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Rise Up to End Police Terror

By Rob Urie
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The Americanism that voting is the legitimate means to legitimate political ends assumes a starting point that never existed and an end point that somehow never arrives. As the ‘founding’ rich, slaveholding, indigenous murdering, white men had it voting was for those who held the social position to vote ‘responsibly,’ meaning in their own interests and for an embedded status quo. There has never existed a political ‘clean slate’ that voting would determine. At the Constitutional starting point the counting of enslaved human beings was to accrue political power to slave ‘masters’ and not to give voice to the politically voiceless. Today the wholly captured two Party system uses identity politics to perpetuate the myth of inclusion as embedded class interests, the ‘New Jim Crow’ and direct political exclusion through mass incarceration determine the current realm of ‘responsible’ voters.

The requisite: this isn't an argument against voting, but rather against the conclusion that it defines the realm of effective politics. The oft taken inference that were voting not politically effective it wouldn't be so exclusionary begs the question of what it is that is being voted on? Slavery, a founding American institution, was an integration of economics and politics. The re-constitution of race-based political repression tied to economic exploitation through Jim Crow, and now the New Jim Crow, is more precisely an extension of the corporate form of slavery through political control over the means of production, in this case human beings. And it is hardly an accident that the 'legitimate,' meaning state-sponsored, determination of social right is made through state means—the legislative, judicial and penal systems, each with long ties to the mechanisms of class and race-based repression and economic exploitation.

The near entirety of existing circumstance is posed as a series of accidents to be resolved rather than more accurately as the state of affairs that suits its beneficiaries just fine. Identity politics supports this placeholder system with progress defined, as Dr. Cornel West put it in a moment of clarity, as the 'better' plantation manager rather than an end to the plantation system. More people in the U.S. die from furniture falling on them than from 'terrorist' attacks but 9/11 was used to reconfigure citizen-state relations in ways that greatly reduced the nominal role of citizens in civil governance. In 2008 Wall Street imploded from several decades of self-dealing and tens of trillions of dollars were made available to restore it while Barack Obama argued that America, with a fiat currency rendered visible by the bank bailouts, had to 'live within its means' when it came to restoring those displaced by economic crisis.

The current conundrum of who will be the new plantation manager, the first 'socialist' President, the first women President or the first billionaire President, requires looking past the intentionally embedded nature of the existing corporate-state and the ability of bankers, various and sundry industrialists and the military to create crises that pre-empt efforts to reorient circumstance away from their existing interests. Mass incarceration, perpetual war, the surveillance state and increasingly concentrated economic power are all outcomes of serial crises that in the moment had their own contorted logic but in the aggregate and against the breadth of history are tragic mistakes for most people. And each crisis appealed to deeply held social mythology for its sway with embedded history as the mechanism of recovered social dysfunction. The history not recovered is of life as struggle against the circumstances imposed from without that constitute factual confrontation within the posed unity of the plantation from which no quantity of votes will deliver us.

Imagine for a moment that in 2000 George W. Bush had run on a platform of launching aggressive wars against Afghanistan and Iraq; serially violating the Geneva Conventions to illegally torture, murder, kidnap and imprison; building out an intrusive surveillance state to spy on U.S. citizens and overriding local mortgage underwriting standards to facilitate the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression? Or imagine that Barack Obama had run on the platform of codifying extra-judicial assassinations of U.S. citizens; unconditionally bailing out Wall Street banks at public expense; 'liberating' numerous North African and Middle Eastern countries from effective governance for the benefit of oil companies and forcing poor citizens to buy health insurance under the guise of health care reform?

Whether one agrees with any or all of these characterizations or not, subsequent history brought to light truths of who these leaders are as people, what the U.S. is as an economic and political entity and an historical trajectory that renders them far more similar than different in each of these dimensions. The differentiating ‘flavors,’ dim Pentecostal militarist versus Harvard educated ‘soft’ social liberal, succeeded in bringing different audiences along with remarkably similar policies. Both are / were effective salespersons for corporate-state imperialism through the economically and politically integrated wars overseas that are still playing out. And both oversaw the continued integration of corporate and state power through privatization of basic state functions like national ‘defense’ (a/k/a launching imperial wars), education and health care.

Against such recent history it is all the more remarkable, or not, that political debate in 2015 centers around what Presidential candidates are saying rather than the largely unstated policies that past candidates have imposed. As experience has it, subsequent policies will be as fluid as the history that unfolds and as constrained as the political-economic system that the candidates are vying to ‘lead.’ Party and candidate differences devolve to ‘flavor’ and the regenerative capacity of this system in post-election context. Donald Trump is every bit as plausible a President as Ronald Reagan was in his first run in 1976. And the Democrat ‘sheepdog’ playbook to run left with Bernie Sanders only to install Hillary Clinton as the ‘viable’ candidate is on track given her debate ‘performance.’

