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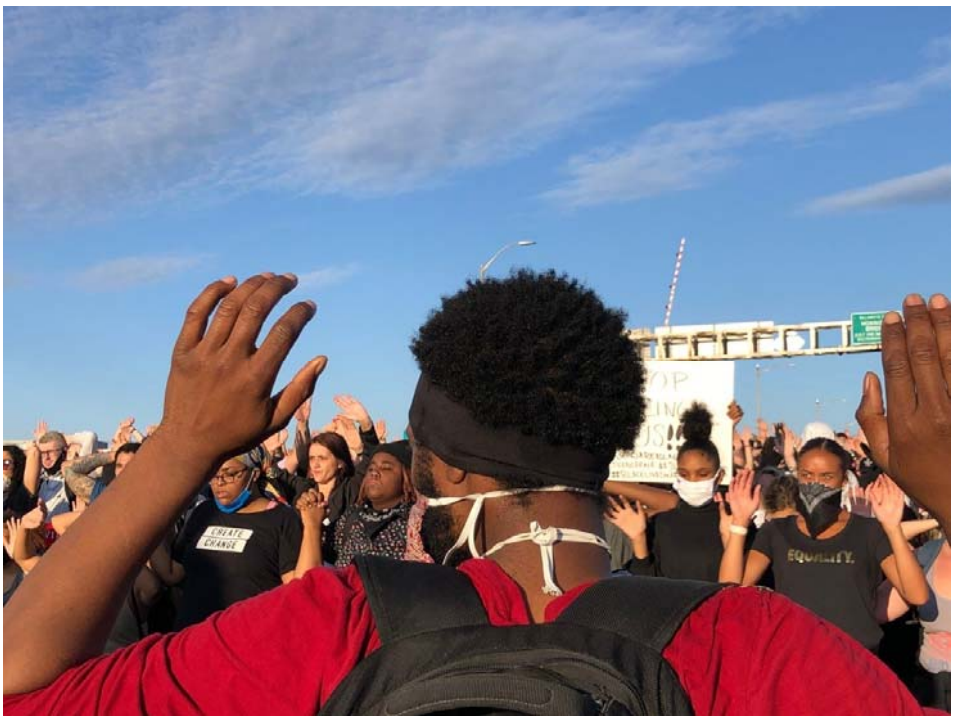
Death of a Liberal and Black Lives Matter



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

I am writing in the midst of strange and surreal times. From late 2020, and if any period of time has been in danger of confirming Lenin's old maxim, 'There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen' – it is surely this one. At around Christmas last year a new strain of virus broke out, it seems, somewhere in Wuhan Province in China. As the New Year drew into focus, we began to hear rumblings – this was more serious than a run-of-the-mill flu, and furthermore, there wasn't a known cure. Even at this point people like myself, who live in the UK, and other areas of Western Europe almost half-a-world away still felt – without consciously framing it – rather insulated from the whole

phenomenon. This would be a passing phase; like the SARS outbreak almost two decades before, it would be something which lingered on the periphery of our consciousness and our lives before disappearing without a trace.

Of course, that is not what happened. Instead the virus spread like a medieval plague, wreaking havoc across the world, forcing nations to close their borders, economies to descale and whole populations to go into lockdown. In Italy, the death count grew so rapidly that the military was brought in to store the corpses in churches and warehouses. In Ecuador, the bodies of the victims grew so numerous that many were just abandoned on the side of dusty roads like so much rubbish. The images broadcast from the global media were at the same time heart-rending and apocalyptic. The designation 'Covid-19' which, only a few months ago, meant very little to very many, is now on the tip of everyone's lips. It's hard, clinical syllables speak of the cold and relentless march of infinitesimally small particles of virus and our vulnerability as a species to them – even in an epoch where we have split the atom and space travel has morphed from science fiction into accomplished fact.

