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America's New Brutalism: the Death of Sandra Bland

by Henry Giroux

7/24/2015

On July 9, soon after Sandra Bland, a 28-year-old African-American woman, moved to Texas from Naperville, Illinois to take a new job as a college outreach officer at her alma mater, Prairie View A&M, she was pulled over by the police for failing to signal while making a lane change. What followed has become all too common and illustrates the ever increasing rise in domestic terrorism in the United States. She was pulled out of the car by a police officer for allegedly becoming combative and pinned to the ground by two officers. A video obtained by ABC 7 of Bland's arrest "doesn't appear to show Bland being combative with officers but does show two officers on top of Bland." [1]

In a second video released by the Texas Department of Public Safety, Texas state trooper Brian Encinia becomes increasingly hostile toward Bland and very shortly the interaction escalates into a shouting match and becomes confrontational. [2] During the interaction, Bland is asked by the office to put out her cigarette she refuses stating "I am in my car, why do I have to put out my cigarette?" Encinia then opens the driver's door, attempting then to physically remove her. He then states "I'm going to drag you out of here." Bland says "don't touch me, I'm not under arrest." Encinia then pulls out his Taser, points it at Bland, and says "I will light you up." Spokespersons for the State troopers later admitted that "Encinia did not follow proper procedure; Waller County District Attorney Elton Mathis said after viewing the video that Bland was "not compliant" with the officer's orders." [3] Encinia claims that after Bland was

handcuffed, she swung her elbows at him and kicked him in the chin, though this does not appear on the video. Bland was then charged with resisting arrest. Neither the dashcam video nor the video take by a bystander show any indication the officer was kicked. Even more troubling is the fact that the video had a number of glitches suggesting it had been tampered with, though the Department of Public Safety indicated the glitches were the result of posting it and later released another version of the video.[4]

A witness reported that “he saw the arresting officer pull Bland out of the car, throw her to the ground and put his knee on her neck while he arrested her.”[5] In the video, Bland can be heard questioning the officers’ methods of restraint. She says: “You just slammed my head to the ground. Do you not even care about that that? I can’t even hear.”[6] At one point, Bland indicates she has been hurt. She says “You’re about to break my wrist and “You knocked my head in the ground; I got epilepsy, MF!” to which Encinia responds “Good.”[7] She was then arrested for assaulting an officer, a third-degree felony, and interned at the Waller County, Texas jail. On July 13, she was found dead in her cell. Quite unbelievably, the police reported that she took her own life and the Waller County Jail is trying to rule her death a suicide. It appears inconceivable that a young woman starting a new job, an outspoken civil rights activist, critical of police brutality, went to church, and was close to her family would have taken her own life. Often posting videos in which she talked about important civil rights issues, she once stated: “I’m here to change history. If we want a change we can really truly make it happen.”[8] Her family and friends believe that foul play was involved, and rightly so.[9] Adding to such disbelief is the fact that the head sheriff of Waller County “ Glenn Smith, who made the first public comments about Bland’s in-custody death, was suspended for documented cases of racism when he was chief of police in Hempstead, Texas, in 2007. After serving his suspension, more complaints of racism came in, and Smith was actually fired as chief of police in Hempstead.”[10]

Bland’s death over a routine traffic stop is beyond monstrous. It is indicative of a country in which lawlessness is now integral to the police state, and extreme violence is the new norm for a society fed by the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow, the incarceration state, the drug wars, and the increasing militarization of everything, including the war on black youth. Routine traffic stops for black drivers contain the real possibility for turning deadly. There is more at stake here than the fact that, as Federal statistics indicate, the police are “31 percent more likely to pull over a black driver than a white driver.”[11] There is the violence that propels a deeply racist and militarized society, a violence that turns on young people and adults alike who are considered disposable and a threat to society.[12] This type of harassment is integral to a form of domestic terrorism in which blacks are beaten, arrested, incarcerated, and too often killed. This is the new totalitarianism of the boot in your face racism, one in which the punishing state is the central institution for both controlling poor minorities of race and class and enforcing the rules of the financial elite. How much longer can this war on youth go on? As Karen Garcia points out, “When police officers can stalk, threaten, harass, assault, arrest, injure and kill black people for the crime of merely existing, I think it’s high time that the USA declares itself a state sponsor of terrorism.”[13]

