

Racism/Razzismo Part II: Yusuf Hawkins and the Closing of the American Mind

Jerry Krase (October 18, 2008)



This was the first of two articles I wrote in The Brooklyn Free Press shortly after Yusuf Hawkins' murder in the summer of 1989. Although it concerns his brutal slaying by a cowardly group of bigoted hoodlums in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, it connects that single, very local, act to city-wide,



nation-wide, and indeed world-wide issues of racism and politics.

Just a few days ago I saw an Italian Sociologist interviewed on RAI about "racism" in Italy. I thought he said that "it" wasn't really racism and then he gave an academic definition of the term which I won't repeat because it really doesn't matter to victims of "it." Racism is like a duck -- if it looks like one and sounds like one... In my opinion, and experience, the "racist" label is a matter of honor for many Italians and Italian Americans. They know that racists are bad people and since they are sure that they themselves are good people, they can't be racists. There are other reasons why they do things which might appear to others as "racist." This was the same response I heard in and around Bensonhurst almost twenty years ago. Italians and Italian Americans are not more racist than other people, but they are more concerned about being labeled as such.

To hear some people talk, it appears that 16 year-old Yusuf Hawkins made a couple of ultimately fatal mistakes. One mistake was in biology and the other in geography. According to the rules of the game in the US, he committed a serious violation by being born black. At least this error was not his fault. His second and most grievous fault was geographical. He assumed that a ride on the "N" subway train to Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, USA would not stop in Soweto, South Afrika. For this misreading he had to be punished. And punished he was! It was like a Moslem or a Christian in Beirut crossing the Green Line. In Lebanon they hurl artillery shells at one another. In American Cities we throw teenagers instead. Those who laid down the law to Mr. Hawkins feel they should be absolved of any guilt in his execution because of his (the victim's) and their own unfortunate, but understandable, miscalculations.

Some witnesses claim it took about thirty punks wielding baseball bats and at least one loaded pistol to put Mr. Hawkins to rest. Remnants of this rabid mob of miscreants claim absolution for their conduct based on the doctrine of mistaken identity. Undoubtedly some one will also claim that they "didn't know the gun was loaded." Besides, they swear, they mistook Mr. Hawkins for another dark-skinned African American with whom they had also never met. According to a lot of people young Yusuf was just unlucky and the assassins had made an honest error in staunchly defending the crumbling walls of their sacred neighborhood against the barbarian hordes. This honorable "duty" is even fun to do when the barbarians are unarmed and vastly outnumbered.

Academically speaking, these young hoodlums are Allan Bloom's kind of people. They obviously have been saved from the horror of the liberal American educational system that produces the "democratic personality." Professor Bloom's widely acclaimed best selling book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, is a stirring indictment of America's schools which practice "education of openness" and other subversive anti-absolutist doctrines. Bloom laments that this system has created citizens who are unfortunately open to "all kinds of men, all kinds of life styles, all ideologies." According to this Professor in the Committee on Social Thought and the College and Co-director of the John M. Ohlin Center for Inquiry into the Theory and Practice of Democracy at the prestigious University of Chicago, America is in danger because too many educated people think that "everything is relative."

To Bloom and his colleagues on 20th Avenue, absolutism is a virtue and certainly not everyone is a relative. Bloom et al claim that the founders of their version of American society considered minorities to be a bad thing—"selfish groups who have no concern as such for the common good." According to this University of Chicago-20th Avenue view, as a result of misinterpretation of the founding fathers (or perhaps evil design?) Americans have been educated not only to accept differences but to exalt them. The Professor has traveled all over the world and most notably has translated Plato's *Republic* as well as Rousseau's *Emile*. He also wrote an excellent book on



Shakespeare's politics. I didn't know that Shakespeare even had any politics and I wonder what he thought of minorities.

