

ARE "RACISTS" AND "TERRORISTS" BAD PEOPLE? ----- ELLIOTT #2062

Of course they are, *by definition*. Each word designates a certain group of bad people--bad, no matter what else they may be. Bad like "the Devil" and "Satan." Inherently, incontestably, inarguably bad. Indeed, so bad that you're in trouble if you try to say any good word about anybody "known" to be a racist or terrorist. So I've often been in trouble on both scores. INSTANCE: In the late '60s I was offered a contract signed by the president of a seminary in the Great Southland, only to be followed by his embarrassed phonecall: some of his trustees had decided I was a terrorist because I'd written this and that as a proviolent antiracist! The president of a seminary in the Great Northland took me on, partly because I was a proviolent antiracist (ie, cared enough about fairness to US blacks to favor sufficient social uproar to murder Jim Crow).

You guessed it: This thinksheet is an appeal with two sides: (1) Please use hot words for hot purposes; and (2) Please use cool words for cool purposes.

1. I remember, in many World War II restaurants, the sign "LOOSE TONGUES KILL." Words loosely, sloppily used kill logic, discourse, even people. That's why I'm both irritated and worried when I'm criticized for insisting on verbal precision: folks don't thank me when I criticize them for careless, slovenly speech. (With great effort, and only rarely, I thank folks who do me the way I do them.) There's a tragic straight line between violence to language and violence to people. I'm not against violence to people (when the occasion calls for it, which is almost never) but I am against violence to language.

2. Parents used to try to protect their gradeschool children from coming home bloodied up, by teaching them the retort "Sticks & stones may break my bones / But names will never hurt me." Me? When called a "name" (ie, a slur, a bad word)--words always having been heavy with me--it felt worse than being hit with a stick or stone, and I preferred going home bloody, hopefully less bloody than the name-caller. Problem: The bullies, knowing they could get my goat by name-calling me, exercised their God-given and American-ratified right of vituperation; and I went home bloody often. I'm lifelong sensitive to name-calling, both at me and from me. (Yes, I'm a situationalist: I name-call when the situation calls for it; ie, when I want to irritate or enrage into irrationality and self-exposure, or when I want to expose and condemn....One category of name-calling is the use of animal names; eg, Jesus' calling Herod "that fox.")

3. Verbal terrorism: Some folks pre-cringe at the thought of being called an "-ist." Currently I see much craven male behavior designed to avoid being called a "sexist." Why the usu. disparaging, even evil, connotation of "-ism" and "-ist"? Why, ie, in Eng. (untrue, eg, in Greek): because the Eng. sibilants tend to connote evil and threat: "sin," "snake," "serpent," et al? At least partly. But let's look behind, at the denotata. All these nouns and adjs are doubly verbal, doubly actional: (1) they are verbal substantives/adjs. (2) of action, all derived from Gk. & Lat. "-ize." The Eng. connotation does not always obtain, but action as the root denotatum can always be felt in "-ism" and "-ist" words. The powerful action-feeling in itself puts one on guard, into a forensic mood. So good mediators and negotiators avoid "-ism" and "-ist"--which explains also why these words are beloved by inciters and instigators of all stripes and purposes. So when you hear/read any of these words, ask yourself: (1) Is the speaker/author trying to rouse me to action or a higher intensity of feeling? (2) Or is s/he (as I in this thinksheet) trying to warn me against arousals intended to bypass my brains to get to my gut, circumvent reflection in order to move me to direct action or unreflective feeling? ("Unreflective feeling" is not a bad description of the psychodynamic root of prejudice.)....Now to the Eng. uses of "-ism"

* *Insidious, isn't it?*

WER

and "-ist" in OED order:... (1) "Process, or completed action," as in a baptizing (Gk. -ismos); or "result" of the action, as in a baptismal state (Gk. -isma). Since Eng. has only the 1 wd. "baptism" for what in NT is these two words, translators should be careful (more than most of them are!). So for this use, BAPTISM is our sample wd.... (2) "The action or condition of a class of persons"; sample, HEROISM.... (3) "The condition of a person or thing"; sample, BARBARISM.... (4) "The name of a system of theory or practice"; sample, QUIETISM.... (5) "A peculiarity or characteristic, esp. of language"; sample, COLLOQUIALISM.... I suggest that you think through these five uses vis-a-vis the two wds. qtd. in this thinksheet's title (+ "sexist," if you so choose). Do you agree with me that none of the five is entirely inapropos of "racists" and "terrorists"? (Notice the name-calling: The abstract nouns "racism" and "terrorism" are comparatively polite; but the name-calling forms, "racist" and "terrorist," are more derogatory. INSTANCE: Rarely has anyone said to me "You're a sexist!" But I've often heard "That's a sexist remark!" The difference is partly classistic: most of my associates are not lower-class, and the lower classes use more name-calling. Not that the lower classes are nastier! The upper classes are just nasty in a nicer way.) (ASIDE: Note that here I do not allow for a middle class. The middle class-or-classes is an economic reality that otherwise serves only as cultural fiction and smokescreen. In all cases of social interaction, people are more cultured or less cultured: those are the two and only classes, culturally-existentially. But when the conversation shifts to another subject, the classes may reverse: I'm lower-class in conversation with an engineer on the subject of engineering.... The rest of the world finds exasperating, and dangerous, the American taboo against the social-vertical: "There's nobody here but just us (equal) chickens." The human reality is bidimensional: At any one moment, human beings are (1) stacked up as inferiors and superiors (2) who are all equal face to face with God and death and, country by country, to a greater or lesser extent, the law.)