But the virus laid bare more than just the fallibilities which inhere in our biology. It also laid bare the fallibilities in our forms of social organisation. While the rich were able to socially isolate, to retreat to lonely country mansions or second homes in sea-side villages, the poor, as ever, had no way out. Locked into tenement housing, often many people to a floor, even to a room – pressed into tight urban spaces with squat accommodation, and no feasible form of 'socially distancing' – the illness cut a swathe through their numbers, in the most painful and ruthless of ways. Men and women who couldn't distance themselves, who couldn't work from home but couldn't afford to take a break from their jobs in the wider world either, often brought death back with them, carrying it into their homes on their clothes, their hands, their breaths – an invisible time bomb which would blow families apart and finish off loved ones. Lives lost – and to the sickening pain of grief was added the sting of guilt, and of utter, utter helplessness which is so often the lot of poverty.

In a moving passage, apropos of the death of his own father, the great essayist and activist James Baldwin reflected on the act of having a funeral, what need such an event fulfils: 'The real man, whoever he had been, had suffered and now he was dead; this was all that was sure and all that mattered now. Every man in the chapel hoped that when his hour came he, too, would be eulogized, which is to say forgiven, and that all of his lapses, greeds, errors and strayings from the truth would be invested with coherence and looked upon with charity. This was perhaps the last thing human beings could give each other'. Perhaps too, this was the last great cruelty that the Corona virus would inflict, that the loss of so many could no longer be marked by the type of funeral rites which had pervaded generations – rather, bodies left to pristine isolation, gradually mouldering in the confines of some darkened room.

Governments trotted out the same familiar lies that they do in times of war. We are all in it together, we were told. Where I live the TV channels became jammed up with the images of

sleek, feted politicians making speeches in which – as though in the grip of some compulsive disorder – every other sentence automatically made reference to the 'Great British Public' or the 'Great British NHS' – the same public health service those politicians had spent over a decade defunding and privatising. We were greeted by the ghoulish spectacle of those politicians shuffling out of their Downing Street accommodations, the flash of the cameras recording the lifeless grins they had affixed to their faces like plague masks, while they clapped robotically for the NHS workers – the same workers whose pay rise they had voted down a couple of years before, baying gleefully as they did.

The death of NHS frontline staff spiked, not simply because they were exposed to more concentrated doses of the virus – but because the same government had, from the outset, failed to provide the money required for medical-grade masks and equipment which would have saved many of the lives medical staff were so bravely risking. While Boris Johnson clapped, Rome burned, and yet still elite politicians appeared like clockwork as if on cue; to tell us just how much they appreciated the sacrifices of the poorest – of those who had to continue to keep society ticking over, the shop workers, the delivery men and women, the cleaners, medical staff and carers. With a 'spirit of unity and determination' our Prime Minister urged – his rich, patrician tones faltering with the sheer emotion of his patriotism – 'the United Kingdom will emerge stronger than ever before'. What meagre weight poverty and death carry before the vision of the eternal nation and the immortal colours of a flashing flag – as those same words are echoed down the generations, sinister and beguiling: *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*.

To the maelstrom of the virus as it swept across the globe, there was added one other event. It happened an ocean away in a non-descript Minneapolis suburb. It was relatively ordinary in terms of its everyday horror. However it was captured on camera. After a report of a forged bill, police were called and an officer would, without provocation, draw his gun on one George Floyd – a middle-aged black man who was then arrested and 'restrained' on the floor. The police officer kneels on Mr Floyd's neck for almost nine minutes, while the pinned man fights to breathe, croaking out the fear for his life, before finally – and in abject terror – he begins to beg for his mother. Eventually he becomes non-responsive. The cop does not remove his knee. The pinned man's pulse is checked. Still the cop does not relent. George Floyd is declared dead at the hospital one hour later.

