

Sterling

5-1-2014

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Sterling" (2014). *On Sport and Society*. 25.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/25>

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
MAY 1, 2014

There are times when something happens in the world of sport that is so startling that reactions come hard and fast and seem to overwhelm events. The Donald Sterling soliloquy hit with this sort of force, and the reaction was beyond what could be anticipated but was still more than appropriate. It was required.

The odd convergence of names in and of itself caused some pause. Sterling was not Donald's family name. He chose it because he wanted to be identified with a precious metal. How strange was it then that the man who rendered the judgment on Sterling had the family name of Silver? This of course has no particular significance. It is just one of those oddities that pop up unannounced every now and then.

As someone who theoretically understands the culture of the United States by virtue of having spent much of my adult life immersed in American history, I have been trying my best over the past few days to put all of this into some sort of perspective. I have been trying to make some sense of Sterling's nonsense.

Certainly race is a central part of this story as it drips from the words of the owner of the Los Angeles Clippers. Then there is the issue of class, social class, and maybe the other kind as well. Donald Sterling is man of considerable wealth who in his own eyes is above and beyond the norms of the average American citizenry. Sterling is an American success story. He is a capitalist who places property at the pinnacle of his value system and who in his success looks down on all those below his income niche.

Thinking about Donald Sterling, his life story, his success, his amassing of wealth, it cannot be a great surprise that he ended up where he did. A trip back to the second half of the 19th century may shed some dim light on this story.

Ideas are important. They shape attitudes and values and spawn truths and opinions. One of the central ideas that made an impact on the second half of the 19th century was Charles Darwin's notions of evolution. The phrases "struggle for existence" and "survival of the fittest" associated with Darwin became enormously influential and

part of the contemporary vocabulary. In the United States they became most influential when they were transferred from a description of nature, to a description society.

Herbert Spencer's application of these concepts to society was grasped by Americans who were looking for an explanation of the extremes of wealth and poverty in their world, and a justification for the opulence of the wealthy. It was simple. The wealthy were "the fittest" that had emerged victorious in the competition of capitalism and thus their rewards were natural. They were the victors in the "struggle for existence."

If you take that vision and combine it with Calvinist economics, sometimes called the Protestant Ethic, economics and sociology take on a theological cast. Wealth in America in the late 19th century came to those who worked the hardest, lived the cleanest, and in their success they reaped the rewards of the righteous. Success was a sign of moral virtue, while failure was a sign of moral weakness.

Now take these ideas and roll them up in the American concepts of race. White people saw themselves as the most virtuous people on earth, while people of color were less so. In some versions this correlated along a sliding scale moving from light to dark, from the top to the bottom of the social order and the human family.

In the first decades of the 20th century this explained the extremes of wealth and poverty, and justified the harshest judgments made by those on top about those at the bottom. For those who moved up the economic scale to levels of massive wealth, or even modest wealth, this set of vague ideas combining social class and morality gave great comfort to the successful and allowed them to think highly of themselves. Wealth was their reward and their due, and they alone were responsible for their place in society.

When someone started at the bottom and moved to the top it was a sign of their hard work, the approval of the deity, and their elevated place over others. They had earned their success and the wealth that came with it, and they were entitled to do with it whatever they liked. No one, no government, so sense of social obligation was allowed to interfere or tell them what to do.

The fact is that we are not all that far away from these views and values. Certainly the society as a whole has muted the harshness of the vision, and for many there is a sense of obligation and community that operates on them. Our social and governmental institutions have been reshaped to round and smooth the harsh edges. Some have even talked about the concept of "compassionate capitalism."

For others however the old values have not faded. As they have moved to wealth and success the rich have found comfort in those values, and this has led them to look down the social order on those below. They make harsh judgments about those who fail finding some moral flaw in that failure. At times they look for ethnic markers to explain the world. And still more than any other explanation race carries the biggest load in our society. The results are both dehumanizing and crushing for those who are purveyors of these values and those who are their targets.

Donald Sterling represents these values in one of their worst manifestations, but he is not alone, and he is not really an aberration. Race and class remain central concepts in our society and the first thing that must happen is for people to recognize that simple truth.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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