The United States has become a country in which it is proud of what it should be ashamed of. How else to explain the popularity of the racist and bigot, Donald Trump, among among the Republican Party’s right-wing base? We celebrate violence in the name of security and violate

every precept of human justice through an appeal to fear. This speaks clearly to a form of political repression and a toxic value system. Markets and power are immune to justice and despise it. All that matters is that control, financial and political, serves soulless markets and the Darwinian culture of cruelty. How many more young people are going to be killed for waking in the street, failing to signal a lane shift, looking a police person in the eye, or playing with a toy gun? How many more names black men, women, and young people will join the list of those whose deaths have sparked widespread protests: Trayvon martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Renisha McBride, Aiyana Jones, and Sakia Gunn, and now Sandra Bland. Is it any wonder that one funeral director in Chicago stated that “young people in the city do not expect to live late into their adult life.”[14] Police violence in the United States not only offers a window into the structural nature of state violence, but also serves as a gateway to prison, especially for minorities of race and class. Police violence against people of color, especially Blacks is not an aberration, it is policy, another way of dealing with those considered disposable. Sandra Bland’s tragic death that began with a routine traffic stop has become a high profile case. What is missing from most of the accounts of her death is that the data that is emerging around how often police officers kill civilians suggests that the number of such killings is astronomical. *The Progress Report* recently noted that two new projects are now keeping count in real time and that “According to *The Guardian*, 637 people have been killed by the police” since the beginning of the year to July 22, 2015. In addition, “*The Washington Post*...is tracking police shootings and counts 535 of those. That’s almost three people shot and killed by the police every day this year.”[15]

Yet, the mainstream media is more infatuated with mindless celebrities, game shows, and the financial brutishness and idiocy of Donald Trump than they are about endless violence waged against poor minority children in the United States. What is clear is that this violence speaks clearly to a society that no longer wants to invest in its youth. And if one measure of a democratic society is how it treats young people, the United States has failed miserably.

The war on terror has come home and it has taken the form of a war on poor minorities, especially black men and youth. Racism and police militarization have created a new kind of terrorism, one in which extreme violence is being used against black people for the most trivial of infractions. The killing of black youth by the police is no longer a routine affair, a norm that stretches back to slaver. On the contrary, it now appears to have become both a spectacle and a sport in America. Of course, there has been an unbroken line of terror and violence waged against black people since slavery.

What is different is that such acts of domestic terrorism now often take place increasingly in full view of the American public who more and more are witnessing such lawlessness after it is recorded and uploaded onto the Internet by bystanders.[16] New technologies and an every present screen culture now enable individuals to record such violence in real time and make it a matter of public record. While this public display of the deployment domestic terrorism makes visible the depravity of state violence, these images are sometimes co-opted by the mass media, commodified, and disseminated in ways that exploit and erase black lives, as William C. Anderson argues.[17] But it does more. It also sends a clear message to the American public, one that is as dangerous as it is violent. The message is that the police can kill African-Americans,

young and old, and do it with impunity, with just a few exceptions—as in the clear cut killing of Freddie Gray in Philadelphia and the indictment of the police officers responsible for his death.

Americans now live in an empire of images that not only serve to reveal the dynamics of oppressive power but also empty words of any meaning, often driven by a disimagination machine that denudes images of any substantive meaning by turning them into spectacles of violence. The police appear to recognize that images no longer provide the ultimate referent for revealing oppressive violence as much as they function to massage the machinery of aesthetic depravity. Racial violence has become so commonplace that when it is perpetrated by the police against innocent people, justice is not measured by holding those who commit the violence accountable. On the contrary, all that matters is that its presence be noted by the authorities and the mainstream media as if that is the only measure of justice. Few people seem distraught by the ongoing shootings, beatings, and killings of African-Americans in a society in which a black person killed every 28 hours in the U.S.[18] In a society engulfed in fear, racism, and violence, a culture of compassion, trust, and justice has been transformed into a culture of war and violence.

In a country in which militarism is viewed as an ideal and the police and soldiers are treated like heroes, violence has morphed into the primary modality for solving problems. One consequence is that state violence is either ignored, rendered trivial, or is shamelessly legitimated in the name of the law, security, or self-defence. State violence fuelled by the merging of the war on terror, the militarization of all aspects of society, and a deep-seated and increasingly ruthless and unapologetic racism is now ubiquitous and should be labelled as a form of domestic terrorism.[19] Terrorism, torture, and state violence are no longer simply part of our history; they have become the nervous system of an increasingly authoritarian state. Eric Harris told the police as he was being choked to death that he could not breathe. His words now apply to democracy itself, which has lost the civic oxygen that gives it life and is on its death bed. America has become a place where democracy cannot breathe.

