

# The Simpson trial in perspective

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The tone and character of the O.J. Simpson case seem to sink continually downward. Just when one thinks that the affair has reached a moral nadir, it falls even lower. Over the Los Angeles courtroom hang vulgarity, corruption and the unmistakable stench of money.

Above all, money. In his new best-selling book, Simpson says modestly: "If I didn't have some money, I would have no chance at all." Indeed. His "dream team" of lawyers is costing him a reported \$60,000 a week. Since his arrest eight months ago, Simpson has spent millions to secure an acquittal. During the same period, about two dozen men in the US, who landed on death row mainly because they were too poor to obtain legal counsel, have been executed.

The attorneys drive up in their Porsches and Bentleys, dressed in \$3,000 suits. Is a single one of them known for defending victims of injustice or championing an unpopular cause? No, there is no Clarence Darrow here. These are lawyers whose specialty is cleaning the dirty underwear of the rich and famous.

Money also buys friendly relations with the police. A *Los Angeles Times* article recently revealed the extent of "the closeness between Simpson and officers at the West Los Angeles division, which patrols his neighborhood." The prosecution, in a court filing, reported that police officers, sometimes on duty, used Simpson's pool and tennis courts; he appeared at police Christmas parties and signed footballs for them.

"In turn," the filing went on, "the officers responded to Rockingham [Simpson's residence] in response to Nicole's calls for help seven-eight times prior to the 1989 incident. Each time, the defendant was not arrested and no report was taken." The prosecution said that her "feelings of helplessness and belief that the police would not do anything to the defendant were well founded."

The cast of characters itself is telling. Simpson is famous because he was a great athlete who projected an affable, comforting persona which advertising agencies were able to exploit. The 17-year history of domestic abuse indicates the instability and violence, encouraged by the gladiatorial nature of professional football, which lay behind the smiling mask.

One of the striking features of the case is the extraordinary contrast between the inconsequential nature of the lives led by Simpson and his alleged victims and the vast attention given over to this trial. Simpson and his circle, after all, are essentially rich, bored, uncultured, not very bright people whose lives are devoted to parties, clubs, shopping and countless hours of worrying about their looks. Alcohol in large quantities, drugs, indiscriminate sex and domestic violence are natural complements to such a lifestyle.

Take the southern California that Raymond Chandler wrote about in the 1940s, peopled by faith healers, gangsters, ruthless tycoons, starlets, hard-boiled cops, phony therapists and a variety of lost souls, and factor in an additional half-century of emptiness, privilege and moral decay—there you have the Simpson affair in all its seaminess.

A brief look at some of the peripheral characters in the case is telling. One of the prosecution's star witnesses ought to be 37-year-old Faye Resnick, a close friend of Nicole Brown Simpson's, who claims to have observed many of the incidents of spousal abuse. However, Resnick cashed in on her relationship with Nicole by writing and publishing a book last fall, ghostwritten by the gossip editor of the *National Enquirer*. In the book, intended to be sympathetic to her late friend, Resnick, according to one account, "presents a brainless, sex-obsessed young woman, whose banality is exceeded only by that of her ex-husband." Resnick, who has been in and out of drug treatment centers, has been left off the list of

prosecution witnesses and may be called by the defense.

Simpson's book, which has climbed at least temporarily to the top of the best-seller list, is essentially an effort to bring in some cash to pay legal costs. It was co-written by Lawrence Schiller. *Time* magazine notes that Schiller "has made a career of packaging tragedy as entertainment." As a child, he apparently owned a police radio, a bicycle and a camera. "When he heard about an accident, he tore off toward it. Even if the scene was far away and he was tardy, Schiller sold pictures of the skid marks to insurance companies."

One of the prosecution's key witnesses will be LAPD detective Mark Fuhrman. He allegedly discovered a bloody glove, matching one found beside the murdered woman's body, outside Simpson's house. Fuhrman has a history of racist remarks and actions. This of course would not make him stand out on the Los Angeles police force or that of any other American city.

For his part, defense lawyer Johnnie Cochran promised, in his opening remarks, to produce 14 new witnesses who would testify to Simpson's innocence. One of them, jewelry store owner Mary Ann Gerchas, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, has been sued at least 34 times in recent years for complaints including allegations of fraud and failure to pay creditors.

It is hard to find any redeeming sides to the Simpson case. Even the genuine issue of spousal abuse becomes twisted and degraded to provide new headlines for scandal sheets.

Consider this: an enormous assault has been launched in Washington against past social gains which will have a calamitous effect on masses of people; the global financial system is staring disaster in the face over the collapse of the Mexican peso; international political relations are volatile and tense. Yet it will be noted by future generations that the media in the US at this historical juncture was fixated on the Simpson trial.

This is an expression of genuine disorientation. In the face of alarming events, there is no doubt a desire within the bourgeoisie to flee from reality. This is made more attractive by the money-making possibilities. A multimillion-dollar Simpson industry came into existence within days of the June 12, 1994 slayings.

On the other hand, there is the element of calculation. The case has been seized upon and made use of as an

enormous diversion. The big business media, nervous about revealing too much of events at home and abroad, are more than pleased to bring out every facet of the Simpson trial. The case acts as a black hole sucking popular attention away from the potentially explosive events taking place.

The Simpson case is the latest in a series of lurid trials and scandals, each one more grotesque than the one before it: the William Kennedy Smith trial, the Amy Fisher saga, the Menendez brothers trial, the Tonya Harding-Nancy Kerrigan scandal, to name a few. There is the whiff of bread and circuses about these episodes. They serve to distract and titillate.

More than that, they pollute the social atmosphere and are intended to implicate the public in the general degradation of bourgeois society. The absorption with these events is largely created or at least manipulated by the media. Once drawn in, the viewer is meant to conclude that his interest in such affairs signifies his participation in some fashion. The message is: we're all in the same squalid boat.

But the effort to keep the public absorbed by "real-life" melodrama is doomed to fail. One senses that the Simpson case is perhaps the last gasp of this sort of mindlessness. There is sufficient passivity and confusion in the population to keep television ratings and book sales afloat for the moment, but such spectacles simply won't wash under the new political conditions. Great numbers of workers and middle class people are about to address the urgent problems in their own lives and put soap opera aside.



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