One can conclude from all this that the ivory tower and the medieval neighborhood fashion similar kinds of bigotry. Intellectual bigots however are much more fashionable than those who yell "nigger go home" and hold up watermelons during civil rights marches. Both groups frequently rail about Affirmative Action. In fact, one local source interviewed about the murder of Yusuf Hawkins last week in Bensonhurst cited anger about affirmative action policies which residents believe have taken away job opportunities for neighborhood youths as a major reason for the hostility that led up to the killing. Blacks and other minorities are seen by unsuccessful people as the cause of their failures. This claim of victimization is a worrisome echo of times past. I remember once reading the headline of a German Newspaper in the Ann Frank House in Amsterdam about fifteen years ago—"Die Juden Sind Unser Unglueck"—The Jews are our Misfortune. Millions of Jews were murdered en masse. In New York City we murder our misfortunes one at a time. There are lots of excuses, which have or will be offered for the murder of Yusuf Hawkins. I don't think his death can be excused but it can be easily explained.

Like other young men who have killed, maimed, raped, and simply terrorized people because they are "different" and therefore "less than" themselves, the mob on 20th Avenue is reflecting the behavior and attitudes of the most powerful of people in our society. They emulate their leaders—the people they look up to and fear. Neighborhood gangs also have an unfortunately accurate sense that no one is looking out for their interests and that they have to defend themselves against any and everyone. They want to be feared by others. Blacks are easy targets for those on 20th Avenue because blacks are easier to spot on their own, reasonably white, turf. The other enemies are hidden from view or protected by powerful institutions. 20th Avenue in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn differs from other neighborhoods only by on-the-surface characteristics. This community of struggling people is simply another place that is off limits to "outsiders."

When I was a teenager in the 1950s I was living in a neighborhood under siege in Prospect Heights. My family had an apartment on the third floor over Love's Meat Market, which catered to the rapidly diminishing population of wealthy WASP's on the once elegant Eastern Parkway across the street from the Brooklyn Museum. We were the janitor-family ("supers") of the building. The mafia, the 80th Precinct, and the Grand Avenue "Boys" were the neighborhood's first lines of defense against the imperial growth of black Bedford/ Stuyvesant and their teenage gangs—the "Bishops" and the "Chaplains." It was a war mentality and the children played war games. One warm summer evening my friends (a mix of working class Irish and Italian Catholics, one Jew and one WASP) decided to have a race around the block—Sterling Street to Underhill Avenue to Park Place to Washington Avenue and the Sterling Street finish line by Lewne's Ice Cream Parlor. The winner would get a few bucks in prize money from those who ran and those who bet on the race. I needed the money badly so I ran like a deer.

I was way ahead on Park Place when two guys jumped in front of me and forced me into the space between the high Brownstone stoops. The space was dark but some light penetrated from the street lamp down the block. Three black kids, about my size and age were preparing to rob me of all my worldly goods. They didn't know I had nothing to my name. One held what felt like a knife to my side. I am certain that the dim light from the lamppost saved me as one of the crew said to his friends, "Let him go. I know him from school." Indeed, he was a friend of mine from P.S. 9 that billed itself as the "Brotherhood School." I came in last in the race. Yusuf Hawkins didn't find a friendly face in the crowd.



Some powerful people in New York City have fostered an atmosphere of intense paranoia and we have all become its victim. Our paranoia benefits them. It keeps us from looking for and finding the things we have in common and things we all need. Each group in the city has a unique history before they got here, but once here they fall into the same pattern of intergroup hostility, the volume and violence level of which rises and falls like the tide. The hostility is seldom addressed except as lip service at the anniversaries of the deaths of fallen heroes. For many politicians the violence is measured first as to who benefits most by it -- themselves or their opponent. The greatest sadness which I can contemplate after Mr. Hawkins death, and the greatest insult to his family, is that some people will soon be receiving campaign literature with the subliminal message "Vote for Me, I'm Not Black" or "Vote for Me, I'm Not White." Yusuf Hawkins will eventually become a "Statistical Bump" in an election year public opinion poll.

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