

The Authoritarian Right is Naive About Human Nature

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Have you ever considered the level of irony involved in the fact that so many of the same people who claim to distrust big government (“I love my country but fear my government”) also adamantly support the police against Black Lives Matter? These people, by and large, actually worship the culture of police lawlessness as something necessary to “stop criminals.” I was reminded of this incongruity by Ami Angelwings’ extended Twitter discussion, on October 3, of the television show *Law & Order*. She suggested that Jack McCoy might be “television’s greatest villain”:

He’s gotten people executed by twisting or even breaking the law, suborning perjury, withholding evidence, and challenging the constitution.... To get one person that McCoy has no evidence against but “knows” is guilty, he regularly tries to flatten broad constitutional protections. To get around parole Jack tried to have a guy committed indefinitely to an institution by arguing criminality itself is a mental illness....

Law & Order seasons 1-5 was basically cop propaganda for liberals, the idea being that the system worked, 5-20 is for conservatives. Later *Law & Order* made me fear cops and the DA due to how they’re portrayed as completely reckless and corrupt and all laws are in their way.

In early *Law & Order* everybody is well-meaning and hard-working, they try to fight for the little guy and have consideration for minority populations. Don’t fight the cops because they’re good and on your side. On later *Law & Order*, every oppressed group is out to game the system and the law enables them. Cops and the DA have to break every rule, lie, cheat and hide evidence if they’re to stop the scumbags who would murder us all if they could....

They get one piece of evidence, form a narrative, and then pound on the suspect in the interrogation room and try to get them to agree to a script. Then when the suspect denies it, they arrest them anyway, and Jack has flimsy or no evidence to try them on and then starts making s*** up.

In my own life, I've heard ordinary people explicitly justify the kind of behavior Ami described. "What's the big deal about planting evidence," they ask, "if cops know somebody is guilty and just need evidence to put them away?"

And this is a narrative going back at least to the '70s in popular media. As Richard Moore described it ("Escaping the Matrix, Whole Earth, Summer 2000):

the genre of the TV or movie police drama has served to create a reality in which "rights" are a joke, the accused are despicable sociopaths, and no criminal is ever brought to justice until some noble cop or prosecutor bends the rules a bit. Government officials bolster the construct by declaring "wars" on crime and drugs; the noble cops are fighting a war out there in the streets — and you can't win a war without using your enemy's dirty tricks.... In this way, the American public has been led to accept the means of its own suppression.

The same people who talk about "unintended consequences" and irrationality in the context of government policy in general, just assume that cops have absolute epistemological certainty about who's guilty, rather than being fallible. They never seem to wonder how it's possible for somebody to "just know" something they have no objective, concrete evidence for, or consider that cops' "gut instincts" might be biased by unexamined prejudices.

And besides trusting the cognitive abilities of police and assuming they can't be sincerely wrong about guilt, they also see cops as exceptional in terms of personal ethics and trustworthiness — they just assume that cops will never lie to convict somebody they know is innocent, either out of personal motives or because of political pressure from above to punish some higher-ups political enemies. For that matter, they assume that cops who lie to convict a "criminal" won't also lie to the public to cover up their mistakes if they turn out to be wrong — as with, for example, the cop who was recorded shooting an unarmed man in the back and then planting a drop gun on the corpse.

Their very notion of "crime" is incoherent. Prisons are commonly described as "colleges of crime." But insofar as law enforcement culture instructs and encourages officers behind the scenes in committing the illegal acts Ami recounted from *Law & Order*, police forces are colleges of crime on a scale that would put any prison to shame. If the idea of "the law" means anything at all, in the sense of a universally applicable body of constitutional, statute and case law, then the police and prosecutors on *Law & Order* (and the real-life cops and prosecutors who do the same things every day, all over America) are *criminals*, every bit as much — if not more so — as the people they shred the law to railroad into jail.

So what we're left with is the implicit belief, on the part of authoritarian "small government" conservatives, that (to paraphrase Nixon) "it's not a crime if someone in authority does it."

In foreign affairs, likewise, these people who claim to distrust the government also assert that "politics stops at the water's edge." The President may just be some crooked politician, but the "Commander-in-Chief" is the vicar of God on Earth. Witness Sean Hannity's outrage, in the early days of the Iraq War, at Sen. Ted Kennedy "accusing the Commander-in-Chief of *lying* — in *wartime!*"

The central irony in all this is that the defenders of police and The Troops like to frame themselves as hard-headed realists, and deride those on the Left as naive bleeding hearts who "don't understand human nature." But these same people are the first to hand a blank check to law enforcement and to the total warfare state, and clutch their pearls at the thought that cops or the

military would ever tell a lie. They claim not to trust the government, and claim to see government itself as serving corrupt interests. But just suggest that, rather than cops being a “thin blue line” protecting us from crime and violence, or The Troops “fighting for our freedom,” might perform a structural function in protecting the corrupt private interests the state serves, and they immediately head for the fainting couch.

These people, who see themselves as “the party of the head,” buy into a myth of “Policeman Dan Is Your Friend” straight out of a ’50s children’s book. And they swallow the official propaganda of America as an “Exceptional” entity, a Christ of Nations, feeding the world with its generosity and promoting freedom and democracy in a way unlike any other in history — when in fact America has left a trail of invasions, coups, death squads and terror, in defense of global corporate interests, rivalling any other empire in history. These “hard-headed realists,” who claim to “distrust the government,” trust the actual wielders of government power — the armed enforcers who *make* it a government — with the credulity of a 3-year-old sitting on a department store Santa’s knee.

A major part of the U.S. Constitution is taken up with restrictions on presidential war powers, and the due process constraints of Amendments IV-VI on the discretion of domestic law enforcement. As Madison said, if human beings were angels, no such restrictions — or constitutions at all, for that matter — would be necessary. But it’s the conservative “hard-headed realists” who believe human beings suddenly become angels, worthy of trust and in no need of checks on their power — when they put on a uniform.

Time and again, as an anarchist and a socialist, I hear accusations from right-wingers that I’m “naive,” and “don’t understand human nature.” And I hear the same “human nature” argument from liberals — who demonstrate their own realism by treating abuses of power as “mistakes” that can be fixed through “reform,” rather than as systemic and structural.

We anarchists are the *real* realists. We understand human nature well enough to know power will *always* be abused. The state, by its very nature, is executive committee of some minority ruling class — and anyone who thinks it can ever be trusted to be anything else is hopelessly naive.

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