

Ending Anti-Black State Violence

January 19, 2016

In 1992, the world witnessed African American Rodney King being brutally beaten by Los Angeles policemen. In 1999, Amadou Diallo, an unarmed Black immigrant from Guinea, was shot 19 times by five New York City policemen outside his apartment. Sean Bell was shot to death by NYPD in 2006 on the morning of his wedding. And just in 2014, Officer Darren Wilson murdered Mike Brown in broad daylight in the city of Ferguson, Missouri.

All these incidents sparked an uptick in activism against police brutality. It was not until the murder of Mike Brown, however, that people actually stayed in the streets. Because of the courage of the people in Ferguson, #BlackLivesMatter emerged as a formidable counter-hegemonic political force.

AN IDEOLOGICAL INTERVENTION

However, #BlackLivesMatter began more than a year before the events in Ferguson. The movement started in response to the 2013 murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of his murderer, the white Latino vigilante George Zimmerman. It was in July 2013 that Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and I created #BlackLivesMatter as a political intervention and mobilizing project, making use of social media and taking action on the ground.

We created #BlackLivesMatter in the midst of a profound sense of love, grief and rage on both the personal level but also communally, knowing fully that the trauma that Black people and allies of conscience in this nation were experiencing could be debilitating or catalyzing. We introduced #BlackLivesMatter into the lexicon not merely as language, but as a much-needed ideological intervention in a society that has systematically disregarded Black bodies and treated them as disposable ever since they were kidnapped from Africa and violently enslaved throughout the Americas.

It was with this depth of understanding and as trained leftists that the three of us took to creating a project to address structural racism. We are out to expose the fact that police brutality and extrajudicial killings are not outlier activities but part of a systematic attempt to keep Black people subjugated and bound.

It was as though our entire Black society was attempting to make sense of how, despite a mountain of evidence, a vigilante could stalk and murder Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager, and still be let off. And so we embarked on a grand political project that, with the use of technology, we hoped would be visceral, because undoubtedly millions of people across the world had felt this same grief and outrage.

Many Black youth-led organizations emerged during this same period. So when approximately a year later, 18-year-old Mike Brown was gunned down by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson, representatives from Dream Defenders, Black Youth Project, Millions Hoodies and #BlackLivesMatter were quickly dispatched to support the people and the protests in Ferguson. In particular, we responded to the retaliation that the courageous people of Ferguson were experiencing based on their righteous dissent.

A FORMIDABLE DECENTRALIZED NETWORK

It was in this period that #BlackLivesMatter emerged as a national and international rallying cry, as

nearly 500 Black people mobilized to Ferguson at the urging of BLM leaders Darnell Moore, Monica Dennis and Patrisse Cullors. As a result of that convergence of Black people, activists returned home and formed dozens of chapters across the nation. In a short period of time, BLM emerged as not only a political platform and ideological intervention, but as a formidable decentralized network of chapters.

Prior to Ferguson, the human rights organization Malcolm X Grassroots Movement had researched and reported the reality: every 28 hours a Black person is killed by a police officer, security guard or vigilante in the US. To be clear, this is not just happening to Black men in the US, but also to Black women and girls. We saw the video footage of a young Black woman, Tasha McKenna, being beaten, tased and suffocated by several corrections officers. And questions still linger about the death of Sandra Bland, a young Black woman who allegedly committed suicide in jail after a routine traffic stop.

These tragic stories have enraged millions of people in our nation and illustrated the profound need to shut down a system that relies on the criminalization of Black bodies. They make visible the ways in which Black lives are being brutalized in the material world, on a structural level.

THE NEO-CONSERVATIVE AGENDA KILLS

The levels of violence Black people are experiencing the US is a result of a neo-conservative political and economic agenda that is directly connected to efforts to systematically undermine the gains made by previous Black liberation struggles, particular the Civil Rights Movement.

During the 1980s, a neo-conservative agenda emerged under the leadership of Republican Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush, Sr. This agenda was not strictly partisan. Other presidents, like Democrat Bill Clinton, further enshrined laws and policies that would systematically devastate Black communities. The War on Drugs, for example, embraced by successive Republican and Democratic presidents and Congresspeople, led to a legalized all-out assault on Black people.

The Broken Windows Theory was one of the outgrowths of the War on Drugs. It was originated by James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling in the 1980s and introduced at a time when the neo-conservative agenda was attempting to find its footing. The current NYPD Commissioner William Bratton was the first to implement the Broken Windows Theory in the 1980s in Boston, Massachusetts. Bratton concluded that cracking down on “disorder” or “petty crime” would prevent “violent crime”. And “pre-emptive” measures like racial profiling were a key feature of the implementations of the Broken Windows Theory.

This theory turns the relationship between poverty and crime on its head. Poverty causes crime; crime does not cause poverty. Broken Window policing continues to result in the criminalization of poverty, while being touted as a landmark of crime reduction. Such policies have led to high rates of disproportionate arrest, fines, incarceration and mistreatment of Black people at the hands of police, such as in the case of Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old resident of Baltimore, Maryland who was detained for running from the police and who subsequently died from injuries he sustained at the hands of six police officers.

Under the guise of improving the “quality of life”, hyper-policing of low-income neighborhoods has become a mainstay, coupled with the criminalization of non-violent acts of “disorder” such as jaywalking, having your feet up on a subway bench, or selling loose cigarettes. Very similar to Jim Crow laws in the US South, these policies identify actions to classify Black people as criminal, using the underlying racist ideology that Black people must be controlled with brute force. Thus, racialization and the criminalization of poverty are inextricably linked.

