment. The radio broadcasts caused a furor. PG was accused of being a traitor, a collaborator.

Among his defenders was the crime novelist Dorothy L. Sayers, who held that the worst that can be said of him is that his behavior had been stupid. A more fulsome discussion came from

George Orwell in his essay "In Defense of P.G. Wodehouse." Orwell suggested that PG's main interest was to get a laugh, that he was living in the past, in the period about which he wrote, and had a naïve, traditional picture of Britain. He lacked political awareness, and cannot be convicted of anything more than political stupidity. It is excusable to be angry at what P.G. did, but to go on denouncing him is not excusable.

Wodehouse was never officially punished , but never honored in Britain to which he never returned. He lived the rest of his life in Manhattan, and then in Long Island, where he died in 1975, age 93. He continued writing his books, and even took part in the revival in 1959 of Jerome Kern's *Leave it to Jane*. His experience presents U.S. protestors with an example of what can happen if they don't state their goals clearly in rational fashion, thus preventing the perversion of their activity.