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Why Race is Everything in America

The issues of 'race' and 'racism' have been with us since the founding of our august republic. Unfortunately, they are perniciously still with us today. They were the reason we fought the Civil War (1861-1865) and have mired our history throughout. There is no period in our history, the history of the United States, when 'race' has not been significant in some profound way.

For many reasons too, the American Civil War is still with us today. It is still with us in every racial conflict we have had since. It is still being fought, perhaps unknowingly by many African-Americans, who have experienced 'structural violence' in some way, whether in terms of wanting better education, better housing, or a better job, or even rights for a normal life. And it is still with us today when African-Americans are targeted unfairly by law enforcement.

Practically everyone in the United States has by now seen the gruesome video of alleged murder of a 46-year old, African-American man, George Floyd on Memorial Day, May 25th, by a white Minneapolis policeman, Derek Chauvin. The policeman, Chauvin, kneeled onto the neck of Floyd for almost 9 minutes while Floyd was handcuffed and immobile and until Floyd was lifeless. While other Minneapolis police officers at the scene kept Mr. Floyd immobile and failed to prevent policeman Chauvin from choking out Floyd. It took four days for Minneapolis prosecutors to charge Derek Chauvin with third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter and days more for charges to be brought against the other 3 officers. Both the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension (BCA) are likewise investigating

the incident. What makes the alleged killing of Floyd even more egregious and even more tragic was the flimsiness of the necessity to use such police force against Floyd. Nor is it even clear if Floyd supposedly used a counterfeit \$20 bill to buy cigarettes at a local eatery and grocery store, which is why police officers were alerted to the scene in Minneapolis. What is very clear to most people is that Floyd's death was absolutely unnecessary. Moreover, Floyd was unarmed at the time of his detention not posing a threat to anyone. Above all, why should a man, any man, have to die for \$20 dollars?

As African-American political activist and television commentator, Van Jones remarked on CNN: "What we saw was a lynching. That is what a lynching is. We saw a white man deprive a Black man of his life in public with the entire community staring, you know, horror struck. Now the world witnessed a lynching. There have been lynchings happening in America for hundreds of years. Umm...this is what we have lived with."

Any familiarity with U.S. history, verifies Van Jones' statement. About 3,446 lynchings of African-Americans have been documented as occurring in the United States between 1882 and 1968 according to the Tuskegee Institute. In reality, and many people may be surprised by this, slavery continued well after the Civil War (1861-1865) and following Reconstruction (1863-1877), and following the passage of the 13th (slavery abolishment), 14th (equal protection of citizenship under law), and 15th (right to vote) Constitutional Amendments. Slavery continued through Southern practices of "sharecropping" by forcing former slaves into indentured servitude; through Southern practices of "chain gangs" by forcing African-American men into forced-labor imprisonment following false detentions; and through "Jim Crow Laws" (1870s-1964), informal ways of enforcing racial segregation between Blacks and whites and through "Black Codes", formerly "slave codes", laws disallowing citizenship rights of African-Americans.

In fact, it took 100 years after the Civil War for African-Americans to have their rights restored through the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968) from luminaries like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr and Malcolm X, among many others.

Yet, in terms of policing with all the talk of police reform over the past 56 years since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 has much been done? Well, in my view, not enough has been done. Just examine the recent case of Breonna Taylor, a 26-year old African-American emergency technician, who was a victim of a no-knock search warrant, whereby the Louisville police forcibly entered her apartment and shot her at least eight times on March 13, 2020. Or what about the latest tragic case on June 12th of Rayshard

Brooks, a 27 year-old African-American man, who fell asleep at a Wendy's drive-thru in Atlanta, Georgia. Allegedly, he was drunk and failed a sobriety test. Brooks then supposedly tussled with the police and took a police-taser and as Brooks was running away and pointing the taser at the police, Brooks was shot in the back. Why was "any" violent force used against Brooks in the first place for being drunk and falling asleep in a drive-thru? This is worth repeating, he fell asleep in his car and he was shot and killed.

As a result of Breonna Taylor's death, Louisville Metro Council voted on a ban of no-knock search warrants in Louisville, Kentucky, and as a result of Brooks' death, the Atlanta police chief resigned. The anger and outrage in our country are real. Racism is evil. People are taught to be racists. It is a social construct which is learned but it can be unlearned as well.

Even so, examine the tragic case of Ahmaud Arbery, another victim of a modern white-lynching on February 23rd, 2020, Ahmaud was only 25 years-old, an African-American man, who was out for a casual jog in a suburban neighborhood near Brunswick, Georgia, along the coast, and was hunted down and shot by two white-men, a son and a father, Travis McMichael and Gregory McMichael, the latter a former police officer. It took authorities 74 days for them to arrest the McMichaels and charge them with murder, along with an accomplice Roddie Bryan who filmed the murder on his cellphone. As in the case of Floyd, the damning cellphone video shows the murder of Arbery but ironically the racist McMichaels used it to show off their crime and their pride in hate of Blacks. Allegedly, Travis McMichael stood over Arbery's body and said, "F***-in N***-er!"—obviously, deep-seated and overt racism.

