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The Danger of a Single Story

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In 2009 the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie gave a fabulous TED talk called “The Danger of a Single Story.” It was about what happens when complex human beings and situations are reduced to a single narrative: when Africans, for example, are treated solely as pitiable poor, starving victims with flies on their faces.

Her point was that each individual life contains a heterogeneous compilation of stories. If you reduce people to one, you’re taking away their humanity.

American politics has always been prone to single storyism — candidates reducing complex issues to simple fables. This year the problem is acute because Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders are the giants of Single Storyism. They reduce pretty much all issues to the same single story: the alien invader story.

Every problem can be solved by finding some corrupt or oppressive group to blame. If America is beset by wage stagnation it’s not because of intricate structural problems. It’s because of the criminal Mexicans sneaking across the border or it’s because of this evil entity called “the banks.”

Worse, the stories have become identity markers. This is a phenomenon borrowed from campus political correctness. In order to express your solidarity with the virtuous team, you have to embrace the socially approved story. If you differ from the official story — the way Bill Clinton differed from the official progressive crime story a few weeks ago — it is not so much a sign that you are wrong (truth is not the issue). It is a sign that you have false allegiances. You must embrace the approved

Hillary Clinton is not naturally a single story person. But while she is controlling the delegate race this campaign, Sanders is controlling the conversation and she is gradually coming around to his version of everything. For example, last week she came closer to embracing a nationwide $15 minimum wage, though still with caveats.

One true minimum wage story is that corporations are reaping record profits while pushing down wages of the unskilled. But another true story, embodied in the vast trove of research, is that if you raise the minimum wage too high, you end up punishing less skilled workers. One study found the modest hike in the national minimum wage between 2006 and 2009 reduced employment among young people without a high school degree by almost 6 percent.

The key is to find a balance between those stories. Raising the minimum wage to $15 may make sense in rich areas, but in most of the country there will be horrendous consequences for less skilled workers trying to find jobs.

In the realm of criminal justice, one true story is that America’s criminal justice system was constructed within a system of slavery and racism. It enables police brutality, often of a racist sort. It has led to massive over-incarceration, which has devastated individuals, families and neighborhoods.

Yet there are other opposing stories, also true:

Incarceration reduces crime. Experts disagree wildly on how much, but most studies show a significant effect. That’s partly because most of the people who do serious crime are career criminals. Among inmates released from state prison in 2005, the average number of previous convictions was five and the average number of previous arrests was greater than 10.

Less aggressive policing means more crime. After the release of the horrific Laquan McDonald video — which showed a Chicago cop killing him in cold blood — there was a 69 percent drop in the nonfatal shooting arrest rate and a 48 percent drop in the homicide arrest rate. In the meantime, according to an analysis by Rob Arthur and Jeff Asher of FiveThirtyEight, nonfatal shootings rose by 73 percent and homicides rose by 48 percent.

While the overall system is steeped in structural racial inequality, parts of the system don’t seem that biased. As the criminologist Barry Latzer notes in his book “The Rise and Fall of Violent Crime in America,” there is not a wide disparity between whites and blacks in time served for various offenses.

Moderate, bipartisan efforts are reducing inequality. Decades ago, evangelicals like Chuck Colson joined with a swath of progressives to reduce incarceration rates. These efforts are having an effect. Total U.S. imprisonment has declined for the past seven years. The imprisonment rate among black women has dropped by 47 percent since 2000, while the rate of imprisonment among white women has risen by 56 percent. Male imprisonment trends are similar though less striking.

As in life generally, every policy has the vices of its virtues. Aggressive policing cuts crime but increases brutality. There is no escape from trade-offs and tragic situations. The only way forward is to elect people who are capable of holding opposing stories in their heads at the same time, and to reject those who can’t.