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## The Roots are in the System: Charlotte and Beyond

By *Paul Street*  
September 27, 2016



One reason to know some history is to inoculate yourself against its propagandistic misuse. One evening last week, I had one of my rare moments in front of cable news television and was very positively impressed by the thousands of Black protestors who could be seen facing down the police state in Charlotte, North Carolina. Once again as so often in U.S. history, it struck me, properly angry and militant Black people were leading the way for others to follow. If we want to overcome the savage, eco-cidal, imperial, and state-capitalist dictatorship of our increasingly perilous times, we are all going to have to hit the streets and drop our (frankly) pathological attachment to law and order and our misplaced respect for elite property rights. This will involve

fighting the police at times – this while also trying to persuade some of them over to our side – and not just handing ourselves over to them to get dragged off and thrown in a cell, paying them cash (no credit cards) for the privilege of civil disobedience.

It was nice to see the protestors gathering in and around Charlotte’s shiny downtown and financial district. Why should confrontation and, perhaps, property destruction take place in the nation’s already poor and all-too boarded-up, capital-abandoned and racism-devastated neighborhoods? No, it belongs in the most capital-intensive parts of town, where mainly white wealth and power is most municipally concentrated.

MSNBC’s Brian Williams (yes, *that* Brian Williams) kept saying how “proud” Charlotte’s leaders are of their fancy “New South” downtown – and of their historical reputation for calm race relations. Are they proud, I wonder, of the misery and terror inflicted on people in and from the poorest and Blackest parts of town? (The most impoverished parts of large U.S. cities are typically 80 percent or more Black).

The corporate media cable news (CNN and MSNBC) anchors and their moderate Black talking heads did not share my take on the events in downtown Charlotte, of course. They were there to walk the line between selling sensational images and sustaining mass obedience to reigning institutions and hierarchies. And in service to that mission, the anchormen I beheld in my admittedly brief time before the glowing telescreens of the gym at the University of Iowa Recreation Center brought on some fittingly bourgeois Black professionals and a Black Congressman to talk about how the protest and rioting that followed the police murder of Keith Lamont Scott in Charlotte, North Carolina “discredited the cause” of racial justice. It did so, the mortified commentators said, in ways that the old heroes of the Civil Rights Movement – including John Lewis and above all Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. – would have found abhorrent. The way these power-serving guests spoke, you’d think Dr. King would have been aligned with the forces of order, working to herd protestors off the streets and let the city return to business-rule-as usual.

### **The Real Dr. King on “The White Society Unwilling to Accept Radical Structural Change”**

I doubt these talking heads knew much if anything about what King actually said about riots in the mid-late 1960s. Delivering a series of lectures on Canadian public radio in late 1967, King reflected on the remarkable wave of race riots that washed across U.S. cities in the “long hot summer” of 1966 and 1967, King made *no apologies for black violence*. He blamed “the white power structure...still seeking to keep the walls of segregation and inequality intact” for the disturbances. He found the leading cause of the riots in the reactionary posture of “the white society, unprepared and unwilling to accept radical structural change,” which “produc[ed] chaos” by telling blacks (whose expectations for substantive change had been aroused) “that they must expect to remain permanently unequal and permanently poor” (Martin Luther King, Jr. *The Trumpet of Conscience*, 1967, pp.9-10).

King also blamed the riots on Washington’s imperialist and mass-murderous “war in [here he might have better said “on”] Vietnam.” The military aggression against Southeast Asia stole

resources from Democratic U.S. President Lyndon Baines Johnson's briefly declared and barely fought "War on Poverty." As King explained:

"A few years ago there was a shining moment in the struggle I and other have been waging in America. There a real promise of hope for the poor, both black and white, through the poverty program. There were experiments, hopes, new beginnings. Then came the build-up in Vietnam, and I watched the program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society *gone mad on war*, and I knew America would never invest the necessary funds or energies ...so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demoniacal suction tube." (*Trumpet*, pp. 22-23, emphasis added)

(These are words that the noted Black North Carolina minister, NAACP board member and *Democratic Party* apologist William Barber III might want to review. He used the Charlotte uprising to shamefully claim in a *New York Times* Op Ed two days ago that "we made significant efforts to address inequality through the War on Poverty. We didn't lose that war because we lacked resources or met insurmountable obstacles. We lost it because Richard Nixon's 'Southern Strategy' played on white fears about black power by promising to restore order without addressing the causes of unrest." ["Why We Protest," *NYT*, 9/24/2016]. *Please*. Nixon's racial politics were terrible but Barber seems to have no sense that the "war on poverty" never rose beyond a "skirmish" [King] and was strangled in its cradle by an imperialist campaign launched by *Democratic Party* presidents – Kennedy and Johnson. That's the modus operandi of the liberal and Black political class: blame Republicans and provide cover for Democrats who are joined at the hip with the dastardly G.O.P. in betraying the causes of peace and social justice, including racial justice).