I have been to Brunswick, Georgia and visited those beautiful coastal areas with grey-moss bedecking and hanging on oak trees and its sleepy hamlets on those marshy islands. The same area where Arbery died. It reminds me how in many places and almost anywhere in the United States you may find overt racism. I am equally reminded of white privilege. Often times, just because you are white, other whites, "racist-whites", might just assume you are just as racist as they are. The so-called wink-wink and nod-nod kind of people. I remember visiting a plantation in southern Georgia, and as our tour guide gave us our paid-for-tour, the white-guide began talking about Blacks in a very derogatory way as if I not only understood what he was saying but also automatically agreed with his point of view. Obviously, I did not. I was disgusted and embarrassed by his disparaging remarks and really angered by them. I remember telling this white

plantation guide off in some way. That was about fourteen years ago. It reminded me then that the “Jim Crow South” was not as remote as I hoped it should be.

Another incident occurred while I was an anthropology graduate student in Tallahassee, Florida. I visited a middle school in the area to explain something about culture and so on to school kids. The white teacher took me aside and began explaining to me that the Black kids she taught are like “little monkeys”, she literally said that! And she asked me if they evolved differently or something absurd along those lines. I think I turned red and told her she was full of it, and walked off really angry and really upset. Racism of the overt kind is more ubiquitous than many people imagine or are willing to admit to. It is evident in articles like the recent one, titled: “Reflections from a Token Black Friend” by Ramesh Nagarajah, wherein white people are mostly unwilling to admit to their own biases and racism.

For my Master’s degree in Cultural Anthropology at Florida State University, I took a class, called “Contemporary Folk Relations”. For my final paper, I conducted some preliminary fieldwork at a Black Baptist Church in Southern Georgia. I will never forget the experience. I interviewed many African-Americans involved in the church. I also learned a couple of years later many of the same Black Baptist Churches in the area had been torched out of racism and racist hate against Blacks in Southern Georgia—more unnecessary violence against Black people. In any event, on one evening, one of the church deacons invited me to his house. It was there that I interviewed this African-American man who had experienced the worse kinds of racism I had ever heard anywhere up until that time. This man in his 80s was a World War II veteran and an airman from the famed Tuskegee Airmen squadron. I learned his father had been a sharecropper and his grandfather had been a slave. I learned he earned his university degree from Florida A&M University.

And as we continued sitting together in his darkened kitchen and as I listened to his story, I was in tears. He told me how with a university degree, the only job he could ever hold was as a janitor at the nearby university. He was not offered anything else. Even though he had been a renowned Tuskegee Airman, and even though he had a university education. It did not matter. His Blackness was a stigma.

That is racism in America and was 27 years ago when he told it to me. It is still true enough today. In many ways, it transformed me and opened my eyes to what racism really is. Racism is a sickness. It objectifies people. It dehumanizes people. And it

unfairly oppresses people for their phenotype, mostly for the color of their skin or other Afro-descendant characteristics in the case of African-Americans. If you are familiar with the novel, Invisible Man (1952) by Ralph Ellison, you know what I am talking about. Or worse, if you have experienced these things yourself. As Ellison wrote: “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me, they see only my surroundings, themselves or figments of their imagination, indeed, everything and anything except me.”

Black people for too long have been invisible in our society. Not only are they unseen but for too long have been unheard as well. They have been passed over for jobs, or not allowed to live in certain neighborhoods, or turned away, and so on. This is the very definition of “structural violence”, those structures in societies, keeping people invisible and oppressed.

I do not wish to generalize about the African-American experience either because there are as many different African-American experiences as there are different African-American people and above all, these are “American stories”. Racism is an American story, even though it is everywhere in the world. American racism has its own malignant history. But we have to rid ourselves of this sickness called “racism” once and for all in America. We need a sea change, the type of civil rights legislation we saw in the 1960s under President Lyndon B. Johnson.

Likely, U.S. Congressional legislation in regard to policing will not be enough, especially if it is only for chokeholds and neck-holds, or for restraining individuals. Some Congressional Democrats, however, have proposed not only banning chokeholds but limiting military weaponry to police, defining lynching as a federal hate crime, establishing a police misconduct registry, and limiting qualified immunity for police officers. Maybe like the President LBJ Administration not only do we need a new “War on Poverty”, but we need a “War on Racism as well?”

Fifty-three years ago, in July 1967, America erupted in riots, similar to today in places like Newark, New Jersey, Minneapolis, Minnesota, Detroit, Michigan, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. At the time, African-Americans also believed not enough was being done for “civil rights”, and like then, the overwhelming frustrations led to tragic violence. In 1968, the riots across the country were even more out of control because of the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Yet, the irony of course, is the same “structures of violence” in

our urban metropolises remain, and in many ways, continue unaltered—unemployment, educational deficiencies, racial bigotry, and police brutality.

Coming to terms with our social divisions, especially over racism, means understanding our long history of racial discrimination and our long history of racial violence. Moreover, it may take another president who is willing to address such issues and unite our country once more. Even so, violence is never the answer. As Dr. King once proclaimed in a 1957 sermon in Montgomery, Alabama: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” Even so, Dr King also said in 1966, “We have got to see that a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the economic plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years...The mood of the Negro community now is one of urgency. That we aren’t going to wait. That we have got to have our freedom. We have waited too long...I hope that we can avoid riots because riots are self-defeating and socially destructive.” King’s words as pertinent today as when he first spoke them.

Yet, in my view, Wesley Lowery, in a recent article in The Atlantic, titled: “Why Minneapolis Was the Breaking Point”, sums up the current #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) movement best when he states: “Racism is not to blame, the thinking popular among at least some conservatives goes. It’s the people fighting racism who are the problem. If everyone could just stop talking about all of this stuff, we could go “back” to being a peaceful, united country. No one seems to be able to answer when, precisely, in our history that previous moment of peace, justice, and racial harmony occurred.”

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