

Faith, Hope, and Charity

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*T*he 1960s were a time of storm and stress. They were also a time of faith, hope, and charity. They were a time when we bequeathed the future—in the form of respect for the least among us—to the best part of ourselves. As a child I was told that “the first shall be last and the last shall be first,” and the 1960s saw a massive effort to put this vision into practice. We cannot reject the values of the 1960s without rejecting our best selves. We cannot put these values away like childish things.

Franz Fanon’s philosophical writings became the bible for the anti-colonial movements of the era. Fanon pointed out the connection between colonial oppression and mental disorders: the “system” produces the very disorders it requires for its own justification. Fanon taught us that under colonialism each “native” internalizes the system’s scorn and learns to strike at his own hated self-image in the mirror of his neighbor.

In the 1990s, the “War on Drugs” and its anti-loitering and curfew laws are a case in point. Dealing addictive, unhealthful drugs in one’s own neighborhood is one of the myriad forms of collective autodestruction

that keep the colonized in thrall. Continuing the war of all-against-all in the form of suspended rights is not, in and of itself, a solution to the problem. Rather it is the other side of the same problem. Things fall apart. In such times, the worst among us are filled with a passionate intensity.

Every twenty seconds someone in the United States is arrested for a drug violation. Every week, on average, a new prison is built. We possess the world's largest prison system, and blacks are now an absolute majority of prison inmates. No greater monument to anti-democracy can be imagined. And yet our imaginations are filled with a Manichean delirium. We imagine that the good and the bad can be separated, one from another and once and for all, if only we spend billions more on prisons. And prisons only foster recidivism.

Marching to the system's endless hymn of self-praise will not "win" the War on Drugs. It will merely serve to estrange us more deeply and profoundly from ourselves. The War on Drugs is the most hallucinogenic war of all time. Those who *enforce* the system's anti-drug proclamations and those who *violate* them march in step. Illegal drug trafficking and use undermines communities. The enforcement of anti-drug trafficking laws also undermines communities. Soldiers are soldiers. Victims cannot distinguish between professional soldiers, citizen-soldiers, mercenaries, and bandits. The spiral of violence relies upon both lawmakers and lawbreakers.

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Enshrining a local public-housing elite with a bit of state power will hardly pave a path to an emancipated future. Given the terrible conditions foisted upon blacks by our white-over-black government it is likely that we blacks, like prisoners everywhere, will agree to become the instruments of our own unmaking—that we will agree to any of the various Faustian bargains directed our way by our masters. And it is likely that by so doing we will kill the very best part of ourselves.

Blacks are still excluded from the nation's political life. Indeed, the U.S. Senate has not a single black member. Nor does it have a single member beholden to a majority-black constituency. And even those few blacks who have attained political office since the 1960s are rarely from, or responsible to, the black masses. A black drug warrior, like a white drug warrior, is a drug warrior. The Drug War is a tragic war on blacks, and increasing black representation among the drug warriors will not bring about a lasting peace.

Tragically, though, Tracey Meares and Dan Kahan are not completely wrong. Tragically, in our time, as in all times, something must be done. But what? Meares and Kahan suggest that we do something to give local people some form of democratic control over their own lives by allowing them to let go of certain rights much fetishized by those who do not live on the front lines of the War on Drugs. I agree. I also agree that “real-world experience belies the idea that spiraling inner-city crime

Anthony Paul Farley

will somehow force powerful interests *outside* the inner city to revitalize those communities." But democracy, radical democracy, may revitalize our communities.

If we accept building searches, curfews, anti-loitering ordinances, and the like, we must do this only as part of an overall strategy of radical democracy in which we end the War on Drugs and begin again the War on Poverty. In this way we can build a beloved community worthy of our aspirations. And to aspire for something better is, of course, to see the future so beautifully dreamed of during the revolutions of the 1960s.

Let us set open the prisons and release all of those who have been placed there for drug crimes not involving violence or large amounts of money, and declare peace by decriminalizing the offenses that caused their imprisonment. Let us beat our swords into ploughshares. We can redeploy the many billions of dollars that will thereby be saved to rebuild the infrastructure of our inner cities, to fund schools that will educate, to pay for healthful recreational activities for young and old alike. We can remember that the prisoner and the guard are linked by the same chains. We can break the chain and recover our souls in the process. And perhaps faith, hope, and charity can replace the desperate equations of the status quo.