

RACISM IS A SOUTHERN THING

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Is there racism in Atlanta? Not exactly. Is there racial prejudice in Atlanta? Perhaps.

This represents the mental dialogue that I had with myself shortly after I moved to Atlanta 10 months ago from Fort Worth, Texas, where I had lived for six years. I moved here after retiring from teaching high school in order to be near my daughter, son-in-law, and (especially) my four-year-old grandson.

Lest you leap to any unwarranted conclusions, let me assert that I am not a native Texan. I am a Philadelphian by birth and upbringing, a New Yorker by adoption and long residence. In short, I am a Northerner in Atlanta, as I was an Easterner in Fort Worth. And just as I came face to face with racial ambivalence in the Southwest, especially concerning Hispanics, now I come face to face with racial ambivalence in the South, especially concerning blacks.

Let me pause here to explain two verbal usages that I have employed in the above.

First, I have used two words (“racism” and “racial”) whose root is the word “race.” I have used them inevitably but reluctantly. After all, I realize—as I went to pains to explain to my high school Sociology and Psychology students—that with respect to humans, biologically, there is only one race, namely the human race. Therefore, the ‘races’ to which we so cavalierly refer in our public discourse are social constructs (fictions) designed to satisfy certain psychological needs, and hence they do not correspond to the way that things truly are. The question of why humans have felt obliged to construct a social world that is so at variance with the natural world is too lengthy to discuss here.

Second, I have referred to Atlanta as the South. This is the crux of my current concern.

After I unpacked, I set out to explore the city, initially alone, then frequently with my grandson. I did so primarily by using the MARTA system because I shy away from using my clunker of a car (because of quirks in its condition and in mine). After several rides on the rail system, I commented spontaneously to my daughter that riding mass transit in Atlanta gave me the uneasy sense of being in the South. She knew immediately that I was referring to the racial divide that is still an insidious presence in the city, and she responded that the natives, at least the white natives, seem blithely unaware of that reality.

So, Atlanta, which should be a cosmopolitan metropolis, seemed in many ways to be an insular, parochial fragment of the Old South with a subtle caste system that even the dynamic presence of many black elected officials has not yet totally eradicated.

I decided to take a totally unscientific poll to assess the level of awareness of this phenomenon. Since I am gregarious by nature, and loquacious by cultivation, people tend to strike up conversations with me, as I do with them. In these conversations, when my interlocutors discovered that I was new to Atlanta, they would invariably ask me what I thought of the city. Each time, I made sure to say that although I liked the city very much, I was surprised by how much it was the South. Then I gauged their reactions. Predictably, when I made this remark to whites, they never failed to ask me what I meant by that. But when I made the remark to blacks, whether native Atlantans or, say, Caribbean immigrants, they always smiled knowingly and warmly, as if to say, “I know exactly what you mean, and I am glad that you were keen enough to sense it.” They rarely spoke about it, nor did they need to, but instead the conversation simply proceeded at a deeper level of comfort.

What does this prove? Perhaps nothing; perhaps everything. What is to be done about it? I invite all y’all to tell me.

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