

## Gilliom on Justice

*In 1973, the locally notorious Troisey Brothers were the bullies who terrorized youth culture in a several block area of the North Jersey town where I lived. One afternoon, I looked out the window of my house to see five of the beefy teens surrounding a developmentally disabled young man who wandered the streets of the neighborhood. They had taken his ball and were engaged in a mocking game of keep away and very rough shoving.*

*My Dad, the minister of the neighborhood church, was upstairs struggling with a forthcoming sermon on some uplifting anti-war text from the New Testament. My thirteen year old voice called out "Dad! Help!"*

*I had spotted injustice and, though I was not sure what my pacifist father would do about it, I called for him to come right the wrong.*

*Dad surged out the side door and approached the group. Dispelling my assumption that he was a pacifist, he charged the biggest oldest brother and knocked him to the ground with a powerful two-handed shove to the chest. The kid started to get up and Dad shoved him down again and again, asking, "How do you like it?" And, "How's it feel to get pushed around by a bully?" He ordered them off his churchyard lawn and they left. The victim of their abuse was consoled and went on his way.*

When I sat down to write this reflection on justice, that's the first thing that came to my mind. That might be quite telling as it reveals a conceptualization of justice that is tied to conflict, domination, the (im)balances of power, and a heroic father figure coming to the rescue. Working from this memory to a request that I explain how I conceptualize justice in my research and scholarship, my mind stays with this picture of redressing situations in which the less powerful get pushed around by the more powerful. Since my doctoral dissertation, a central element in my research has been exploring what happens when the more powerful assert new conditions of domination on the less powerful (through surveillance), the frequent failure of formal means of redress (like litigation or public action), and the often sneaky personal ways in which the less powerful fight back (through everyday resistance).

My most powerful and sustained scholarly dialogue with questions of justice was in the context of my research on welfare mothers and welfare surveillance in Appalachian Ohio. In a follow-up piece written nearly ten years after the original research, I wrote:

*(I) If you ever do come to visit the remote hills and hollows of Appalachian Ohio, you will not encounter picketers with signs reading "Welfare Moms Against Big Brother." You will not find a staff of activist attorneys preparing litigation strategies. You will not find a field office for*

*any of the national privacy rights groups. But you will find... a widespread pattern of unorganized resistance to surveillance in which several important things are happening:*

*--The welfare mothers we spoke with engage in an array of tactics designed to evade and thwart the detection and control of the surveillance system.*

*--They voice a widely shared critique of the goals and practices of the surveillance program. It is a critique that breaks with the conventional grounds of the right to privacy arguments to advance tangible concerns about food, shelter, and the welfare of their children.*

*--Their tactical efforts work to strengthen the values of the critique, challenge the powers of the surveillance system, and produce tangible improvements in their families' lives.*

*In short, what we found as we explored the everyday lives of a heavily surveilled group was a dense pattern of unconventional and seldom-noticed politics through which an internally coherent combination of ideology and action worked to advance the interests of these families and thwart the mission of the surveillance regime.*

....

*(T)hese alternative ways of complaining about surveillance are also important to a discussion of everyday resistance, because they show that the women's actions are framed within a sensible and compelling moral argument. Skeptical readers of works on everyday resistance have noted the frequent absence of something that we might hope to see in political struggles—principles: some form of broader argument or ethic that positions and explains the actions of the oppressed and the wrongs of the oppressors while building the possibility of shared consciousness. Isolated acts of opportunistic self-expression or petty thievery which make no contribution to building a vision of a more promising world, they argue, should not get more attention or significance than they deserve.*

*But here we see patterns of everyday resistance that are neither unprincipled nor unrelated to broader political critiques. While the mothers studied here don't regularly quote the Bill of Rights or make speeches about the right to privacy, many of them do make consistently principled arguments about need, duty, and obligation and explain their actions and their critique of the state in terms of those principles. Similar complaints about the welfare surveillance regime and explanations for resistance mark many of these interviews. This finding shows that there is a shared frame of reference—an ideology of caring or parenting within a context of need—behind the seemingly discrete and apolitical actions of women in the welfare system. Although they are not united spatially, politically, or socially, the women interviewed here do share economic, institutional, and familial identities, and we can see that they also share a unified framework of language and values with which to mobilize their critiques and actions.*

(Excerpts are from my 2005 Social Text article, "Resisting Surveillance")

Since I have written with unveiled enthusiasm about the beauty and justice-building potential of patently illegal practices of everyday resistance, it seems pretty clear that my definition of justice has little to do with formal law. I am also not going to make a claim about it being based in an explicit and coherent theory of the polity, humanity, or the firmament. In fact, as I sit here and think about it, I am not even sure that I can picture justice as something that can be achieved as a sustained state. It seems, rather, to be a situational, dynamic, and fleeting sense

that the ongoing imbalance of power is momentarily reset in favor of those who would be dominated. But it also strikes me that if we take this idea of a situated balancing of powers and could imagine the instances accumulating into an ongoing state, it comes out to a fairly simple and obvious state of ongoing democratic equality. While I think this last image is unachievable, it seems pretty clear that my imagining of justice in its limited manifestations points in that direction.

PS. One of the things that has always intrigued and excited me about the study of everyday resistance as a means of achieving brief moments of justice is that it is so utterly autonomous, subtle, self-made and disconnected from broader organized movements. In this sense, the fight for personal justice stands as a distinct moment of self-expression and demonstration of autonomy, even in the face of formidable arrays of power. Returning to our opening narrative, these small moments of justice don't require the intervention of the idealistic preacher-- the victim himself takes a shot at the bully (and then must either run like hell or get clobbered).