The mainstream press seems especially interested in such stories when the victims can be viewed as assailants, as in the case of Treyvon Martin and Michael Brown, but are less interested when the old stereotypes about crime and black culture cannot be invoked. When the victims of police violence cannot be tarred with labels such as super-predators or thugs[20] as in the case of Tamir Rice, who was only 12-years old when shot to death by a policeman— who in his previous police assignment in another city was labeled as unstable—demonizing discourse becomes useless and such acts of state terrorism simply fade out of view.

Why is it that there was almost no public outcry over the case of Kalief Browder, a young black man, who was arrested for a crime he did not commit and incarcerated at the notorious Rikers Island and spent more than a one thousand days, two years of that time in solitary confinement, waiting for a trial that never happened. Shortly after being released he committed suicide.[21] Would this have happened if he were white, middle class, and had access to a lawyer? How is what happened to him different than the egregious torture inflicted on innocent children at Abu Ghraib prison? What has the United States become in the age of domestic terrorism.

Not surprisingly, the discourse of terrorism once again is only used when someone is engaged in a plot to commit violence against the government but not when the state commits violence

unjustly against its own citizens. What needs to be recognized as Robin D. G. Kelley has pointed out is that the killing of unarmed Afro-Americans by the police is not simply a matter that speaks to the need for reforming the police and the culture that shapes it, but also for massive organized resistance against a war against black youth that is being waged on U.S. soil.[22] The call for police “reform,” echoed throughout the dominant media, is meaningless. We need to change a system steeped in violence, racism, economic corruption and institutional rot. We don’t need revenge, we need justice – and that means structural change.

Ending police misconduct is certainly acceptable as short-term goal to save lives, but if we are going to prevent the United States from becoming a full-fledged police state serving the interests of the rich who ensconce themselves in their gated and guarded communities, the vicious neoliberal financial and police state has to be dismantled. Such resistance is beginning with the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, along with youth movements such as the Black Youth Project, Millennial Activists United, We Charge Genocide, and other groups.[23]

A new brutalism haunts America, drenched in the ever increasing flood of intolerable police and state violence.[24] More and more people are being locked up, jailed, beaten, harassed, and violated by the police and other security forces because they are poor, vulnerable, viewed as disposable, or simply are marginalized by being black, brown, young, and poor.[25] Black youth are safe neither in their own neighborhoods nor on public streets, highways, schools, or any other areas in which the police can be found.

Notes.

[1] Stephen A. Crockett, Jr. “Sandra Bland Drove to Texas to Start a New Job, so How Did She End Up Dead in Jail?,” *The Root* (July 16, 2015). Online: http://www.theroot.com/articles/news/2015/07/sandra_bland_drove_to_texas_to_start_a_new_job_so_how_did_she_end_up_dead.html. Also, see Amy Goodman and Juan González, *Truthout’s* Maya Schenwar and Former Prisoner Jason Hernandez Speak Out on Prisons and Policing,” *Democracy Now!* (July 17, 2015). Online: <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/31939-former-el-reno-prison-inmate-freed-by-obama-speaks-out>

[2] Tom Dart, “Sandra Bland dashcam video shows officer threatened: ‘I will light you up’” *The Guardian* (July 22, 2015). Online: <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jul/21/sandra-bland-dashcam-video-arrest-released>

[3] Sam Sanders, “Dashcam Video Of Sandra Bland’s Arrest Released,” *NPR* (July 21, 2015). Online: <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/07/21/425105015/dashcam-video-of-sandra-blands-arrest-released>

[4] Charles Blow raises a number of questions about the video and the legality of the arrest. See Charles Blow, Questions about the Blow case,” *New York Times* (July 22, 2015). Online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/23/opinion/charles-m-blow-some-questions-about-the-sandra-bland-case.html?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=opinion-c-col-left-region®ion=opinion-c-col-left-region&WT.nav=opinion-c-col-left-region>

[5] Aviva Shen, “Woman Dies in Jail after Being Roughed Up During Traffic Stop. Police Say it was Suicide,” *ThinkProgress* (June 16, 2015). Online: <http://thinkprogress.org/justice/2015/07/16/3681278/sandra-bland-video/>

[6] Ibid. Stephen A. Crockett, Jr. “Sandra Bland Drove to Texas to Start a New Job, so How Did She End Up Dead in Jail?”

[7] Tom Dart, “Sandra Bland dashcam video shows officer threatened: ‘I will light you up’” *The Guardian* (July 22, 2015). Online: <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jul/21/sandra-bland-dashcam-video-arrest-released>

[8] Jamie Stengle and Jason Keyser, “Family Says Woman found Dead at Texas Jail would not Kill Herself; Authorities investigating,” *U.S. News and World Report* (July 16, 2015). Online: <http://www.usnews.com/news/us/articles/2015/07/16/texas-probing-death-in-jail-of-woman-with-chicago-ties>

[9] Ibid., Jamie Stengle and Jason Keyser.