Black people, of course, have become the primary targets in every phase of the criminal justice system from arrest to prosecution, sentencing to administration of the death penalty. Only armed with the color of their skin, the murders of Rekiya Boyd, Islan Nettles, Aiyana Stanley Jones and Tamir Rice are consequently justified under the realities of structural anti-Black racism.

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY MOVEMENT-BUILDING

Despite the alarming rates of murder and brutality against Black people, the public outcry, mass mobilizations and extensive advocacy have led to only trivial reforms. Orwellian solutions such as body cameras, addendums to police training, the introduction of “community policing” strategies and the recruitment of more personnel have been the preferred response of lawmakers.

Sadly, all of these proposals and tactics fail to address the root cause of the violence that social justice advocates are working tirelessly to upend, and often offer so-called solutions that further entrench the ideas that policing and control are the answer to systemic human rights violations.

Though graphic videos of intense confrontations between riot gear-clad police and unarmed civilians have captured the most attention, police killings are not the only concern of Black organizers and activists. Blacks in the US are acutely aware that we are not a monolith, nor is the movement. And so an expansion of the framing of state violence has been key to understanding the ways in which diverse Black bodies are all vulnerable to oppression and explicit forms of violence from government forces and institutions.

Creating spaces that embrace diverse Black bodies is key to this movement period. In order to do this, an embodied practice that has emerged in the #BlackLivesMatter network is that of prioritizing the needs of those most marginalized. For example, the #BlackLivesMatter network has made the prioritization of Black trans- and cis-gendered women central to their political ideology and programmatic work, as these communities are often targeted by the state and experience interpersonal violence that must be stopped.

Other Black-led formations like the Black Alliance for Just Immigration and Black Immigration Network have been engaged in protecting Black undocumented immigrants from deportations, which happen in disproportionately high numbers due to racial and religious profiling. These vulnerable and marginalized populations are often not seen as the typical Black persons targeted for violence, however, they are – and they arguably have always been.

BEYOND THE POLITICS OF “RESPECTABILITY”

The emerging movement is characterized by its disavowal of respectability politics that frames “Black issues” in a narrow, patriarchal frame centering on the aspiration to assimilate and obtain full citizenship for African-Americans. With great acknowledgement of the dramatic progress and gains made by the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement, many unrecognized struggles were pushed by the wayside. A new politics is emerging among strategists that makes these marginalized people within Black communities and their issues of main importance in order to achieve improvements that will work for all.

As for its predecessors, taking non-violent direct action is a must for the current movement. Communities are tired of the status quo and know that in order to make visible the grievances of Black community members, these tactics are a necessity. From the shutting down of highways, train stations and sites of commerce, to rallies and actions in strategic places, multiracial, intergenerational people have been convening to interrupt the system and declare that there will be no business as usual until Black lives matter.

What is needed is not merely reform, but the fundamental transformation of culture, policy and institutions to address the root causes of structural racism. Campaigns such as Reparations for Torture Victim survivors in Chicago and Safety Beyond Policing in New York are examples of visionary initiatives that make demands that would lead to the reconstituting of the public safety net.

There must be a divestment from the oppressive, punitive systems of policing and incarceration and an investment of resources to benefit those who need it most, those who have been systematically disenfranchised. Also important is establishing reparatory justice for those who are victims of brutality and the surviving family members of those who have been murdered.

Linking these efforts to campaigns that are pushing back against international trade agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership are the new ways that Black communities are grasping at the root, like dear sister former-Black Panther Assata Shakur admonished members of our movements to do. And in focusing on root causes, the movement is necessarily raising real questions about the nature of global capitalism and the displacement and criminalization that are key features of it.

TRANSNATIONAL COMMITMENTS TO UPEND GLOBAL CAPITALISM

Connecting to the international community is key to US-based Blacks winning some semblance of justice in the face of structural racism. However, any gains in this field will be short-lived if there is only one-sided solidarity. The reality is that Black communities across the globe have always connected for mutual support, and the beginnings of a similar practice are emerging today.

Communities from Kenya, Venezuela, Germany, South Africa, Brazil, Israel, Palestine and other countries have been demonstrating solidarity, and US-based activists have reciprocated. Building Black power across continents and nations is critical. Formations such as the Pan African Network in Defense of Migrant Rights, an Africa-wide network based in Kenya, #BlackLivesMatter and its chapters founded outside of the US, the European Network for People of African Descent and others, help materialize the possibility of a global movement to challenge neoliberalism and global financial institutions.

Black people in other regions like Europe and the Caribbean experience the systematic devaluation of Black life as well. Remnants of colonialism reinforce modern discriminatory practices, often coupled with practices exported from the US. From mass deportations to mass deaths in the Mediterranean Sea caused by Western nations that continue to prey on African countries and other economically depressed nations, forcing them into oppressive trade policies that cause families to make difficult decisions to migrate, it is imperative that our movements continue to take a visible stand against the injustice and decry abuse whenever governments put the blame on refugee and migrant populations.

Key flashpoints in history have often led to a reinvigoration of social movements, but the very nature of social movements is that the scope of work is beyond that of a singular issue. As Caribbean-American poet Audre Lorde aptly stated, "there is no such thing as a single issue struggle, as we do not live single issue lives."

The hallmark of this movement is that there is not one issue. The movement is for racial justice that goes beyond one geographic community and one particular Black person. The struggle will always be for democratic societies that work for all of us. Truly, Black people and other marginalized communities have always struggled for transformational justice believing that another world is possible. But it is clear we will not get there until all Black lives matter.

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