



Have you heard the term "retarded monkey" yet? Well, if you're around kids or adolescents much, you might be exposed to it soon, as it seems to be spreading in parts of Southern California.

This phrase, "retarded monkey", means nothing really; it's just a thing kids call each other for fun, like "lame-brain" or "butthead". It's what you yell at a friend who's chasing you around on his bike. Innocent. But, the phrase got me thinking about language, youth, and culture, and particularly about our adult inclination toward ~~a~~ ^{haughty} criticism of anyone who runs afoul of the self-appointed propriety police. Just imagine, for example, if "retarded monkey" wasn't squealed into the neighborhood ether by some tag-playing ten year olds, but instead was used in a TikTok or Twitter post by some minor celebrity. I think the outcry might be significant then, and I bet it would center on the supposedly callous use of the word "retarded" and the supposedly racist implication of ~~calling anyone a monkey~~, retarded or otherwise. But... why?

Perhaps there's more to it, but it seems to me ~~the~~ the answer is that many people are just salivating over the opportunity to voice their disapproval of other people's ~~purportedly~~ offensive language. I have no doubt that if an adult said "retarded monkey," large swaths of society would start shrieking. They'd shriek first that someone dared to even utter the word "retarded", proclaiming it an insult to, well... retarded people. But it's not an insult at all, it's a perfectly good word that refers to something delayed, such as human development, but lots of folks insist on conflating the adjective "retarded" with the noun "retard" — emphasis on RE. THAT word is nothing but a nasty slur that definitely should be called out and denounced, same as words like "fag" or "bitch" or "beaner" or (gasp!) "nigger", all of which are intentionally hurtful and degrading insults with no place in our discourse.

The second shrieking would no doubt condemn the "racist" word "monkey", and

While that condemnation shouldn't even merit a reply, it seems there's no getting around it. Can we just stipulate that monkeys aren't people, and people aren't monkeys? Ever? Of course, some folks use animal words to deride their fellow humans (as when we call anyone a "predator", which is a zoological term that was deployed as political rhetoric to dehumanize certain young people in the 1980's, but now mostly attacks those whose sexuality is distasteful to some). However, assuming a racist intent behind the word "monkey" is, I believe, a rather racist presumption in itself. Can't we playfully refer to our friends any way we like without conjuring the spectre of racial animus?

All of this reminds me of the Roseanne Barr controversy ~~some~~ a few years ago, when her politically charged flame war with Valerie Plame produced a reference to the movie, Planet of the Apes. As it turned out, Ms Plame was part African American, so everyone rushed to slam Roseanne for attacking a black person with a racial insult. From the beginning, though, that didn't seem right to me. First, I'd never heard a peep about Roseanne being racist before. Second, even if she was, I think she's smart enough to keep her public sparring out of that particular gutter. More importantly... is Planet of the Apes somehow racist? It didn't add up until someone pointed out that calling black people "apes" is a common racist trope, but Roseanne had never called Ms Plame a simian of any sort. So, what did she intend? After I saw a picture of Ms Plame, I hate to say it, but it all made a lot more sense! Truth is, in at least one unfortunate photo, Valerie Plame sufficiently resembled one of the original movie's apelike characters to make it easy to see why Roseanne said it. It was an insult no different from calling someone, say, Sloth from the Goonies (yes, I actually know someone who gets called that, and yes, you KNOW why), or maybe even Roseanne Barr (again, it's only funny if there's a genuine resemblance). It's clearly mean-spirited, but it equally clearly has nothing to do with racism; just an ugly jab at someone you're fighting with.

In this case, "retarded monkey" is literally nothing but a piece of youth-culture currency with no deeper significance than combining some inherently funny phonemes. My childhood friend once started calling everyone "defective cum bubble", which made no sense, but the words just naturally make you laugh... at least if you have a particularly juvenile sense of humor, as many do. Anyway, this all just seems like yet another opportunity to reflect on what upsets folks, and how maybe we'd be better off if we were a little less quick about inventing reasons to be offended.

In other words, don't be such a retarded monkey about stuff.