

Blind Obedience and Indiscriminate Violence: The Tragic Murder of Mr. George Floyd

What is so chilling for black people is the obvious question that such flagrant police misconduct and violence provokes: if police will murder a cooperative black man accused of a non-violent crime, “passing a counterfeit bill,” in the cold light of day, what have they been doing in the dark, when no one is watching?

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Two minutes and forty-three seconds. That is the duration that Derek Chauvin continued to kneel – forcing his body weight onto the neck of Mr. George Floyd - after he was already non-responsive. Protests have sprung up across the USA, in Canada, and around the world and this mass mobilization is a sign of the agonizing pain that many feel at the circumstance of Floyd’s brutal murder, captured by surveillance cameras, multiple by-stander videos (and no doubt unreleased police body-camera footage) in broad day light. Clearly, Chauvin’s conduct, demeanor (smug facial expression and hand in pocket), demonstrated his utter lack of regard for Floyd’s life and his belief that he was operating with impunity, unfearful of the multiple by-standers armed with cell phones and even safe from the disapproval - much less physical intervention - of any of the other three police officers at the scene. Indeed, new by-stander video now reveals that two other officers also knelt on Floyd’s body during the incident, while one stood by watching everything unfold. That these three have yet to be charged is another demonstration of the epic failure of judicial systems to hold police accountable for their violent and often lethal misconduct.

Western police forces have operated for decades (if not centuries) with an utter disregard for the lives of black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities which they have only recently professed to serve and protect. What is so chilling for black people is the obvious question that such flagrant police misconduct and violence provokes: if police will murder a cooperative black man accused of a non-violent crime, “passing a counterfeit bill,” in the cold light of day, what have they been doing in the dark, when no one is watching? Black people know the answer to this question. It is in our bones and the bones of our ancestors who suffered under the yoke of slavery.

What has struck me is how much the misconduct of these Minneapolis Police officers directly approximates the ubiquitous white violence of Transatlantic Slavery. There is a poignant scene in Steve McQueen’s Oscar-winning film 12 Years a Slave (2013) in which the vicious white slave owner and rabid alcoholic, Master Epps (played by Michael Fassbender) beckons Solomon Northup (played by Chiwetel Ejiofor) with whom he is displeased due to his conversation with Patsey (played by Lupita Nyong’o) who he has been systematically raping under the nose of his upper class white wife, Mistress Epps (played by Sarah Paulson). Although stinking drunk, enraged with jealousy, and armed with a knife, Master Epps expects Northup to

comply with his command to “come here now”. When Northrup defies him, trying to keep at a safe distance while desperately explaining the circumstance in which he was accompanying Patsey, Epps violently pursues him, knife in hand, chasing him around the yard before falling on his face after attempting to leap over a fence out of a pig pen. Exhausted and clearly drunk, Epps then commands Northrup to “help your master to his feet”. Northrup’s apparent reticence stems from his instinct to protect himself from the man who clearly intends to wound or even murder him.

This scene is not fiction. It is a cinematic representation of what we know to have happened day in and day out across the Americas to countless enslaved people at the hands of their white slave owners and their surrogates, like overseers. When Floyd, already handcuffed was led peacefully by the Minneapolis Police officers from his seated position to the side of their police cruiser where he was forced to lay prone, they operated with this same expectation of his complete obedience regardless of the logic of their demands or the nature of their actions. (I should point out again that the crime for which Floyd stood accused was passing a twenty dollar counterfeit bill – by no means a violent one.) Floyd, as any black man in America (Canada, the UK, France, I could go on...) clearly understood this in a profound way.

What is evident from the by-stander video is that Floyd did not struggle when the nineteen-year police veteran, Derek Chauvin, and his two colleagues, knelt on his body for almost nine minutes with enough force to suffocate him. To the contrary, Floyd, dignified even in the face of such excruciating suffering, never forgot the “basic training” to which most black people are taught to submit (literally for our lives), calling Chauvin “sir” as he gasped to speak several times: “I can’t breathe. Please let me stand.” To state the obvious, most human beings in such a situation would have struggled vigorously against the force that was pinning them to the ground, literally crushing the life out of them. Irrefutably, it is the natural instinct of people to resist any such brutal actions which threaten their lives in such an immediate way. But does anyone doubt that Floyd’s life would have been stolen even more quickly had he physically tried to remove the three officers from his body? What we are dealing with then is not just the problem of systemic and widespread police brutality against black people, but an expectation that black people simply submit and not resist their indiscriminate violence, even when the police are quite literally in the act of murdering us!

This demand for blind obedience and the violence that often follows, speaks to a profound belief in black insentience and brutishness that goes back to slavery. Clearly, there are too many police officers in America and elsewhere with an utter disdain for black life and even one such person is too many. We are anguished by the never ending cycle of black death at the hands of white police and civilians alike. In recent weeks, we have been collectively grieving for Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and Regis Korchinski-Paquet and we are still haunted by the killings of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Abdirahman Abdi, Eric Garner, and Philando Castile, also at the hands of Minnesota police. This has to stop. We can’t breathe!