THEY ARE GETTING THEIRS, BUT ARE WE GETTING OURS?

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Here're some reflections on the Bronx's (and America's) perplexities as to what to do about *America's Hall of Fame for Great Americans*, begun the first year of this the last century of this millenium & now fallen into shabby desuetude & partisan guerilla fighting. With sorrow I must take it as a metaphor of America's soul-condition this hard winter of 1988.

1. When a half century of ago for the first time I wandered in awe and with thanksgiving through the 630-foot statues-filled colonnade around what was then N.Y.U.'s library, I had no sense (I can be quite sure of this) that the busts in "the American Pantheon" were of white men (without exception? almost, if not entirely). Like the civilization itself, the selection board was dominated by white men, who naturally had what might now, in liberation-theology jargon, be called "a preferential option" for seeing the white-adult-male sector of the populace as the natural, normal pool for fishing out heroes to commission our most famous sculptors to "do" for this national shrine. The white-male selection committee--doubtless at least largely unconsciously--was thus both giving theirs (credit where credit's due) & getting theirs (a continuous ratification of the culture-&-power old-white-boy network), and I (as I say, unconsciously), aspiring to become an old white boy, was sort of getting mine....Subsequent trips were not so innocent & complacent. Through various social movements, I came to ask whether blacks (& other "coloreds") were getting theirs, whether nonAnglos were getting theirs, whether women were getting theirs,....Now I'm forced to come full circle & ask, in light of the fact that the white male is getting NONpreferential treatment (an upsidedown version of go to the back of the bus), whether we (WASP males) are getting ours.

2. But the new-cultural-situation question as to whether we WASP males are getting ours in not this Thinksheet's burden. Even if we aren't getting ours in the meritocratic sense, we are getting ours in the punitive sense (as when one says of an unpunished miscreant "He'll get his!"): we're in what Tenn. Wms. would call "A Period of Adjustment." Roughly, one might say that though two wrongs don't make a right, two unfairnesses sort of make a fairness....But what this Thinksheet is getting at is, rather, the malign effects of today's party-politicizing of the fairness idea, a process & public dynamic I've put into interrogative form: ARE WE (WHOEVER) GETTING OURS (WHATEVER)? ("Getting ours" is both +, rewards, & -, punishments: I can mean, in addition to the former as implied in the Thinksheet's title, "Are we getting punished as much as we should be punished?" This way truth, but also masochism. Masochism made even more ugly by social manipulation, as when various partisans-parties try to lay guilt-trips on me for being a WASPM, a male of my particular ethnos & religion.)

3. How can we get to the third stage, viz all this consciousness-raising with justice (all forms of discrimination against individuals being ipso facto unjust, unfair)? Fighting over the public schools has gutted them of "values" (the roots & reach of the Beyond Within Beyond): fighting over the Bronx Pantheon has intimidated the selection committee into immobility (the next "great American" to be selected must be a--let's see, whose turn is it? Greek? Woman? Black? Asian? Hispanic? A child? Jew?). (I'm chair of an otherwise all-woman committee, & opposed having a man added just for "balance.")

4. This idea of the individual as criterion & court of justice-fairness is not as old as most folks imagine. I'd date it only back to 1860, Jacob Burckhardt's THE CIVILIZATION OF THE RENAISSANCE IN ITALY, which

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propounded the thesis that those highly individualistic ethnics, the Italians, needing esthetic & spiritual space to recover pagan classicism a few centuries ago, came to self-awareness over against the conservative church-&-society forces working to maintain self-consciousness "only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation." Not that he held forth a bright future for this "spiritual individual": his historical pessimism was to become one of the roots of modern existentialism. He himself I judge to have been, though beyond the Renaissance trap of the romantic individual, in the trap of the Enlightenment's intellectual "isolato," the man (sic) rationally able to self-distance from both the mass & the sociopolitical sanctions of the powers. While I've not read his whole oeurve, I doubt that he was aware that at least one factor in his pessimism was the fact that his "individual" does not exist except as an operational fiction.

5. Fictions are operational-operant (what you work with as a means to power), heuristic (what you work with as a means to knowledge--eg, scientific hypotheses), & entertaining (what you have fun with as "homo ludens" playing with words). JB's "spiritual (German for "cultural") individual" is an operational fiction, polemic-rhetorical over against the reality that every human being is a social product (theologically, a creature God-created in society as womb; sociologically best exegeted by Geo. Herbert Mead's MIND, SELF, & SOCIETY From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist, U.Chicago/34/44). The reality to which the individual points is the person-in-society, but even that phrase contains a fiction: the "person" does not exist except as an operant fiction (in this case the power-goal being "equality," an important-necessary concept, though not entirely free of operant-fictional content). The fictional in "persons"? The fact that what exists as actual human beings are females & males. (The androgynous spillover of "person" as sociopolitical idea into actual social behavior is sometimes sad, often hilarious, paralleling the deformities when a person-in-community behaves as an individual.)....Mead's classic (above) is worth, here, a few reff.: "The self...is the action of the 'I' in harmony with the taking of the role of others in the 'me.' The self is both the 'I' and the 'me,'" which are "fused" when the self responds (as 'I') to the 'me'-in-the-situation (277); the social forces merging I & me are religion, patriotism, & teamwork (sec. beg. on p.273); the fusion, & thus the unity of the self, occurs in action, behavior (280f).

6. Now let's nuance the question:

	I-me	*we-us*
the absolute mine-ours	**A**	**B**
the relative mine-ours	**C**	**D**

A: Is my "self" (me-environment + I-response) getting what it needs to do its thing, become it-self & make its contribution?....B: Are we ...we...our...ourselves...our...? These two questions are independent of others past or present, here or elsewhere....C & D are the same questions, but with this added: In comparison with others here or elsewhere, past or present,.... Now reread this Thinksheet's title & note (1) that A & B aren't in play, & (2) C & D are specifically indicated. Now think about verbal implications of these nuancings. Eg, might someone or some group be treated (A & B) fairly & also (C & D) unjustly? And if so, are we to conclude that social decision-making should include the question whether the proximate/ultimate goal is to be fairness or justice?

7. Jealousy, an isolable factor in C & D, does not exist in A & B. In static societies it exists mainly laterally, as the hope of upward mobility hardly exists. But where the telly spreads the blandishments of "civilized" society as well as the virtues of civil rights, there is the (destabilizing) revolution of the eyeballs--now almost everywhere.