The masters of the "Vietnam War" sent poor Blacks to the front killing lines to a disproportionate degree. They also advanced the notion that violence was a reasonable response and even a solution to social and political problems. Black Americans and others sensed what King called "the cruel irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same school. We watch them in brutal solidarity burning the huts of a poor village, but we realize that they would never live on the same block in Detroit," King said in his second CBC lecture, adding that he "could not be silent in the face of such cruel manipulation of the poor" (*Trumpet*, 23).

Racial hypocrisy aside, King said that "a nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense [here he might better have said "military empire"] than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual doom" (p.33). (Those are haunting words nearly five decades after his assassination (or execution), in a time when the hyper-bloated U.S. Pentagon System accounts for nearly half the world's military spending and maintains more than a 1000 military installations across more than 100 "sovereign" nations as a part of a seemingly permanent war of geopolitical provocation.)

Did the rioters disrespect the law, as their liberal and conservative critics alike charged? Yes, King said, but added that the rioters' transgressions were "derivative crimes...born of the greater crimes of the...policy-makers of the white society," who "created discrimination...created slums. [and] perpetuate unemployment, ignorance, and poverty...[T]he white man," King

elaborated, “does not abide by law in the ghetto. Day in and day out he violates welfare laws to deprive the poor of their meager allotments; he flagrantly violates building codes and regulations; his police make a mockery of law; he violates laws on equal employment and education and the provision of public services. The slums are a handiwork of a vicious system of the white society.” (p.8).

Did the rioters engage in violence? Yes, King said, but noted that their aggression was “to a startling degree...focused against property rather than against people.” He observed that “property represents the white power structure, which [the rioters] were [understandably] attacking and trying to destroy” (pp. 56-57). Against those who held property “sacred,” King argued that “Property is intended to serve life, and no matter how much we surround with rights and respect, it has no personal being”

What to do? King advanced significant policy changes that went against the grain of the nation’s corporate state, reflecting his agreement with New Left Radicals that “only by structural change can current evils be eliminated, because the roots are in the system rather in man or faulty operations” (p.40). King advocated an emergency national program providing either decent-paying jobs for all or a guaranteed national income “at levels that sustain life in decent circumstances.” He also called for “demolition of slums and rebuilding by the population that lives in them” (p. 14).

His proposals, he said, aimed for more than racial justice alone. Seeking to abolish poverty for all, including poor whites, he felt that “the Negro revolt” had come to challenge what he called “the interrelated triple evils” of racism, economic injustice/poverty (capitalism) and war (militarism and imperialism). It had “evolve[ed] into more than a quest for desegregation and equality” by becoming “a challenge to a system that has created miracles of production and technology to create justice.”

“If humanism is locked outside the system,” King said, “Negroes will have revealed its inner core of despotism and a far greater struggle for liberation will unfold. The United States is substantially challenged to demonstrate that it can abolish not only the evils of racism but the scourge of poverty and the horrors of war....” (pp. 16-17, emphasis added). There should be no doubt that King meant capitalism when he referred to “the system” and its “inner core of despotism.”

No careful listener to King’s reflections in 1967 could have missed the radicalism of his vision and tactics. “The dispossessed of this nation – the poor, both White and Negro – live in a cruelly unjust society,” King said in his fourth lecture. “They must organize a revolution against that injustice,” he added (p. 59). Such a revolution would require “more than a statement to the larger society,” more than “street marches” King proclaimed. “There must,” he added, “be a force that interrupts [that society’s] functioning at some key point.” That force would use “mass civil disobedience” to “transmute the deep rage of the ghetto into a constructive and creative force” by “dislocate[ing] the functioning of a society...The storm is rising against the privileged minority of the earth,” King added for good measure. “The storm will not abate until [there is a] just distribution of the fruits of the earth...” (p. 17).

By and before the time of his death, King was a democratic socialist mass-disobedience world revolution advocate. The guardians of national memory don't want you know about when they honor the official, doctrinally imposed memory of King – and they dress him up as a fan of law and order in service to race and class hierarchy and the police state.