[10] Shaun King, “Texas sheriff involved in the death of Sandra Bland fired from previous post for racism,” *Daily Kos* (July 16, 2015). Online: <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2015/07/16/1402770/-Texas-Sheriff-involved-in-the-death-of-Sandra-Bland-fired-from-previous-post-for-racism#>

[11] Ibid., Aviva Shen, “Woman Dies in Jail after Being Roughed Up During Traffic Stop. Police Say it was Suicide.”

[12] On the issue of state violence, see Brad Evans and Henry A. Giroux, *Disposable Futures: The Seduction of Violence in the Age of Spectacle* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2015).

[13] Personal Correspondence, July 22, 2015.

[14] Daily Mail Reporter, “‘These Kids Don’t expect to lead a full life.’ Fears for Chicago teens as fatal shootings in city outnumber US troops killed in Afghanistan,” *Dailymail.co.UK* (June 19, 2012). Online: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2161690/Chicago-crime-More-people-shot-dead-Chicago-killed-duty-Afghanistan.html>

[15] CAP Action War Room, “Say Her Name: Sandra Bland,” *The Progress Report* (July 22, 2015). Online: <http://thinkprogress.org/progress-report/say-her-name-sandra-bland/>

[16] See Michelle Alexander, “Michelle Alexander on “Getting Out of Your Lane,”” *War Times*, Aug 28, 2013

<http://www.war-times.org/michelle-alexander-getting-out-your-lane>

[17] William C. Anderson, “From Lynching Photos to Michael Brown’s Body: Commodifying Black Death,” *Truthout* (January 16, 2015). Online: <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/28580-from-lynching-photos-to-michael-brown-s-body-commodifying-black-death>

[18] For instance, according to a recent report produced by the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement entitled *Operation Ghetto Storm*, ‘police officers, security guards, or self-appointed vigilantes extra judicially killed at least 313 African-Americans in 2012... This means a black person was killed by a security officer every 28 hours.’. Online:

<https://mxgm.org/?s=killed+every+28+hours>. See also: Adam Hudson, “1 Black Man Is Killed Every 28 Hours by Police or Vigilantes: America Is Perpetually at War with Its Own People,” *AlterNet* (May 28, 2013). Online: <http://www.alternet.org/news-amp-politics/1-black-man-killed-every-28-hours-police-or-vigilantes-america-perpetually-war-its>; Arlene Eisen , “Update on ‘Operation Ghetto Storm’: The Enduring War on Black People in the US, Part 1,” *teleSUR* (July 13, 2015); Online:

<http://www.telesurtv.net/english/opinion/Update-on-Operation-Ghetto-Storm-Part-1-20150713-0007.html>. Also see, Arlene Eisen, “Update on ‘Operation Ghetto Storm,’ Part 2,” *teleSur* (July 18, 2015). Online: <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/opinion/Update-on-Operation-Ghetto-Storm-Part-2-20150715-0033.html>.

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[20] Jason Stanley, “The War on Thugs,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, [June 10, 2015]

Online at: <http://chronicle.com/article/The-War-on-Thugs/230787>

[21] Jennifer Gonnerman, “Kalief Browder, 1993-2015,” *The New Yorker* (June 7, 2015). Online: <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/kalief-browder-1993-2015>

[22] Robin D. G. Kelley, “Why We Won’t Wait,” *Counter Punch*, November 25, 2014

<http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/11/25/75039/>

[23] Arianna Skibell “We are fighting for our lives”: The little-known youth movement rising against police brutality,” *Salon* (February 25, 2015). Online:

http://www.salon.com/2015/02/25/we_are_fighting_for_our_lives%E2%80%9D_the_little_known_youth_movement_rising_against_police_brutality/; Danielle Allen and Cathy Cohen, “The New Civil rights Movement Doesn’t Need an MLK,” *The Washington Post* (April 10, 2015). Online: http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-new-civil-rights-movement/2015/04/10/e43d2caa-d8bb-11e4-ba28-f2a685dc7f89_story.html

[24] Amy Goodman, “Michelle Alexander: Ferguson Shows Why Criminal Justice System of ‘Racial Control’ Should be Undone,” *Democracy Now!*, (March 4, 2015)

Online at:

http://www.democracynow.org/2015/3/4/michelle_alexander_ferguson_shows_why_criminal

[25] Jody Sokolower, “Schools and the New Jim Crow: An Interview With Michelle Alexander,” *Truthout*, (June 4, 2013)