The whole time the cop who is doing this appears almost nonchalant, his eyebrow cocked – at one point he puts his hand into his pocket. He has the swagger of vicious arrogance, the complacency of a stupid, unfeeling bully whose miserable and sadistic life is shielded by petty officialdom and the generic authority of a uniform. Officer Derek Chauvin looks like someone who has learnt that he can use his fists with impunity; yes, that most of all – *he looks like someone who knows he can get away with it.* And to be frank, such an assumption on his part would be far from unsound. After all, in any other time, Mr Floyd's murder might

have passed relatively unnoticed, except from on the part of the loved ones and the community of the victim himself. A campaign group might have picked it up, added it to the roster of such occurrences. Perhaps a local reporter might have worked on the story, carrying it in a few columns before it eventually disappeared into the spume of generalised misery which enshrouds such events. After all, these things happen so frequently that they form a backdrop to life, especially to the lives of black Americans.

And yet. That is not what happened. This incident – this cavalier application of unbridled power by the brutal mechanics of the state machine – acted as a flashpoint, illuminating the chasm of oppression, racism and police violence which lay behind it; within hours, the video footage had gone viral, and the following day the first protests took place in Minneapolis where protestors clashed with police in the streets. The natural reaction of the authorities was to stamp down hard but this was the equivalent of pouring petrol on a fire and soon several police stations were themselves in flames. Going into June, five days after Mr Floyd's death, protests had erupted in every state, and though 24 000 troops from the national guard were activated and curfews declared, along with law enforcement personnel from dozens of agencies – this too proved a futile endeavour; trying to subvert the building power and violence of this great and interminable movement of people from below stirred to its very depths – was like attempting to halt a tidal wave by way of stepping out in front of it and raising one defiant hand.

Even the thick fug of stupidity which insulates the mind of the current US president from the reality he presides over was penetrated by the potency and power of the social unrest; in the early stages of the protests he quipped – with the swaggering bravado of someone who has seen one too many John Wayne movies – 'when the looting starts, the shooting starts', but a couple of weeks later, as the American landscape had been engulfed in protest and riots his tone was notably more rueful and conciliatory, when he described the murder of Mr Floyd as a 'disgrace' and even went as far as to suggest that certain chokeholds the police currently employed should be made illegal.

The dissonance between Mr Trump's atavistic and monochrome politics and the sheer complexity and richness of the social change which was billowing closer and closer to the gates of the White House – was made apparent in terms of the rambling, confused nature of his speechifying. In one particularly incoherent and nonsensical delivery he merged the prosaic with the utterly bizarre, remarking on how employment rates had taken a turn for the better and how this, in turn, meant that the murdered George Floyd was now 'looking down and saying this is a great thing that's happening for our country'. But if, as the days became weeks, the most powerful man in the world could only experience these mass protests as incoherent and befuddling – then those who had the least power, those at the bottom, intuited their rationality and their necessity within moments. For them, the protests were no mere aberration, and they were not to be reduced to criminality or looting either.

Rather they had emerged from an ongoing struggle, an ongoing history, which had ebbed and flowed over generations; the various strategies of criminalisation which have been pursued against black people in the US were the expressions of this. From the chain gangs which were introduced in the aftermath of the abolition of slavery in order to secure a different form of uncompensated labour, to the 'war on drugs'[1] which allowed for the type of mass incarceration and state-sanctioned murder that helped defuse and destroy the political organisations, like the Black Panthers, which had emerged out of the Civil Rights movements. All the way to the present day where mass incarceration has become fully fused with private enterprise and extra-legal lobbying groups to create a financial racket in which thousands of innocent people are arrested and languish in jail simply because they can't afford bail money.

The criminalisation of black people, therefore, had been shaped as a clear strategy on the part of the state to target and cripple expressions of popular power, to coerce labour along explicitly racial and class lines, while facilitating the enrichment of an elite which – ever more parasitical – grew bloated and septic having gorged itself on such unremitting suffering. It is in this context that the horror of what had happened to George Floyd forms a link in a chain of systematic oppression and mass murder. And it was this which the Black Lives Matter campaign was able to bring to light with such pathos and such pain, articulating the experience of black people in America with a simple and deathly slogan – that 'I can't breathe' – the unbearably poignant words uttered by George Floyd just before his death; but words which had been croaked out by other black men in the moment of their murder including Eric Garner, including Elijah McClain, including Javier Ambler, including Manuel Ellis, and others. That 'I can't breathe' was no longer simply the words of an individual in his death agonies – they were the words of a whole people who had struggled and fought to break the chains of slavery, who had smashed the political and legal forms of apartheid through the most heroic acts of demonstration and revolt, and yet still they found themselves smothered by a miasma of racism and ignorance, still they found their lives to be disposable in the very place they had come to call home.