### **The Oprah and Obama Effect**

But enough about great men and history. What about today? Half a century later, in a time when mass Black urban unrest and even riots (including two in the last two months) have returned to American history, King's lament about "the white society, unprepared and unwilling to accept [the] radical structural change" required seems all too relevant again. Most white Americans deny that racism poses any significant barrier to Black equality and advancement anymore. They point to numerous examples of highly visible Black success in public life – including above a technically Black U.S. President – as "proof." It's "the Oprah [and Obama] Effect. Throw in Colin Powell, Beyonce, and Charlotte Hornets owner Michael Jordan. "See? Anything's possible if you just work hard. The president is Black, so get over all this politically correct liberal and left-wing nonsense about racism!" It's an environment in which a white North Carolina Congressman – the ridiculous Robert Pittenger (R-NC) – can actually tell BBC that the Charlotte protestors "hate white persons because white people are successful and they're not."

Meanwhile, Black life is still badly misshapen by persistent harsh racial segregation and an intimately related racial inequality so steep that the median wealth of white US households is 22 times higher than the median wealth of black US households. The Black joblessness rate remains more than double that of whites – as usual. The Children's Defense Fund (CDF) reports that an astonishing 40 percent of the nation's Black children are growing up beneath the federal government's notoriously inadequate poverty level. Roughly 1 in 5 Black and 1 in 7 Hispanic children live in "extreme poverty" – at *less than half* the poverty measure – compared to just more than 1 in 18 White, non-Hispanic children.

This radical race disparity both reflects and feeds a four decades long campaign of racially disparate hyper-incarceration and criminal marking. More than 40 percent of the nation's globally unmatched stockade of 2.4 million prisoners are Black. One in three black adult males carries the crippling lifelong stigma (what law Professor Michelle Alexander has famously termed "the New Jim Crow") of a felony record. Criminal marking is a deadly barrier to employment, housing, education, voting rights and more for the nation's giant and very disproportionately Black army of "ex-offenders." It makes re-integration next to impossible for many, feeding a vicious circle of poverty, black market crime, joblessness, family disintegration, jailing, and recidivism.

Most whites really couldn't care less. At the university Rec Center the other night, dozens of white young adults were spread across a weight machine floor beneath a large telescreen broadcasting extraordinary live (CNN) images of mostly (though not exclusively) Black protesters engaged in exhilarating back-and-forth with Darth Vader-like cops decked out in the latest fashionable police state riot gear. Tear gas was in play. The only other person so much as glancing up at the amazing scenes from the floor was a random Black guy. Over by a long gleaming mirror, two young white women stared sideways at themselves in narcissistic

fascination while performing some strange arm and butt exercise. The revolution televised and ignored. (For what it's worth, this little Aldous Huxlean scene occurred on a campus that went a little crazy for the "democratic socialist" Bernie Sanders, a U.S. Senator from the whitest part of white America – and a guy who never quite figured out how to talk to "the Blacks.")

### **Race Facts That Matter in Today's Protest Cities**

Let's look at some of basic facts from the metropolitan areas and cities where significant racial protests and even in some cases riots leading to significant police state deployments (including National Guard units in two cases) have occurred over the last three years. In the St. Louis area, where the Ferguson, Missouri police murder (by shooting) of the Black teenager Mike Brown (whose body was left to rot in the street for hours) led to major protests and rioting/looting in the summer of 2014, the Black-white residential dissimilarity index (hereafter "DI") is 72, seventh highest among large U.S. metropolitan areas. This means that 72 percent (nearly three-fourths) of Blacks residing in the region would have to move to another census tract in order to be evenly spread across the region – that is, to live in neighborhoods with the same Black-white racial composition as the whole metropolitan area. In St. Louis County, home to Ferguson, the percentage of Blacks living under the federal government's notoriously inadequate poverty level (more on that below) is 22, more than three times higher than the county's white poverty rate (6.5 percent).

In the New York metropolitan area, the DI is 78, second highest in the nation. In New York City, where a grand jury's exoneration of a police officer who murdered (by choking) the 44-year old Black man Eric Garner set off major protests (within and beyond NYC) in December of 2014. The official Black poverty rate (hereafter "OBPR") in NYC (Garner's home town), is 23 percent, eight points higher than the white poverty measure there.

In the Baltimore metropolitan area, the DI is 65. The OBPR in the city of Baltimore, where the sadistic police murder (by beating and "rough ride") of the 25-year old Black man Freddie Gray led to significant racial unrest in the spring of 2015, is 28 percent, nearly double the white poverty rate there.

The Chicago metropolitan area's DI is 76.4, third highest in the nation. In the city of Chicago, where the long delayed release of the savage police execution (sixteen shots from the gun of a deranged white officer while walking away from killer) of the Black teenager Laquan McDonald led to significant protests last November and December, the OBPR is 34 percent, more than double that of the white rate (14.9) there. More than a sixth (17.3) of the city's population lives in "deep poverty," at less than half the poverty level, nearly three times higher than the white deep poverty rate.

