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USA and racism

We Can't Breathe: Rebellion against Racist Police Violence

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The uprisings and demonstrations in Minneapolis and other cities including in front of the White House that followed the brutal May 25th killing of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man by white Minneapolis police officers and the hesitation of local and federal prosecutors to immediately arrest the cops who had been videoed in the act comes on the heels of several other recent and widely reported cases of racist violence. By May 30, demonstrations had spread to scores of cities attended by multiracial protestors many of whom were young, masked and seemingly trying to maintain social distancing as they moved through the streets. Some seemed to have been mobilized by local or national organizations, while others were moved to mobilize by the video images of the killing and protests elsewhere. Floyd's murder is the latest in a string of cop killings of Black men dating back to at least the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 and even further back to the beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police in 1991, one of the first such police beatings captured on film.

As the grim statistics of sickness and death have emerged over the last few weeks and months from the Covid-19 pandemic, it has become clear that people of color have been the principal victims of the health crisis. George Floyd's murder reminds us that police brutality has not been quarantined during the pandemic. "Jogging While Black "and "Birding While Black"

Back in February, Ahmaud Arbery a young Black man was jogging near his home near Brunswick, Georgia when three white vigilantes, including an ex-cop accosted him while, they claim, attempting to make a "citizen's arrest." One shot him three times with a shotgun while another stood by with a drawn handgun. It wasn't until video coverage of the incident taken by a third white civilian participant that the Georgia Bureau of Investigation finally stepped in and arrested first two and then the third vigilante. The local good old boy network that allowed the vigilantes to remain uncharged for weeks recalls the murder of civil rights activists Cheney, Goodman, and Schwerner by local vigilantes and police officers in Mississippi during Freedom Summer in 1964.

Only a few days before George Floyd was killed, a video surfaced showing a white woman in New York's central park responding to a request by a black bird watcher to leash her dog in accordance with park regulations by threatening to call the police and tell them that her life was "being threatened by an African American man." The woman and her would-be Black victim shared more than the coincidence of a common last name: both understood whose word would be accepted by police, prosecutors and the mainstream press in the event that she made such a charge. In a chilling irony, the incident took place in the same park that five Black men the "Central Park Five", were falsely accused, convicted, and jailed of raping and beating a white female invest banker in 1989. The shameless exploitation of this ugly fact of race and gender in US society by a privileged white person is an outrage in itself that could only have added to the timber box of outrage that erupted in Minneapolis. About the same time, Breonna Taylor, a Black health worker was shot to death in her bed in Louisville, Kentucky by cops executing a warrant at the wrong address. The murder of Arbery, Floyd and the recent Central Park cases might never have been brought to wide public attention had they not been video recorded.

George Floyd's recorded pleas of "I can't breathe" are painfully reminiscent of the police murder of Eric Garner by New York city police in 2014. Vigilante lynching with local cop participation, the readiness of whites to use their privilege to call the police against Blacks for the slightest imagined offense including their very presence, and the umpteenth cop killing of an unarmed Black person are examples of only some of the treatment that Black people have come to expect in the US.

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The political climate that encourages this is stoked by a president who openly flirts with the most racist and reactionary forces in the country with the tacit complicity of one of the parties that rule us and the hollow dissent and ineffectuality of the other.

The Fire This Time

Every few years spates of violence against African Americans reach the point that outpourings of grief and anger are expressed in uprisings accompanied by burnings of cities and looting of stores. The Watts section of Los Angeles saw a rebellion after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968, as did Los Angeles following the acquittal of the cops who beat Rodney King in 1991.

The burning of a Minneapolis police precinct and the temporary abandonment of the surrounding streets to the protestors has considerable symbolic importance. Police headquarters in communities of color are constant reminders that the police are an occupying force rather than a source of public safety. Protestors danced in the shadow of the flames consuming Minneapolis police station #3, a physical symbol of their oppression. For a few hours the streets belonged to the people who lived there.

We can expect the usual chorus of pious head shaking and finger wagging from liberal and conservative mouthpieces lamenting how the damage caused by the uprising will only hurt the Black community itself. This too is a cover up. Urban uprisings are the result, not the cause of the dire conditions of life faced by Blacks and other people of color in racially segregated US cities. Decades of redlining, capital flight, residential segregation, and other features of racial capitalism have long rendered many Black neighborhoods jobless centers of despair, violence, and official neglect, while white downtown and residential areas have flourished thanks to private capital infusion and public funding and wealthier white areas enjoyed well-funded schools and neighborhood safety.

While the embers of precinct #3 smolder so does the anger of a community that simply can no longer breathe. The rebellions are a cry for the oxygen of social and racial justice. Just as the sources of exploitation, oppression and state and vigilante violence experienced by African Americans over the last four hundred years run deep and wide, the solutions too are vast. They begin with holding the state accountable for the violence committed by police and prosecuting vigilantes emboldened by the politicians who rule us. Addressing the broad issues of Black oppression however, will require deep structural changes such as the dismantling of the racist criminal justice and prison systems and a redistribution of wealth that could involve various forms of reparations for the crimes of slavery that have been discussed in progressive circles. In 1963, Black novelist James Baldwin titled his reflections on racial oppression *The Fire Next Time*. The fire has come and only a reordering of US society will quell the flames of protest that it has produced.

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