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Baltimore, Police Violence and Economic Justice

The Economic Destruction of Baltimore

by ROB URIE

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“We need more police, we need more and tougher prison sentences for repeat offenders. The ‘three-strikes-and-you’re-out’ for violent offenders has to be part of the plan. We need more prisons to keep violent offenders for as long as it takes to keep them off the streets.”

Hillary Clinton 1994

The Economic Backdrop

American politics is the realm of Immaculate Conception where actual policies and accumulated history disappear behind a veil of personal characteristics and unrelated acts. The (mis)leadership class pretends that ruling class machinations— trade agreements, financial deregulation, imperial wars, surveillance and policing have no bearing on social outcomes. American cities bear the imprint of these policies plus the residuals of slavery, genocide and the particulars of Western capitalism that have embedded history into current social relations. This is to argue that the individualist explanation of Western history may be interesting for those so-inclined, but it fails as description in every conceivable dimension.

Political explanations of public policies like trade agreements and financial deregulation put a political face on fundamentally economic arrangements. When Bill and Hillary Clinton instituted the ‘tough-on-crime’ policies that so exacerbated mass incarceration there was a political explanation— pandering to White suburban voters’ manufactured fears of a Black urban underclass to garner votes, but the policies tied closely to American economic history as well. From slavery to convict leasing to urban dispossession, racial repression has produced economic value that has been expropriated. The Clinton’s neoliberal trade policies exacerbated the urban industrial exodus while deregulation of finance ‘monetized’ Black wealth for the taking. Seemingly unrelated ‘political’ policies often have economic explanations.



Freddie Gray. Original image source: cnn.com

Economic history ties America’s cities to political and economic hierarchy through the dimensions of this hierarchy. Washington to Baltimore to Philadelphia to New York was the land route North for Southern Blacks fleeing slavery. This was also one of the routes to industrial jobs following WWII. Sequential (engineered) oil crises in the 1970s roiled industrial America. In the late 1970s and early 1980s Federal Reserve policies decimated the industrial economy by increasing the value of the U.S. dollar. Bill Clinton passed NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) and his deregulation of Wall Street provided the money needed to finance the

relocation of a large portion of the U.S. industrial base overseas. None of these policies were crafted by the inner-city residents.

Modern day Baltimore, Philadelphia, Detroit and Chicago have neighborhoods left behind by policy decisions that decimated the economic bases that once supported them. When there were jobs people worked. When the jobs left people either stopped working or found other, less remunerative work in the service sector. The housing boom and bust monetized inner-city houses until the bubble burst. Rather than forcing Wall Street to clean up the mess inner city residents were left with their former wealth in the hands of bankers and an economy that imploded in the Great Recession. While this story is full of malefactors, Bill Clinton has major policy responsibility for mass incarceration, for neoliberal trade deals and for bank deregulation.



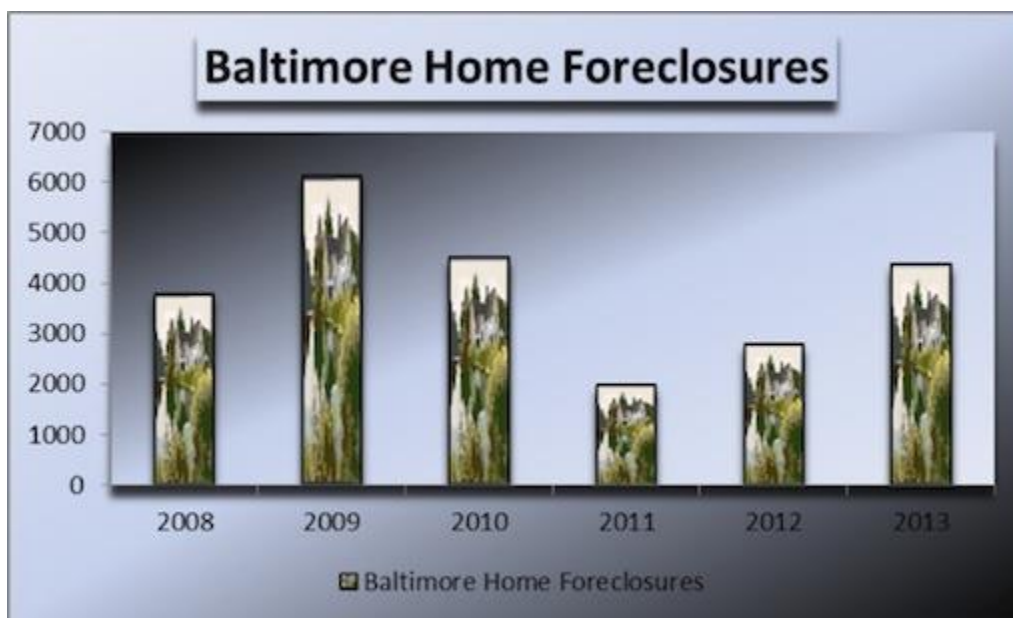
The bankers who destroyed Baltimore discuss their bonuses with Congress. Image source: google images.

The Murder of Freddie Gray

The wholly implausible storyline that Freddie Gray severed his own spine being put out by the Baltimore police is a Rorschach test for social accountability. The political strategy of officialdom is to peel away those who will accept any explanation in favor of police actions, no matter how implausible, to marginalize protestors. That a significant portion of the population, both Black and White, wants to believe that the police always act in good faith illustrates a preconception that will only be effectively challenged through political estrangement. The fabrication adds insult to Freddie Gray's murder and as such, to the conduct that the Baltimore

police department needs to be held to account for. Freddie Gray was murdered in police custody. Technocratic explanations of the particulars only serve to obscure this basic truth.