The DI for Baton Rouge (Louisiana) metropolitan area is 58. In the city of Baton Rouge, where the police murder of the 37-year old Black Alton Sterling (shot while pinned to the ground) sparked significant protests (and then a police mini-riot) last July, the OBPR is 31 percent, nearly double that of the white rate. A sixth of the city's Black residents live in deep poverty.

In the Milwaukee metropolitan area, the DI is a remarkable 81, highest in the nation. In the city of Milwaukee, where the police murder of the 23-year old Black man Sylvile Smith, sparked rioting last month, the OBPR is 40.4 (!), more than double the white rate. More than a sixth of the city's Black residents live in deep poverty.

In the Charlotte (North Carolina) metropolitan area, the DI is 54. In the city of Charlotte, the police murder of the 24-year old Black man Jonathan Ferrell (killed with a cold-blooded twelve shots) caused protests two years ago. So did the exoneration of his killer last year. The police murder of the 43-year old Black man Keith Lamont Scott has produced five days of protest and at least one night of rioting as of this writing. The OBPR in Charlotte is 25 percent, more than double the white rate.

### **“All Lives Matter!”**

The federal poverty rate, it should be noted, is a Dickensian joke. As serious livable wage and income research has long shown, families on average need an income of about twice the measure's level to cover basic expenses. By that standard, the National Center for Children in Poverty notes, fully *44 percent of U.S. children live in low-income families*. This includes a remarkable 65 percent of the nation's Black children (6.3 million kids), 62 percent of its Native American children (0.3 million kids), 62 percent of its Latino/a children (10.9 million kids), and 31 percent of its white children (11.4 million kids).

Can't you just hear an aggrieved white talk radio American saying, “hey look, where's the white privilege? The biggest number of poor kids are white. White lives matter too! All lives matter!! ‘Black lives matter’ is a racist slogan!!!” Well, yes of course all lives matter, including whites, but who says they don't. And there's these things called rates, percentages, and proportions, and the point that is that Blacks and other non-whites are disproportionately poor and jobless and sick and incarcerated and homeless and felony-marked (and so on) because of persistent racial bias across all leading U.S institutions and because of the related living and unresolved, compound-interest legacy and crimes of Black chattel slavery, southern Jim Crow, and northern ghettoization. There's more white poor kids primarily because the nation is still majority white.

Nobody says that white and other lives “don't matter” or “matter less” when they respond to the highly disproportionate killing of Black Americans by police officers with a slogan meant to communicate the notion that Black people have an equal right to live, to not be shot down in the streets by the forces of order. When Black men wore placards saying “I am a Man” during the days of the Civil Rights Movement they did not thereby significant that white men were not men. When you raise your daughter to understand that she and other girls are entitled to full human rights along with boys you do not thereby teach her that male lives don't matter.

All that said, yes that's a hell of a lot of poor white kids. Capitalism has a long history of making untold millions of white folks poor too, something the racist buffoon Robert Pittinger might want to reflect the next time he wants to proclaim that “white people” are “successful” (I will pass for now on the question of what really constitutes “success” in life) and Black protesters are not.

### **American Apartheid: Why Place Matters**

The extreme residential (and related educational) segregation that is rife across the nation has little to do with Black choices. It is a product of class and racial bias in the functioning of real estate and home lending markets and the reluctance of many Caucasians to live in racially mixed communities. It is also highly relevant to the nation's steep racial inequalities. It's not about the need for interracial chit-chat and love affairs over backyard fences and at local Dairy Queens and city parks (though there's nothing wrong with and plenty good about such neighborhood diversity, of course). The bigger matter is that place of dwelling is strongly connected to social and economic status and opportunity. As sociologists Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton noted in their important 1998 book *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*, "housing markets...distribute much more than a place to live; they also distribute any good or resource that is correlated with where one lives. Housing markets don't just distribute dwellings, they also distribute education, employment, safety, insurance rates, services, and wealth in the form of home equity; they also determine the level of exposure to crime and drugs, and the peer groups that one's children experience." By concentrating poor and working class Black people in a certain restricted number of *geographical places*, U.S. *de facto* race apartheid reinforces Blacks' persistently disproportionate presence in the lowest *socioeconomic places*. That basic underlying concentration of poverty and its many ills (including crime, addiction, and family fragility) is deeply reinforced by the nation's four-decade campaign of "racially disparate" (racist) mass imprisonment and felony branding, conducted under the cover of a "war on drugs."

