

RACISM IN AMERICA

Police Chokehold is Not the Issue



THE American project was founded on rank hypocrisies. On the one hand, President Thomas Jefferson, who wrote the stirring words in the Declaration of Independence that upheld “these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal”, did not free his own slaves (not even Sally Hemings, who bore him six children). Similarly, the Constitution of the US, celebrated as one of the finest examples of a self-conscious construction of a liberal democratic order, defined Blacks as only three-fifths of a person, not a full human being. Though “slave trade” was abolished by Congress in 1808, a brisk market in slaves continued since it was considered essential to the “Southern life-style” and the mode of production in a plantation economy. Even in 1857, the Supreme Court ruled (Dred Scott v Sanford) that Black people were to be deemed “property”, not “citizens”.

It took a Civil War and three momentous amendments to the constitution (the 13th in 1865, the 14th in 1868, and the 15th in 1870) for slavery to be abolished, for Blacks to be accorded the “due process” protections of citizenship, and for them to receive the right to vote. (Women did not receive that right till the 19th amendment in 1920).

While the abject inhumanity of slavery may have been legally mitigated to some extent, the institutions, practices and values of exclusion, exploitation and devaluation were not. Constitutional guarantees, and Supreme Court decisions, could be cleverly subverted by the states. For example, Black people were denied the right to vote through poll taxes, arbitrary registration requirements, literacy tests, grandfather clauses, white primaries and so on. In 1940, 70 years after they had received the right to vote, only 3 percent of Blacks in the South were registered as voters. Less overt voter suppression efforts continue to this day.

Similarly, discriminatory laws in many Southern states also imposed second-class citizenship on them. There were restrictions on residence, employment, bank loans, travel (they had to sit in the back of the bus) and, till the Court’s decision in Brown (1954), the schools they could attend. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 removed many of these ostensible barriers, but the shadows remained long, corrosive and cruel.

II

While slavery may have been “the original sin” through which America came into being, its treatment of other minorities was not very tender. The ones who suffered the most immediately and most grievously were the Native Americans. This land which was theirs was taken away from them. Today, most live in reservations which constitute only 4 percent of US land area.

They were also physically decimated. They became collateral damage in the relentless westward expansion of the Europeans based on notions of “manifest destiny”. They were killed through forced marches—e.g. the “trail of tears” between 1830-1850, when almost 60,000 of them were uprooted from their habitats and relocated elsewhere, with almost one-fourth dying on the way. There were massacres—e.g. in Bear River, Idaho, 1863, Oak Run, California, 1864, Sand Creek, Colorado, 1864, Marias, Montana, 1870, Wounded Knee, South Dakota, 1890, and many others. And there were summary executions—e.g. the largest execution in US history was that of Dakota men in Mankato after the Sioux Wars in 1862.

When Columbus “discovered” America, the Native population was between 10-15 million. By the end of the 19th century, thanks to the efforts to civilise and Christianize those “red savages”, it had been reduced to 238,000. Today, it is less than 7m, or about 2 percent of the population.

Smaller minority groups in the US faced similar discrimination. Jews were saddled with the long-standing accusation of being “Christ-killers” and their intellectual and financial skills generated envy and anxiety. They were also considered to be consummate conspirators intent on taking over the world, ironically as bankers and financiers (Henry Ford’s argument), or as Bolshevik revolutionaries (Hitler’s conviction, also echoed in the US).

The Chinese were the only people to be formally denied immigration into the country through the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Many Chinese, welcomed earlier as “coolie” labourers to lay the railroad tracks, faced harsh treatment and even violence. The Japanese, restricted through a “gentleman’s agreement” in 1907 from coming into the country any more, were herded into internment camps after Pearl Harbor even though there was not a shred of evidence that anyone had done anything wrong. “Indians”, i.e. those from South Asia, were not considered to be “free Whites” and thus not eligible for citizenship (US v Bhagat Singh Thind, 1923). Asian immigration was completely banned in 1924 and, when the door was slightly opened in 1946, limited by strict quotas of about 100 annually from these three countries.

III

Thus racism was sown right into the fabric of American history, practices and values. The question that is frequently asked is why, while other minority groups subjected to discrimination were able to prosper later, Blacks did not. There is usually a racist subtext to that question to underscore White assumptions about Black laziness, intellectual inferiority, moral weakness, and collective inability to cooperate, organise and develop social capital. That conclusion is both self-serving and untrue.

First, no other group endured the sheer ferocity and persistence of bigotry in the same way that Blacks did. All others (except Native Americans, whose conditions have not improved) had voluntarily come to the country. The Blacks were captured, enslaved and commodified. They were not scrappy immigrants who came to the land of opportunity to pursue the American dream; they were forcibly brought here and left to contend with their American nightmare.