When videotape revealed the brutal beating the Los Angeles police inflicted on Rodney King the defense was able to convince a jury and a substantial portion of America that Mr. King had assaulted the police ‘batons’ with his head. One might wonder how graphic footage of a group of cops beating Rodney King within an inch of his life in plain public view could be construed otherwise. The tactic used was similar to the comments from officialdom, including the Black (mis)leadership class, toward protestors in Baltimore. Mr. King was alleged to have been in an angel dust rage that made him impervious to pain and to rational thought—he was an ‘out-of-control’ Black man. Likewise the protestors in Baltimore were deemed irrational ‘thugs,’ criminals with no legitimate right to political action.



Graph (1) above: the official storyline has unknown forces producing intractable poverty in American cities when many of the forces are quite visible. Mass incarceration is racially targeted and causes wholesale immiseration by precluding meaningful employment. Wall Street’s subprime lending fiasco racially targeted neighborhoods and emptied them of residents as local wealth was transferred to the bank accounts of the already wealthy. It is paradoxical that public discussion of ‘looting’ in Baltimore has focused on angry citizens without deep discussion of what they are angry about. Home foreclosures in Baltimore (Graph (1) above) have followed the national housing boom – bust because Wall Street made predatory mortgage loans targeting neighborhoods of color. Rather than charging bankers with making fraudulent, predatory loans the citizens of Baltimore were forced to bear the consequences of banker malfeasance. Source: Baltimore Homeownership Preservation Coalition.

In telling form, officialdom’s concern for property overshadowed care for the life of Freddie Gray and the many other Black, Brown and poor White youth and men murdered by the police. These misplaced priorities are thinly veiled socio-cide, concern with what can be replaced in place of what can’t be. The rapid vilification of protestors was accompanied by Immaculate

Conception politics, denial of responsibility for the circumstances being protested. However, made apparent by events in Baltimore is that police murders only enter the American consciousness when buildings and police cars burn. Assertions that peaceful protests are the only legitimate form face the burden of history and official hypocrisy. Moral suasion through peaceful protest assumes a capacity that divergent class interests render improbable.

Democracy Now! illustrated one such experiential divide when a Baltimore mother refused to join local youth who had volunteered to clean a burned CVS store because, as she put it, the police need to be made to understand that they can't murder Black youth with impunity. Left unexplored, and apparently unconsidered by the youth who saw the local CVS outlet as 'their' store, is that through direct purchase and their Caremark consulting business CVS has put hundreds of locally owned pharmacies in inner city neighborhoods out of business and replaced them with minimum wage jobs and extractive economic practices. Likewise, the Ace Cash Express that was burned is a payday lender whose business model is to make usurious loans in poorly banked communities under terms that lead to permanent debt servitude.



State police or police state? Original image source: spaulforrest.com.

National Mis-Leadership Meets Local Mis-Leadership

When President Obama called protesters in Baltimore 'criminals and thugs' he neglected to mention the class divisions that have as his major campaign contributors the Wall Street bankers who engineered the housing boom – bust still devastating Baltimore and whose subsidiaries are the payday lenders who destroy lives and neighborhoods there. Some fair portion of these campaign contributors would have been 'criminals' if Mr. Obama's Justice Department had not

shielded them from prosecution for their crimes. The term ‘thugs’ is widely used as racist code for Black and Brown youth and could be more appropriately applied to American drone operators so regularly slaughtering wedding parties across the Middle East. And the term most certainly applies to the police who murder Black and Brown youth with alarming regularity and officially sanctioned impunity.

Much of the reaction to events in Baltimore harkens to the late FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover’s quip that “justice is incidental to law and order.” Implied is that justice may be set to the side if order can be maintained through systematic injustice. The conceptual problem is that, as with President Obama’s and Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake’s slander of protestors as ‘thugs,’ class interests lie behind class-based policing. Heavily armed, militarized police could storm Wall Street (as metaphor for geographically dispersed finance) and corporate executive suites kicking in doors, handcuffing everyone they meet and opening fire on those who aren’t immediately compliant under the same theorized justification they have for doing so in Baltimore, Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia or Los Angeles. That they don’t is evidence that neither law nor justice is behind police actions in poor communities.



If peaceful change is possible, why have the police been militarized to prevent it? The Department of Homeland Security calls protestors ‘terrorists’ and the Ferguson, MO police department calls them ‘the enemy.’ Original image source: google images.

The economic crises affecting communities of color in Baltimore and elsewhere tie directly to government policies like trade agreements that benefit financiers, upper class ‘professionals,’ industrialists and the owners of capital. Official indifference to the social consequences of industrial relocation has produced economic dead zones in major cities since the 1960s. Wall

Street's predatory mortgages decimated black wealth in cities like Baltimore and with it the capacity for economic investment. Elite chides that citizens are destroying their future prospects through rebellion provide cover for the economic forces they control for their own benefit. In the last decade Wall Street has destroyed more of urban America than citizen rebellions ever could.

The problem of the economic capture of the mis-leadership class suggests that political resolution is unlikely to come through the ballot box. Blacks have joined this mis-leadership class with co-optation being the singular result. American political economy is set up to perpetuate existing class relations with the racial residual of history as a component. Martin King began addressing economic justice with the understanding that it is a prerequisite to social justice. He was murdered shortly thereafter. The interest in 'property' in the face of the loss of life at police hands is clear indication of what drives official concerns. Therein lies the political paradox—economics is the more dangerous dimension of social injustice to address but it is also the most necessary. The U.S. has subverted democratic movements and invaded countries to prevent implementation of a minimum wage. But how is life possible without a living wage?