### **Tinder and Spark**

This apartheid and the inequality it both reflects and furthers is the underlying tinder the fuels the fires of rage across Black America today. The sparks are provided by the racist and murderous police state. And that is very much like the riots of the 1960s, actually, which were fueled (as King noted) also in no small part by the pain of raised and then disappointed expectations for significant improvements in racial justice and equality after the rise and early triumphs of the King-led Civil Rights Movement in the late 1950s and early to mid-Sixties. Then, as now, the spark was typically a violent provocation by the police: a violent raid, a killing, or a beating (this is clear from the highly detailed Kerner Commission analyses of the riots of 1965-67).

One can't help but wonder if some of the legitimate Black rage that has exploded in the last three years reflects a somewhat analogous dynamic. As Obama's vacuously repressive neoliberal and "post-racial" presidency nears its end (perhaps Obama should explain to the protestors in Charlotte *how the arch-corporatist Trans Pacific Partnership is going to make everything alright*), it has sunk in with millions of Black Americans that the symbolic election of a technically First Black President (something made possible by the Civil Rights Movement of King's day) is nothing compared to the deep structurally and institutionally entrenched racism of the American System.

### **"When We Can't Control Our Own Blacks"**

The still separate and unequal regime of white supremacy is backed by the savage racist indifference and hatred of millions of Caucasians, including the white nationalist swarm behind

Donald Trump, who deeply insulted Black American by responding to the Charlotte uprising by absurdly calling for a “national stop and frisk law.”

“How,” the white nationalist Trump asks, “are we supposed to be the world’s leader when we can’t control our own cities?” He might just as well have said “*when we can’t control our own Blacks.*” The promise of such rhetoric is clear: “to restore order without addressing the root causes of unrest” (in the word of William Barber III). How about white-supremacist martial law, Herr Trump? That’s what a “national stop and frisk” measure would amount to.

Hillary Clinton is trying to sound more tolerant since she (unlike Herr Trump) actually has Black voters to lose but make no mistake: a Clinton restoration regime *will not hesitate to take repressive measure to bring militant Black protesters “to heel.”*

### **What the Cops Police vs. How They Police: Keeping Blacks in Their Place**

Throughout its coverage of the recurrent rolling drama sparked by the relentless string of police killings of Black people (young Black men especially), the dominant U.S. corporate media has framed the basic racial issue at stake as *how* police carry out their tasks: *how they police*. It’s no minor matter: how cops do their jobs is a serious matter in an age of ever more militarized, high-tech policing. How those jobs are performed in and around Black communities is a particularly grave question during a time when a Black American (usually a young man) is killed by a (usually white) police officer, security guard or self-appointed vigilante on average once every 28 hours.

Still, just as important but missing from the national media coverage and commentary is the fundamental question of *what* government authorities *police* in the US. And *what the U.S. police police* are the overlapping and interrelated evils of racial apartheid and racial inequality both reflected and reinforced by “the New Jim Crow.” It’s about keeping blacks in their place, in more ways than one.

### **Imagine**

None of this has changed to any significant degree because a small number of Black American *faces* have moved into highly visible *high places* – and certainly not because a neoliberal Black man sits in the office besides a head bust of Dr. King, whose legacy Barack Obama regularly insults in service to each of Dr. King’s “triple evils that are interrelated” – (and to other evils as well). The *roots are in the system*. And the underlying conditions would not be any more acceptable if the cops were less murderous and more “sensitive.” They certainly will not be undone by Democrats’ favorite solution, so-called “community policing,” which provides fake-liberal cover for gentrification and enlists middle class homeowners and upper end renters in the enhanced surveillance and racial/socioeconomic cleansing of high property value neighborhoods.

Another issue beside how they police is the question of how and why American government at all levels pours so much taxpayer money into racially biased surveillance, arrest, incarceration, and ever more militarized forms of police state repression instead of in the meeting of basic human needs in a society plagued by endemic deep inequality and poverty. It’s long past time to

trade in SWAT teams, riot squads, and sound cannons – not to mention F-35s (Bernie Sanders’ favorite military-Keynesian “job creator”) and other parts of the vast U.S. military empire – for (among other things) free lunch and green jobs programs, for free health clinics, for a guaranteed national income, for single-payer health insurance (the real national health insurance reform cause that Obama coldly betrayed at the onset of his wealth- and power-serving presidency), support for true neighborhood revitalization, including community gardens and genuine public and popular education in the nation’s many truly disadvantaged ghettos, barrios, and reservations. By introducing real and environmentally sustainable social justice and equality (as advanced by the officially marginalized Green Party), the nation and its various jurisdictions wouldn’t really “have” to police folks at all. Imagine.