Second, while others also faced stereotypes

by historical practice. Hence we hear about teaching them a lesson, demonstrating overwhelming force, putting them in their place, to “dominate” as President Trump advised the other day, threatening to use the military if needed. It is for this reason too that Pilonise Floyd poignantly pointed out, in his testimony to the US Congress, that his brother had been subjected to a modern-day lynching.

Third, there was a psycho-sexual dimension to this relationship that complicated matters even further. While White men had always been fiercely protective of “their women”, their concern and insecurity regarding Black men were particularly pronounced. Even a hint, a look, a word, the slightest of moves that could be construed as expressing Black lust for a White woman, would provoke savage reprisal. This lasted well into the 20th century.

In 1921, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a Black teenager was accused of molesting a white woman, even though she never pressed charges. In the resulting carnage, there were 10-15 White casualties and, by some estimates, up to 300 Black. The entire Black neighbourhood of Greenwood was set on fire, and more than a thousand homes and businesses were destroyed. Not a single person was convicted.

Similarly, in 1955, Emmet Till, a 14-year-old boy from Chicago visiting his aunt in Mississippi, was accused of making a pass at a White woman by whistling at her. The boy was tortured to death, so badly brutalised that his mother could not even recognise her own son. The perpetrators were acquitted by an all-White jury.

One hears the same refrain in Harper Lee’s 1961 classic *To Kill a Mocking Bird*.

IV

According to the Sentencing Project’s Report to the UN in 2018, Blacks are three times more likely to be searched, twice as likely to be arrested, and receive longer prison

wealth was USD 138,000 for Blacks, and USD 933,700 for Whites. While more than 72 percent of Whites own homes usually in nice neighbourhoods, only 42 percent of Blacks do so usually in shabbier environments. Unemployment rates are typically twice that of Whites.

Approximately 23 percent of Covid-19 patients are Black, and similar discrepancies are seen in terms of people suffering from blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, asthma, cancer, and other health challenges.

Educational disparities are pronounced. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, while almost 80 percent of Whites graduate from high school, only 62 percent of Blacks do so. While 29 percent of White males and 38 percent of White females graduate from college, only 15 percent of Black males and 22 percent of Black females do the same.

This is not because of innate intellectual differences traditionally used to explain the “achievement gap” (comparative lower scores in reading and math for Black students). As John Valant pointed out, Black performance in standardised tests has much more to do with exclusionary zoning policies that keep Black families from better school districts, mass incarceration practices that remove Black parents from children, and under-resourced Black school districts that impose relatively poor-quality teachers, weak supportive infrastructure and an environment of hopelessness and despair that students are compelled to endure. Expecting these kids to perform at the same level as others is like tying a weight to their legs and hoping that they can be competitive in a marathon.

President Johnson’s effort to “level the playing field” led to some Affirmative Action policies, and the formation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in 1965, to provide historically disadvantaged

requirements. It was tokenist, grudging and alienating. Instead of bridging racial divides, they deepened them.

V

Ay, and there is the rub, as Shakespeare would say. The issue of racism is not about a chokehold of a White police officer, but its stranglehold on US society. It is ingrained in the predatory capitalism that the US worships with its emphasis on ugly materialism over human development,

When racism is reduced, and isolated, to a simple problem (e.g. police brutality), it will let politicians shake their cynical heads and issue condemnations with platitudes and clichés that will come trippingly to their tongues. It will permit them to tinker with this or that aspect of law enforcement and claim to have “fixed it”.



Thousands march through the streets during nationwide unrest following the death in Minneapolis police custody of George Floyd, in Raleigh, North Carolina, USA, on May 30, 2020.

PHOTO: REUTERS/JONATHAN DRAKE

and prejudice, none encountered the uncouth mockery and the sheer physical violence that were inflicted on the Blacks. Minstrel shows, which caricatured Black people as sub-human beings (played by White folks in blackface), were wildly popular.

But it was the slaps and kicks, the lashes and chains, the nigger hunting licenses and tar-and-featherings, the burning of crosses and the lynchings that were emblematic of the dehumanisation of Black people. According to the Equal Justice Initiative, between 1877 and 1950, more than 4,400 Blacks were lynched. Many of these lynchings became public events which communities enjoyed as spectacle and the celebration of White power.

It is certainly not that Blacks only understood the language of violence. But this was certainly the only language preferred by Whites to speak to them. Those attitudes and tropes remained, manifested in new forms, sometimes hiding behind police badges. This is vigilante justice dispensed and protected by the instruments of the state, and sanctioned

sentences for committing the same crime. Thirty-five percent of all executions in the US have been Black; they constitute 34 percent of prison inmates and 42 percent of people on death row.

