

Paranoia and a Society of Victims

Nothing is more tempting, or intellectually hazardous, than to draw broad conclusions from a single isolated case. Indeed, whole clusters of unusual incidents may mislead people into thinking that they represent a serious trend, when in fact they represent nothing more than the operation of chance in human affairs. I was once asked to take part in an official inquiry into several untoward incidents (murders, actually) that took place in what seemed to be an unusually short period of time in an unusually small geographically area. A statistician subsequently proved that the assumption behind the inquiry, namely that there was an anomaly to be explained, was false.

Nevertheless, it is only natural that we should see signs of the times in very unusual incidents and try to derive wider meaning from them. So it is with the case of Vester Lee Flanagan, the former television journalist who broadcast under the name of Bryce Williams, and who shot two erstwhile colleagues dead and injured another while they were broadcasting, then committing suicide by shooting himself. We feel instinctively that such extraordinary conduct must be symbolic of somethings: not merely an event, but a signal.

Three things struck me about the case immediately, all of them of (possibly) wider significance. They were, if first reports are to be believed, the paranoid stance of the perpetrator; his apparent desire for fame; and his claimed sense of moral outrage that he believed both explained and justified his actions.

None of these three things is unique to our, or to any other, age. Where human conduct and motivation is concerned, there is no new thing under the sun. The only question is the

prevalence of the phenomenon under consideration.

The paranoid stance – the belief that the world is so constituted as to do one down – has certain sour compensations, chief among which is that it explains in advance all our possible failures. We do not say with Cassius:

The fault, dear Brutus, is in ourselves,

Not in our stars, that we are underlings...

but rather that the fault lies elsewhere entirely. We fail, but never deserve to do so. In fact, we are absolved in severe cases from even trying to succeed, since the forces arrayed against us are too strong; and bitterness therefore increases in proportion to the alleged, or self-described, meritocracy of a society.

Few of us believe any longer in the stars as the source of our destiny, but the advance, or at least the spread, of sociology has given us a whole menu of impersonal forces from which to choose to explain, or explain away, our failings and our discontents. Racism is one such force: not that it does not exist, but it is easily co-opted to become the omnium-gatherum of self-exculpation.

The paranoid stance partakes of grandiosity, in so far as the paranoid person believes that much that goes on around him is directed at himself. He hears people laughing and supposes that they are laughing at him; whispered conversations likewise must be about him. He puts the worst possible construction on words and even on intonations; for him innocent remarks become veiled insults and jokes become outright abuse. He is a target of conspiracy, even if he is unable to say who the leader of the conspiracy is or what, precisely, are its aims other than to frustrate his progress and block his path.

Vester Lee Flanagan seems to have had problems of this kind.

His repeated accusations of racism and discrimination against him by his colleagues seem to have been sincere; it is unlikely that he was merely seeking monetary compensation. His failure in his lawsuits would only confirm him in his quarrel with the world. No evidence can ever undermine the paranoid stance, and all evidence can be twisted to become compatible with it. Thus querulousness, aided and abetted by the legal system, became a large part of his character.

There have always been people of paranoid disposition, of course, and there always will be. But if the tendency in a population to the paranoid stance has a normal distribution (a bell curve), then certain prevalent beliefs in that population can shift the whole curve in the direction of the stance, so that disproportionately many now become paranoid. For example, the Azande of the Sudan used to believe that no one died except by the witchcraft of enemies, so that it is hardly surprising that they developed a wary attitude to their neighbours and the people around them. Where there is a cultural emphasis on racism, an increased number of people, with a relatively high propensity as individuals to paranoia, will interpret the world in its light. At the far end of the spectrum, there will be Vester Lee Flanagans.

It appears also that he felt an inner compulsion to be famous. Again, there have always been people who desired fame, and provided the fame sought is for valuable achievement which is a precondition of becoming famous, the desire is constructive and perhaps even necessary. But where fame is desired for its own sake, detached from any worthwhile achievement, it is malignant and loosens or dissolves moral restraint on behaviour. And we may wonder, since worthwhile achievement is as difficult as ever, self-publicity is increasingly commonplace and fame the desire of more and more people who would once have been contented with obscurity, whether those with an extreme desire for fame unaccompanied by any particular qualification for it resort to ever more bizarre

behaviour in order to reach it. Better a live donkey than a dead lion; and better fame (or infamy) for a despicable act than a life without public notice.

Finally, there is the role of anger. We do not think of it as a sin any longer but as the sign of a generous heart, at least when felt and expressed on behalf of others. To live your life without anger is to be complacent and self-satisfied. And since the state of the world gives plenty of scope for those seeking an occasion for anger, we may be angry on behalf of others all the time. The greater our anger, in fact, the greater our generosity of spirit. And since our anger is noble and generous, when we act out of such anger (as Vester Lee Flanagan claimed to have done), we suppose that we are acting generously.

It ought to be obvious that those who love justice ought not to commit injustice themselves. But anger makes matters worse even than La Rochefoucauld suspected when he wrote that love of justice in most men is merely fear of suffering injustice. Anger makes us love injustice, provided that it is we who are committing it. An atmosphere of rage is concomitantly one of righteous (or self-righteous) cruelty.

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