

# Kangaroo Court Nation

The premise behind much of the protesting we hear in our time from women, African Americans, gays, and other groups granted the special status of being in the minority (how that applies to women, who make up more than half of the population, is hard to see), is that *they are to be believed* when they tell their stories of oppression. Nay, more.

Even to express a doubt in any specific case is tantamount to violence. One might say, in the case of women – who, with the obvious and important exception of rape, are much less likely than men to be the victim of every single category of violent crime – that the very claim is a sort of wish-fantasy, salt to an insipid life, so that they may see themselves as actresses in a drama of high meaning and great danger.

Be that as it may, the premise is nonsense. When one speaks the truth, one wants to be heard, but one does not cry out, “Believe me, or else!”

Take out of the picture every political consideration. Imagine that you are dealing with two persons in a controversy. The one who says, “If you don’t believe me, you are wicked and hateful,” or, “If you don’t believe me, I will burn the house down,” shows himself instantly to be unworthy of trust.

Always choose against the manipulator.

“All men are liars,” says the psalmist in a moment of deep gloom. We need not go so far. Plenty of people tell bald and flat lies. But at best, our relationship to the truth is uneasy. We exaggerate. We overlook what weighs against us. We see the mote in our brother’s eye and miss the beam in our own. We leave ourselves nooks and crannies for our less admirable motives, while searching out the motives of others with a microscope, or a kaleidoscope.

We remember what we like and forget what we don't like. We rush to judgment. We draw connections that are merely possible, and we treat them as certain. We commit the fallacy of the single cause, ignoring other causes that may be more important. We incline one way rather than another, like bowling balls of unequally distributed weight: the original meaning of the word bias. Our passions get the better of our reason.

There are plenty of instructive moments in Cervantes' great epistemological epic, *Don Quixote*. That Knight of the Mournful Countenance and his illiterate squire Sancho Panza have come to the court of a mischievous duke, who has read the first installment of the good man's imaginative adventures. He decides that he and his courtiers will grant Sancho what Don Quixote had long promised him: the governorship of an "island." They plan to set the peasant up as governor and see how he handles the cases that arise.

The knight's advice to Sancho illustrates none of his madness. It is filled with humane kindness and wisdom in the ways of men. "Let the tears of the poor find more compassion in you," he says, "but not more justice, than the testimony of the rich. Seek to uncover the truth amid the promises and gifts of the man of the wealth as amid the sobs and pleadings of the poverty-stricken."

Sympathy is to be quiet in questions of truth. "If some beautiful woman comes to you seeking justice," he says, "take your eyes from her tears, listen not to her moans, but consider slowly and deliberately the substance of her petition, unless you would have your reason drowned in her weeping and your integrity swept away by her sights."

But sympathy is to be alive and warm in questions of punishment. "Remember," says the Don, that the guilty man "is but a wretched creature, subject to the inclinations of our depraved human nature, and insofar as you may be able to do so

without wrong to the other side, show yourself clement and merciful," for then he will be most like God, whose mercy shines brighter to us than does his justice.

We are now the reverse: a nation of kangaroos and kangaroo courts.

How many millions of people have been *certain* about events to which they were not witness, and about characters they have never met! How many millions of people *have not the slightest doubt* that – to use an example – the absence of women from the top ranks of mathematicians is attributable to some systemic evil, rather than to a dozen other causes that are either natural or not worthy of blame? How many millions of people are quick to place the words of their political opponents under the worst conceivable construction, while granting to themselves and their friends the widest latitude for expression?

We are not, I would say, a particularly virtuous nation, but we seem quite unaware of it except where other people are concerned. We are like people dwelling in a sewer, complaining that our neighbors stink.

But that would not be quite so bad if we were apt to consider Don Quixote's mercy. Then, though we might be quick to condemn, and though we might often condemn the innocent, we would at least be clement in punishment. But we are not so. It is as if a culture has a certain fund of moral condemnation, like a river. The narrower the channel, the more violent the flow. The fewer sins we recognize, the more violent our condemnation, and that is especially so when we can direct the current against the sins that *other people* commit.

We ruin reputations, we tear down monuments to our flawed benefactors, we destroy lives with a glee and a certitude that would make the old inquisitors blush.

We know what the remedy is. It tastes bitter. It is

epistemological humility: being slow and careful in judgment. Everyone you meet is at best but groping for the truth, with spectacles an inch thick, and sometimes, when the subject is their field of special inquiry, they are blinder than ever. It is moral humility: recognizing that almost everyone you will ever meet, yourself included, is neither a monster nor a saint, but a muddle of motives, some of them pretty good if you don't look too closely, some of them not so good. That includes men, women, children, rich people, poor people, Europeans, Africans, Asians, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, the orthodox, the heretics, the unbelievers, everybody.

"But what about justice!" my reader may cry. Yes, justice. Do we really want God to consider us as the sinners we are, with all our stupidity, our stubbornness, our negligence, our hardness of heart, our willfulness, our treachery, our mendacity, our lewdness, and our selfishness laid bare, to be granted what it all deserves? Do we think God can be fooled by the lies we tell ourselves?

—

*This [article](#) has been republished with permission from American Greatness.*

[Image Credit: Flickr-Fibonacci Blue, [CC BY 2.0](#)]

Image Credit: [Image Credit: Flickr-Fibonacci Blue, CC BY 2.0]