Even more remarkable are the increasingly probable ‘end-times’ environmental, economic and political calamities that are the product of Western ways of doing things now treated as campaign talking points until they can be (un)safely stowed away following the election. In the most basic sense nothing else follows without breathable air, drinkable water and edible food. Bernie Sanders is able to say as much, but actually doing something about them requires confronting the very Democrats that he has promised not to confront with an independent run. The larger question is how resolution is possible without destabilizing confrontation when Western political economy is demonstrably responsible for the first one and one-half centuries of greenhouse gas emissions and the Western ‘model’ of environmentally destructive economic production is now globally embedded? If co-operative resolution on the scale needed is possible, where is the evidence?

The American virtue of ‘compromise’ proceeds from the perspective that incremental reform is the preferred mode of resolution when reform is just as likely to perpetuate the generation mechanisms of social dysfunction as to resolve them. More to the point, ‘compromise’ has been used by a self-interested political right to sell gullible liberals on the idea of an ever-moveable (rightward) political center and by liberals to sell their nominal constituents on policies that benefit their economic benefactors against their own interests. How gullible must someone be to believe that Barack Obama is an environmentalist because he forbids drilling for oil in the Arctic two weeks after Shell Oil determined that doing so isn’t economically viable?

The question of which Party is more dangerous; Republicans with their tribal ignorance in the service of tribal ‘profits’ or Democrats who occasionally articulate the right policies as a means of selling the wrong, goes eternally unanswered as they both predictably move in and out of power every decade or so. Much has been made of the question of who benefits from Democrat versus Republican policies when low social and economic mobility and growing economic

stratification point to class and race based determinants far more than Party politics. With class and race the dominant determinants of who gets what, of corporate-state distribution, it is hardly those on the outside— the poor and working classes, Blacks, Browns, poor Whites and indigenous peoples, that can be said to be driving the process.

The canard of ‘money in politics’ used to explain bi-partisan corruption ignores the original source of most corporate-state power and resources in the nexus of large corporations and the multiple dimensions of government. The U.S. military is the largest institutional consumer of oil on the planet providing a permanent and wholly circular mission for itself as well as the oil and gas industries. Government research, patent protections and purchases support the technology, pharmaceutical and agricultural sectors. Wall Street would have ceased to exist in 2008 had the (George W.) Bush and Obama administrations not come to the rescue with consequence-free bailouts of nominally capitalist enterprises. And Republican (George W) Bush was harsher with his corporate class-mates through passage of Sarbanes-Oxley legislation and Enron prosecutions than Democrat Barack Obama has been in more extreme circumstances.

The myth of socially beneficial capitalist competition finds its facts in this corporate-state nexus as it developed historically. In its geopolitical incarnation capitalism is inexorably tied to several centuries of imperialism with ‘competition’ used as self-legitimizing code for subjugation and exploitation. Slavery is tied through ‘convict leasing’ and Jim Crow to mass incarceration and for-profit policing with nary a ‘starting point’ that didn’t emerge from this history. And management techniques learned on Southern plantations are the basis of current corporate management methods with the ‘freedom’ to work or starve constituting the voluntary basis for participation in capitalist enterprise. The choice of donkey or elephant has little bearing on the terms of employment without the right of labor to organize and an end to labor-crushing ‘free-trade’ agreements. And as economist Joan Robinson put it some decades ago, the only thing worse than being exploited by capitalists is not being exploited by them (unemployment) in capitalist political economy.

Had forty acres and a mule ever been delivered to freed slaves the question would still exist of its provenance. Genocide against the indigenous population is the basis of ‘real property’ much as expropriated slave labor was the basis of capital accumulation in the American colonies. The police grew from slave patrols organized to ‘recover’ runaway slaves in South Carolina to maintain an historically determined status quo in the present. The strategies of social legitimation and de-legitimation used by the police pose this dubious provenance as the basis for existing economic distribution. For-profit policing and racial repression exist to maintain the social mechanisms of economic expropriation. But this particular history of race ‘relations’ in the U.S. also finds broader expression in capitalist class relations— in subjugation and exploitation of all socially vulnerable classes.

This is to argue that the political establishment that the Presidential candidates are vying to lead is institutionally incapable of political resolution because its basis is in class relations imposed from ‘above’ that are premised on / in irresolution. Capitalism is premised on, and is tied directly to, the corporate-state levers of economic exploitation. This was reasonably well understood before the capitalist renaissance of the 1970s – present posed market competition as the new-old basis of social determination. But with capitalist distribution continuing to feed off of historical

class and race relations it is this modern plantation system that is in need of resolution. The police exist to maintain the status quo and the status quo is political repression to facilitate economic exploitation.

Ending police terror is a necessary step toward social justice. Ending the system of political economy that the police exist to support is needed to end police terror. Social justice for all people— including economic, political and environmental justice is the goal of meaningful political action. As the saying goes: no justice, no peace.