4. Now please exhaust your dictionaries and your hearts/brains on "terrorists" and "racists." "Consider the source!" is the central wd. of wisdom here. Your violence is "terrorism," mine is patriotism (or some other relative "-ism"); I believe that every people has a right to be itself both over against and alongside of every other people, but you're a believer in "racism." (Excuse me: I should have been polite; so please reverse you/me in the above.) To put it abstractly, who's a "terrorist" or a "racist" is subjective (or, as it's now fashionable to say, "contextual," a matter of "sociology of knowledge"). Consciousness of the rhetorical-political connotation of our terms should free us from captivity to our own propaganda and the arrogance thereof. Currently, I'm appalled and embarrassed at the ignorant-arrogant assertions of ecclesiarchs and lesser church folk on global socioecopolitical realities. Unlike all sounding-off Christian clergy I hear sounding off on S.Africa, I don't know what Pretoria should do; I don't know what Washington should do vis-a-vis Managua...or the PLO/Israel...or Libya...Iran...Syria...IRA as "terrorist sources," if anything. God seems to have spoken to all the other clergy, and left me out. I feel fairly comfortable with what China has done about the Gang of Five, Italy has done about the Red Brigades, Germany has done about the Bader Meinhof; a little less so in the case of what Spain has done about the Basques and the Turks have done about the Armenian "terrorists." I'm bothered by the reason the USSenate won't extradict IRA criminals: too much Irish blood in the USA....ditto for too-easy support of Israel: too much Jewish blood in the USA. (Not that I want less Irish and Jewish blood in America! How much poorer we'd be without them both!).... "Race" may mean many things; not used in UCC Statement of Faith: "binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races": language is more important than biostock. first ^{MORE}

5. But is "race" (a hot wd.) nothing but biostock (a cood wd.)? It is usu. that, though OED puts, beginning AD/CE 1500, both biology and "a set or class of persons" "having some common feature or features"--the 2nd, and less usual, category of meanings (the 1st being "connected by common descent or origin"). But unlike "race," "racism" is a recent coinage, on which see the OED Supplement (just completed, 1986)...As for the 2nd category, women are one race and men are another; literates are one race and illiterates are another. But this 2nd category is of secondary, almost trivial, significance in "racism," which is a disparaging attitude and demeaning behavior vis-a-vis somebody else's biology-and/or-culture.

6. Why do I say "biology-and/or-culture"? (1) Biology is usu., but not always, cultural destiny--America being history's most astonishing "not always." Zubin Mehta the Parsee (Zoroastrian Persian in India) is, culturally, as Western as Queen Eliz. II (his basic culture being British Indian). Disraeli the Jew was as thoroughly British as any other member of the House of Commons (over which he was P.M.) and almost as British as any other member of the House of Lords (the question being unsetttable as to whether his conversion to Anglicanism was more than strategic). ... (2) Racism is stronger where biology is cultural destiny, ie, where the victim does not convert to the racist's culture. If the victim is of a minority group, as US blacks, the pressure to convert to the majority culture is strong; but if of the majority group, as South African blacks, the pressure NOT to convert may be stronger than the pressure to convert--which gives force to the S.African white fear of cultural swamping by blacks if the one-person-one-vote type of democracy prevails. (Is it conceivable that the white culture continue to prevail if white power is given up? Yes, if the blacks who come to power are convinced that the white culture is superior for political and economic purposes. But could blacks of this persuasion come to power? Yes, if.... Problem: Developing this line of thought requires that it be thinkable that one culture may be, for political and economic purposes, superior to another culture. "Racists" have no doubt of it; antiracists have no doubt either, but the opposite no doubt: antiracists have no doubt that all races have equal potential for the management of political and economic life. From my standpoint, the confrontation can become an intelligent conversation only if these two hardened "no doubt" positions soften. As I write this (27May86), an international conference is in process on the economic chaos in all of black Africa (blacks in S.Africa being the exception because of white dominance, till now, of all economic affairs in South Africa). There's no evidence (in my opinion) that Afro-blacks are inferior to whites biologically vis-a-vis econo-management: there's massive evidence that Afro-culture is, in this aspect of human life, inferior to white culture. What's making progress at the conference so tough is what I call the insult factor: to move toward economic viability, the Afro-nations must admit the failure of their meld of tribalism and socialism (the 2nd element being as white as "capitalism"), but that would be an admission of inferiority to something white--an admission which, to a victim, feels like self-abuse and the dishonoring of the ancestors. The impasse is that the Afro-nations are virtually demanding more white billions in virtual reparation for historic white abuse, and the whites are refusing on the ground of their experience that this would just continue the present rat-hole operation of black ecopolitical incompetence. NOTE: "White" here is a cultural use having no direct bearing on skin-pigmentation (ie, biology)).... (3) Some racism, eg antisemitism (ie, antijudaism), is more cultural than biological. Jews, eg, are far more a "race" culturally than biologically. Which leads me to a bit of the history of the expansion of "race" from biology to wider meanings: ^{over}

1580, "the human race." 1581, "a house, family, kindred" from "a common ancestor." 1600, "a tribe, nation, or people, regarded as of common stock." 1774, "one of the great divisions of mankind, having certain physical peculiarities in common." 1842, "a group of several tribes or peoples, forming a distinct ethnical stock" (1849, "the qualities etc. resulting from this"). (Curious note on the "mankind" meaning: 1901, 1st appearance of "race suicide" meaning conception-control!)...For this study of "racism," I've reduced and rearranged these reff. to "race" in the OED.

7. Should law be race-blind ("color-blind")? Hitler thought not: Jews should be treated not as individuals but as Jews, and most of the German people agreed with him. Four days ago the Supreme Court thought not: as Sandra O'Connor put it, the Court reached "a degree of unanimity" in favor of affirmative action (the principle that, under specified circumstances, people should be treated by category rather than as individuals --an exception to the core belief of liberal democracy, the principle the US is pressing on S.Africa in opposing apartheid: our Supreme Court, and Botha's government, agree that rights inhere in a favored group).... Antiracism (as I use the term in paragraph #6) is, though more compassionate than, as ignorant as racism. Is reverse discrimination as ignorant as discrimination? I think not. I'm for affirmative action philosophically (believing, as I do, that in some circumstances human beings should be treated as groups rather than as individuals--eg, women treated different from men, children treated different from adults), but it's so easy to set up dangerous precedents. Our Bill of Rights, history's most impressive governmental protection of the individual, is so easy to violate! (On this, see the next thinksheet.)

8. "Terrorism" has a much longer history than "racism." In Eng. it's always had a bad connotation (cp. "Christianism" as a disparaging term for some forms of Christianity, 1674-). But the wd. originated in France (1795-) to describe "a system of terror," "government by intimidation; the system of the 'Terror' (1793-4)." It was then there generalized as "a policy intended to strike with terror those against whom it is adopted; the fact of terrorizing or condition of being terrorized."....The 1st ref. to "terrorist" is the same year, 1795. "Any one who attempts to further his views by a system of coercive intimidation" (and so "applied to members of one of the extreme revolutionary societies in Russia 1866"; "an alarmist, a scaremonger 1803."...."Terrorize," 1823-. "To fill or inspire with terror, reduce to a state of terror; esp. to coerce or deter by terror"; intransitive, "to rule, or maintain power, by terrorism; to practice intimidation 1856." This precis of the OED articles shows that (1) the heart of the matter is coercion by fear, including whatever is necessary to create and sustain fear; and (2) the process may be by as well as against a particular government or other power-group (such as the Inquisition, which used terrorism in the hope of eliminating the various protesting heresies); further, (3) the terms are not necessarily pejorative: there's good/bad "terrorism." IMPORTANT ASIDE: The NT instructs to fear God and government, both having specific ways to threaten (so as to achieve compliance) and punish (so as to eliminate noncompliance). One impediment to clear thinking on "terrorism" today is that the fear sanction is in bad repute among the most educated classes, both secular and religious, in the US. Terrorizing children is out, dirty (unless you give them nuke-fright on school-time). Peoples get a new government by military defeat, by revolution, by election, by terrorism (guerilla warfare: the Maccabees, G.Washington, terrorist Jews who in 1947 discouraged the British from staying in Palestine as we in 1776-89 discouraged them from staying in the Colonies).

9. Current world "Arab terrorism" is driven by a complex of internal and external frustrations, not just by the existence of the State of Israel.