

[Author's note: Uli Hoeneß used to be the president of Europe's most successful soccer club, FC Bayern München. He was sentenced to three and a half years in prison for evading 37 million dollars in taxes.]

i)

Thought experiment time.

Imagine somebody walked up to and offered you a million dollars every month. Of course there's a hook: Every month there is a small, one digit percentage chance that you're going to jail for as many months as you've collected the money for. Do you take the money anyway? Of course you do. Answering yes to this question doesn't make you Uli Hoeneß, but answering yes to the next question will: Would you do it for fifty dollars a month?

The punchline about the Hoeneß trial is that he was already a very wealthy man before he got into tax evasion. Hoeneß' fortune is an estimated 556 million dollars, which means that he risked going to jail to increase it by another seven percent. But since this is post-2008, that doesn't evoke any reaction other than shrugs. "It's like with the bankers and their greed." says someone who stopped thinking five minutes after Lehman Brothers went the way of all flesh.

Greed is the explanation they gave you because it keeps things the same. People believe that greed is part of human nature, and hence part of them, and thus the only way to change the system is to change themselves, and that's why when the bailouts came, people cheered or at best offered sternly written op-eds in opposition. If the price of homeostasis is a couple hundred billion paid with the national credit card, then so be it.

But greed is not why they did it. They did it because if you cram a few dozen people with equally ridiculous fortunes into one room, the only way they can figure out whose dick is bigger is by checking how quickly they can make them even more ridiculous. This still sounds like greed, which is why they were able to convince you to pay, but the reward isn't the money, the reward is being the biggest dick in the room, it's identity. Investment bankers know better than anyone else that the money they're playing with isn't real, so why would they chase after more of it? But to you, who have little of it, the money is real – it's called marginal utility – so you think greed is a valid explanation, but had they told you that they played Monopoly with your retirement money, you would have gone berserk, and correctly so.

You surround yourself with people that reinforce your identity, not people that challenge it. The mechanism along which you are reinforced may feel like being challenged, but trust me, you've got safety wheels and a helmet. The upside of this is that you've got a safe space, the downside is that it's an echo chamber. We don't need to speculate about what Hoeneß heard in his echo chamber because the echo chamber is on Facebook and Twitter, for everyone to see: You're a good guy, you've done so much for society, you're contributing even without paying your taxes.

And thus, he didn't. This also explains why he chose to accept the ruling and resign from his position as Bayern München's president - because it preserves his identity as the good guy, the upstanding member of society. Breaking the law doesn't come into it, you don't think of yourself as a criminal for running a red light either. But you are.

ii)

"Ugh, can we talk about something else, like the Ukraine?" But we never talked about the Ukraine. "What? No, I'm pretty sure we did-" No we didn't, I was there, I watched the political talk shows. We talked about the protestors on Maidan, especially the more prominent ones like Klitschko, and of course we talked about Yanukovich, until he fucked off, when we stopped talking about him and started talking about Putin. "I don't get where you are going with this." Of course you don't, this is how you were conditioned to think: In terms of people, not issues. Jon Stewart despaired over the focus on Putin's body language, but he missed the point, the problem is not the technique, the problem is the target.

And Putin knows this, which is why he lets you stare at his manboobs and idly speculate about whether he's lost it or not, all the while he creates facts on the Crimea. Speaking of it, maybe Putin is right to take it? The majority of people there are ethnic Russians, the area was only transferred to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic 60 years ago by Nikita Khrushchev, who himself was half-Ukrainian. Everything else the Soviets did is considered bad and illegitimate, why not this? "Whatever, I don't know, I haven't thought about it like that." I know, history is hard.

You may think that the Hoeneß trial barged in and grabbed everyone's attention at a time when we should have been thinking about something actually important, but there's no difference between the media's treatment of Ukraine and the media's treatment of tax evasion. "What, who's talking about tax evasion?" Exactly. In the first place, Hoeneß only got so much attention because before him, Alice Schwarzer¹ was outed as a tax evader, and before her, maybe it was Christian Wulff², and before him it was Klaus Zumwinkel³. Nordrhein-Westfalen's treasurer claimed that Germany loses 222 billion dollars a year due to tax evasion, but I never see him on TV and can't remember his name, but I do know the names of the people whose collective net worth isn't even one percent of that.

The actual issue of tax evasion, or of the Ukraine, for that matter, confuses you. I can relate, it confuses me as well, it's harder to decide whether letting tax evaders indict themselves is fair or not than to decide whether the individual tax evader is a bad person or not. It's harder to decide whether Russia has a legitimate claim on the Crimea or not, but it's easy to decide whether Putin is evil or not. The only problem is that by answering the easy questions, you're leaving the tough questions to someone else to decide, and that someone else's answer may not always please you.

1 Germany's #1 Feminist

2 Germany's former President

3 Former CEO of Deutsche Post

iii)

The truly important question is not, however, why Hoeneß evaded his taxes, it is why people supported him despite that. Tax evasion is an externalisation of costs, it's theft from society. If Hoeneß doesn't pay 37 million in taxes, that money is either coming out of everyone else's pocket directly or the government issues another 37 million in debt, the interest on which is definitely coming out of your pocket.

"They're soccer fans, they don't care about politics." Thank you for being so above everything. I may look down on soccer fans as well, but I don't believe they would have let Hoeneß get away with accusations of murder, rape or holocaust denial. The issue is this specific crime: If you support a tax evader, you're saying that you don't believe tax evasion is a serious enough crime and that you would have done the same, so you support Hoeneß to support yourself.

"But I do think tax evasion is bad, I just also think that Hoeneß has paid his debt to society through charity." That's even worse, though. "How?" Again, I can't blame you, this is how you've been conditioned to think: It doesn't matter what you do, what matters is who you are, and you are what you think you are, reality be damned. "That's not what I think at all!" Yes, it is, that's why you are satisfied that Hoeneß gets three and a half years in jail, regardless of whether you like him or hate him. You're happy that in this post-2008 world that was almost destroyed by the masters of the universe at Goldman Sachs, rich people can still go to jail like the rest of us.

You're used to a status quo where in every other walk of life, your actions have been rendered irrelevant in favor of your identity. You've inherited much of your life from your parents, more of it than they did from their own. You know that the people you see on TV are not there because they are the best at what they do, but only because they appear to be, appealing to some invisible person who pulls all the levers. That person is still you, though, because you're not actually mad at the selection mechanism, you're just mad it didn't choose you. You can't actually imagine another way.

The problem is you. The problem is always you.