However, while police brutality and related injustices are obvious, the most overwhelming burden for Blacks is the political disempowerment and economic inequities which they have to bear.

Blacks are approximately 13 percent of the population. But currently, while their presence in the House is roughly equivalent (52 out of 435), they have only three Senators (the highest ever), and no Governors. Of the 189 American Ambassadors, only three are Black, usually in “hardship posts” or less relevant assignments (like Bangladesh?).

According to Valerie Wilson from the Economic Policy Institute, in 2018, a median Black worker only earned about 75 percent of what a White person does (USD 14.92 per hour to USD 19.79), and *The Economist* reported that in 2019 mean household

groups some extra educational and economic opportunities. Some progress has certainly been made. A small Black middle class of professionals has gradually come into existence, some Black entrepreneurs have been notably prosperous, and a few Black performers have gained spectacular success in the entertainment and sports industries (unrelated to affirmative action).

But, on the other hand, many Whites resented these programmes which were gradually challenged, and in some ways gutted, through charges of “reverse discrimination” (Bakke v Board of Regents University of California, 1978). The sentiment was that these policies unfairly violated a merit-based system of rewards, and created an entitlement culture for undeserving Blacks (conveniently forgetting that Whites had gained from it for centuries). Sometimes affirmative action only meant incorporating a few Blacks in various positions to prove an institution’s quantitative adherence to EEOC

selfish individualism over collective welfare, desperate profit-seeking over social responsibility, immoral inequalities over a sharing culture, patriarchal dominance over an inclusive democracy, mindless consumerism over ecological concern, and a phenomenally successful strategy of keeping people, particularly the working class, divided and loathing each other.

It is also true that the races are prisoners of their respective assumptions, perceptions and judgments that lead them to see “the other” in radically distorted terms. Their narratives of history, their engagement with reality, and their judgment of events condemn them to their own rhetorical echo-chambers, making communications difficult. What the Blacks will see and remember will be vastly different from what the Whites will (e.g. Blacks will hear George Floyd crying out for his mother as a casually sadistic White officer chokes him to death, Whites will see the looting). In these conditions, hate becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Finally, when racism is reduced, and isolated, to a simple problem (e.g. police brutality), it will let politicians shake their cynical heads and issue condemnations with platitudes and clichés that will come trippingly to their tongues. It will permit them to tinker with this or that aspect of law enforcement and claim to have “fixed it”. It will encourage the power-elite to seek TV-rich moments such as taking a knee, or carrying a BLM placard, or raising a fist at a funeral memorial—high in symbolism but pitifully, perhaps deliberately, low in accomplishment.

As long as they ignore the larger historical, political and psychological context in which White defensiveness and Black weaknesses are located, one can treat the symptoms and not the virus of racism. The intellectual honesty and moral courage this would require has been absent in the past, and there is neither much evidence, nor much hope, that we will see it anytime soon.

Postscript: Having lived in America for many years, I can personally attest to the fairness and decency of the vast majority of colleagues, students, and general people my wife and I have met, and the genuine graciousness and warmth of many friends that we have been blessed to have. This merely underscores the point that the issue is not individual but institutional, not personal but structural. (The cases mentioned in the article are all Supreme Court cases.)

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ALDOUS HUXLEY
(1894-1963)
English novelist and critic

But the nature of the universe is such that ends can never justify means. On the contrary, the means always determine the end.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Helper: Abbr.
5 Big hit
10 “The lady – protest too much”
11 Soda can feature
13 On the sheltered side, nautically
14 Dawn goddess
15 Cinema snack
17 Meditation sounds
18 Like the bone in a porterhouse steak
19 Morse E
20 Form 1040 org.
21 Eat in style
22 Dark wood
25 Trail carriers
26 Store event
27 Assn.
28 Attempt

29 Beat to the story
33 Unit of resistance
34 Beyoncé, for one
35 Warhol’s field
37 Test
38 Small piano
39 Take the bus
40 Fills completely
41 Beholds

DOWN

1 Make suitable
2 Songs for one
3 Two-time NBA MVP Curry
4 Captain Queeg’s command
5 Some tires
6 Pitcher’s place
7 Spring mo.
8 Was a

replacement
9 Estrogen, for one
12 Wallops
16 Nashville’s Grand Ole –
21 Readers of secret messages
22 Prevents, legally
23 Paints the town red
24 Washington’s capital
25 Sticky stuff
27 Walter and Winfield
29 Bender
30 Sprite
31 Steer clear of
32 Titled women
36 Small worker

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BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT