

THE NON/PARALLEL CASES OF
RODNEY KING AND HENRY LAMB:
AMERICA'S MAD MIX OF MORALITY, POWER, & RACE

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The play-within-a-play device was effectively used in the Oscars-winning 1990 film, "The Godfather III." The opera "Cavalleria Rusticana" was the fictive story: the actual though fictional parallel was a Mafia story, the connections working as in an electrical circuit wired in parallel....Another film of that year, "The Bonfire of the Vanities" (based on Tom Wolfe's three-years-earlier novel of that title), comes to mind as a play within the Rodney King play, or the reverse. The novelist wants us to see his effort as "a morality play" (520), "a signal, a very important signal to the people of this city [NY, "Babylon of the twentieth century," 535] who think they're not part of the social contract" (534). That conscience has led to the Rodney King event's being widely dubbed "a wakeup call to America." Maybe, by similarities & differences, we can get some light from a near-great novel on our present L.A.-&-all-America anguish. Let's see.... (Unreferenced quotes are from the film.)

1 While the catalyst in both cases is a bad black man, the focus is on whites: Sherman McCoy, whose Mercedes, when he wasn't driving, backed into a mugger, Henry Lamb, who remains in a coma throughout the novel; & the police who beat Rodney King. Questions:

(1) Is there such a thing as a bad black man? Not if, as the liberal saying has it, "There's no such thing as a bad boy." Many of my liberal friends think whites so bad it's almost obscene to speak of any black as being bad. In the moral connotations of the words, whites are black & blacks are white. (It's sad that the movement didn't stick with M.L.King's "Negro": "Black" or "black" can never free itself from the negative moral overtone. Back to "colored," or on to "African-American"? But Africans of high melanin are not the only humans of high melanin. The nomenclature problem is a metaphor for the intractability of "the race problem.")

(2) Would the race problem go away if there weren't any bad black men? Of course not. The problem was created by bad white men with the cooperation of bad black men, the slave ships transported blacks commercially seized by other blacks so bad whites could sell them to other bad whites. If this way of putting it, with all the judgmental "bads," seems strange to you, it does also to me. My religion requires me to "hate the sin but love the sinner," so I'm much more apt to call deeds bad, not people. But the courts in the Lamb & King cases weren't free to be nonjudgmental. In the interest of justice, courts must pass sentence vis-a-vis intentionality & legality.

(3) Was the badness of the two blacks relevant to the court cases? Crucial. No black badness, no cases. In each case, the black badness was the catalyst.

(4) Were the two blacks generally bad, or only situationally bad? Morally relevant, legally irrelevant. In both cases, our American mad mix of morality, power, & race was played out in the courtroom; so let's stick to the limited fact that Lamb & King were catalytically bad.

(5) How were they bad? Lamb was trying to mug McCoy, King was trying to evade arrest after DWI driving 115mph (endangering lives: his own, his passengers', the police's, other motorists, & pedestrians).

2 The trigger of an unloaded gun is only a piece of metal. But in our country, the race gun is loaded, & the trigger "hair" (ie, acts with only slight pressure)....Guns are temptations, & the race gun often fires in the interest of attention-getting, power (politics), & "justice" (which I put in quotes not to be cynical but to indicate the word's capacity to entertain moral, ethical, legal, religious, & devious contents).

In both our cases, the trigger was hair. Ordinary events caused extraordinary explosions, because....

3 The media riveted the public's attention on the Event. The First

Amendment recognizes religion's & the press's freedom, & we thank God for both--supporting religion & the press where benevolent, criticizing either when malevolent, aware always of the possibilities of either's abuse of power.

In the King case, the media were private camcorder + commercial television-radio-newspapers-magazines. The press was massively judgmental: bad white men (incidentally, police) were beating up an innocent black man (innocent, at least, of any crime that would justify the beating). Police brutality is ordinary & follows the curve of police rage: the greater the criminal's crime, the rougher the treatment. Defense doubtless stressed the greatness of King's crime (endangering all those lives, in addition to resisting arrest), & the naturalness of commensurate police rage (though virtually conceding excessive force). The jury got to consider all the evidence, the world saw only the beating. The press' dominant concern was with neither justice nor fairness, it was with "the news." The justification for the blanket coverage of the rioting-looting-burning? "It was news!" Yes, & self-generating news: the more the media attention, the greater the conflagration.

In the Lamb case, the first medium was a tabloid whose reporter, Peter Fallows, needed a hot story to stave off his being fired for alcoholism. He uses, & is used by, corrupt city officials (Jewish) & a corrupt preacher (black) to entrap Sherman McCoy, who feels like Don Juan in hell the day after seeing the opera (another play in a play!). He tricks a school principal into saying Lamb was "an honor student," whereas the principal had said "he was an honor student only in the fact that he came to school & didn't piss on the teacher." At the end, he says McCoy "saved his soul" (by perjury!) but then quotes, in his own case, "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, but loses....ah well, there are compensations [one being that for the reportage, he wins a Pulitzer]." (The perjury was his claiming that a taperecording [of his mistress admitting she was the driver] was made by him, else it'd not been admissible as evidence.)....A little moral light into this cesspool: an honest & courageous judge (black), & Fallows' self-awareness as mendacious ("I'm the best whore in the [whore]house."). A great speech by the judge as he responds to the courtroom audience's outrage at his freeing of McCoy: "The law is man's feeble attempt to set down the principles of decency....Go home and be decent." In context, this meant to be fair (as blacks) to McCoy (as an innocent white, betrayed by his mistress' perjury in claiming that not she but he was the driver).

4 Both are tales of two cities colliding--not NY & LA, but the two cities within each (505). It seems that the harder our American society tries to integrate, the more fragmented we become. The mobility ladder for blacks, as that for Amerinds, has a few rungs missing, but the arts are on the side of the angels: in the novel, the good judge is Jewish; in the film, black. Truth, however, is on the race-&-politics scaffold. Eg, Lamb dies, & (last p., 690) the Bronx D.A. calls the would-be mugger who hadn't pissed on the teacher a man "who represented the finest ideals of our city," in harmony with a spokesman for the venal Rev. Bacon's in-character phrase, "the racist destruction of a fine young man." From the media I've seen-heard not one serious criticism of Rodney King except via concession (such as "of course, he wasn't perfect"), nor any significant kindness toward the beating police. (Should police beat, or only walk the beat? Should whites ever beat blacks? What level of force should Police Chief Daryl Gates have used in repressing the rioting-looting-burning? Was he justified in using none, to raise the question whether L.A. is policeable without beatings, thus whether L.A. is governable without police beatings ("excessive force," "police brutality")? In the Lamb case, the city was corrupt but the judge wasn't (so the judge was ousted): in the King case, the city (& state & nation!) was negligent, but the court (I'm convinced) wasn't....McCoy agonizes over his lie (p.673) "in the name of truth....This is the actual conversation we [his mistress & he] had....For this to be suppressed, that would be the greater dishonesty." Like justice, honesty is not simple; but without efforts toward honesty & justice, the only law is the law of the jungle.

5 Each in its own way, the two cases raise the political question of **tractable-ness**. Like world population, "race" may be an intractable problem.