

Op-Ed: Papuans and Zulus

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By SAUL BELOW

BOSTON -- Snowbound, I watched the blizzard impounding parked cars at midnight. The veering of the snowflakes under the street lights made me think how nice it would be if we were totally covered by white drifts. Give us a week's moratorium, dear Lord, from the idiocies that burn on every side and let the pure snows cool these overheated minds and dilute the toxins which have infected our judgments. Grant us a breather, merciful God.

Any sensible, feeling person, in the present state of things, might utter such a prayer in the dead of night. In my case, the immediate cause was an odd one. I had come under attack in the press and elsewhere for a remark I was alleged to have made about the Zulus and the Papuans. I had been quoted as saying that the Papuans had had no Proust and that the Zulus had not as yet produced a Tolstoy, and this was taken as an insult to Papuans and Zulus, and as a proof that I was at best insensitive and at worst an elitist, a chauvinist, a reactionary and a racist -- in a word, a monster.

Nowhere in print, under my name, is there a single reference to Papuans or Zulus. The scandal is entirely journalistic in origin, the result of a misunderstanding that occurred (they always do occur) during an interview. I can't remember who the interviewer was. Always foolishly trying to explain and edify all comers, I was speaking of the distinction between literate and pre literate societies. For I was once an anthropology student, you see. Long ago, I had been a pupil of the famous Africanist M. J. Herskovits, who had also devoted many decades to the study of the American Negro.

The subject of my senior thesis was "France and the African Slave Trade." Rummaging in the library stacks, I had discovered that two of the French ships involved in the trade were the Jean Jacques and the Contrat Social. Never a professional anthropologist, I was however a sound enough amateur. I had read widely in the field, and immediately after the telephone interview I remembered that there was a Zulu novel after all: "Chaka" by Thomas Mofolo, published in the early 30's. In my Herskovits days, I had read it in translation. It was a profoundly, unbearably tragic book about a tribal Achilles who had with his own hands cut down thousands of people, including his own pregnant wife.

Now why did my remarks, off the cuff obviously and pedantic certainly, throw so many people into fits of righteousness and ecstasies of rage? France gave us one Proust and only one. There is no Bulgarian Proust. Have I offended the Bulgarians too? We, for that matter, have no Proust either: should the White House issue a fatwa and set a price on my head for blaspheming against American high culture?

My critics, many of whom could not locate Papua New Guinea on the map, want to convict me of contempt for multiculturalism and defamation of the third world. I am an elderly white male -- a Jew, to boot. Ideal for their purposes.

The literacy of which we are so proud often amounts to very little. You may take the word of a practicing novelist for it that not all novel readers are good readers. The ground rules of the art of fiction are not widely understood. No writer can take it for granted that the views of his characters will not be attributed to him personally. It is generally assumed, moreover, that all the events and ideas of a novel are based on the life experiences and the opinions of the novelist himself.

Our American preference is for the facts -- only facts count. A gold miner in Alaska watching an early film and running at the screen to hit the villain with his shovel is my favorite illustration of this low-level bondage to actuality.

Preliterate societies have their own kinds of wisdom, no doubt, and primitive Papuans probably have a better grasp of their myths than most educated Americans have of their own literature. But without years of study we can't begin to understand a culture very different from our own. The fair thing, therefore, is to make allowance for what we outsiders cannot hope to fathom in another society and grant that, as members of the same species, primitive men are as mysterious or as monstrous as any other branch of humankind.

It's no slander to describe a people as preliterate. In any case, preliterate societies are rapidly vanishing. Besides, as we all know, certain forms of literacy are decidedly repulsive. Anyway, the study of culture is our idea. Our civilized demand is for scientific discussions of everything. Papuan field-workers do not come here to learn what makes Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Miami or New York tick.

The socialist realism that dominated the literate U.S.S.R. for many decades forced poets, playwrights and novelists to become part of the official falsehood machine. Those who resisted were sent to die in Kolyma or locked away in psychiatric hospitals. An unpublished poem on Stalin's "cockroach whiskers" brought to the attention of the Kremlin by informers was the cause of Osip Mandelstam's death.

Despots do not accept the autonomy of the literary imagination. Freedom of the imagination, dangerous to them, is related to the independence of the soul. This independence is not peculiar to artists, it is common to all human beings.

In any reasonably open society, the absurdity of a petty thought-police campaign provoked by the inane magnification of "discriminatory" remarks about the Papuans and the Zulus would be laughed at. To be serious in this fanatical style is a sort of Stalinism -- the Stalinist seriousness and fidelity to the party line that senior citizens like me remember all too well.

In the U.S., we were protected in the past by a sense of humor. In the days of Mark Twain, of Mr. Dooley and H. L. Mencken, we were still able to kid ourselves. Mencken's wicked jokes on Boobus Americanus -- his term for the average man -- had a salutary influence on the discussion of public questions and on public behavior. Sometimes crude, openly prejudiced but often very funny, he banged away at the professors, the politicians and the Jim Crow South. But fanatics and demagogues had far less influence in those pre-sensitive days. Child gangsters did not then kill the kids who "dissed" them.

Righteousness and rage threaten the independence of our souls.

Rage is now brilliantly prestigious. Rage, the reverse of bourgeois prudence, is a luxury. Rage is distinguished, it is a patrician passion. The rage of rappers and rioters takes as its premise the majority's admission of guilt for past and present injustices, and counts on the admiration of the repressed for the emotional power of the uninhibited and "justly" angry. Rage can also be manipulative; it can be an instrument of censorship and despotism.

As a onetime anthropologist, I know a taboo when I see one. Open discussion of many major public questions has for some time now been taboo.

We can't open our mouths without being denounced as racists, misogynists, supremacists, imperialists or fascists.

As for the media, they stand ready to trash anyone so designated.

Saul Bellow, professor of literature at Boston University, won the Nobel Prize in 1976.

<http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/04/23/specials/bellow-papuans.html>