Those words resonated around the world. From 'the Black Trans Lives Matter' demonstrations which broke out in the heart of Brooklyn to the streets of Amsterdam where protestors chanted in their thousands, 'I can't breathe'. From the socialists in Sri Lanka who gathered in the capital's Liberty Plaza waving placards which sported the words 'Justice for Floyd', to the moving mural of George Floyd which was daubed onto the bullet-scarred wall of separation which segregates poverty-stricken Palestinians from Israel proper. In France too, Palestinian flags flew at a Black Lives Matter protest in the Place de la Republique, Paris. That there are affinities between two states which have both evolved a top-heavy police apparatus adept at brutalising on a racist basis the peoples they have displaced and impoverished goes without saying. Indeed Israel's police, military and intelligence services

have provided training for American law enforcement in terms of use of force and crowd control. But the global explosion of Black Lives Matter revealed something else; it revealed the intimate and powerful connection which exists between peoples – worlds away – the struggles from below which recognise collective forms of oppression and whose solidarity crosses racial and geographical lines. The very essence of internationalism.

Even in my little neck of the woods, the protests breached all expectations. Thousands of people across the UK gathered to protest for BLM. For a long time, the liberal media had carried a rather self-satisfied tone of British exceptionalism; racism was, of course, a problem in other places such as the US, but the rather down-to-earth British sense of fair play and even-handedness prevented such concerns ever reaching a critical mass in this country. No Jim Crow here folks, and there never was. Keep stiffening that all important upper-lip and remember we are in it together donchyaknow?

As always, such comforting and cosmetic balms really only worked to disguise the darker, more lupine shapes of the reality behind the facade. Black people in my country are almost twice as likely to die in police custody. Police in England and Wales are three times more likely to arrest a black person rather than their white counterpart, and in the period 2018-19 official figures demonstrate that physical force on the part of the police was five times more likely to be applied to black people. Black people were nine times more likely to be stopped and searched. And, perhaps most startling of all, a recent report drew attention to the fact that 'the proportion of black people in jail in the UK was almost seven times their share of the population, whereas in the US the proportion of black prisoners is four times greater than their population share.' In the same month George Floyd was murdered by police, a recording went viral of the UK police tasering a black man (Desmond Ziggy Mombeyarara) in front of his five year old son. The reason for his stoppage? He had allegedly broken the speed limit. A witness at the scene described the officers' behaviour as 'aggressive and threatening' and said they made no attempt 'to deescalate the situation.'

But if the mainstream media wasn't so keen to reveal the truth about the social realities of race and discrimination in the UK, there was a way in which these realities were revealed, if you like, at the level of the collective unconscious of the nation itself; there was a way in which the history of race and racial oppression was materialised at the level of town and city, as clear as day – and yet, from the hustle and bustle of our ordinary lives, the majority of us had never even stopped to take a proper look. I am, of course, talking about statues. In the UK alone there are scores – perhaps even hundreds – of statues in highly visible and public places which commemorate key figures of British imperialism such as Cecil Rhodes who believed the 'white race' was paramount and went on to prosecute this belief in and through his murderous colonial adventures in Africa against the indigenous peoples there. Or earlier figures like Sir Robert Clayton, who had managed to realise a tripartite level of charmingness in as much as he was simultaneously a banker, politician and slaver – someone who was on

the board of the Royal African Company which shipped more African slaves into the Americas than any other institution.

The statues were the point at which the underlying nature of a colonial past visibly extruded itself into the realities of a present which was still structured in accordance with deep racist overtones of political and systematic oppression. There was something of the inevitable, therefore, in the fact that the Black Lives Matter campaign in the UK burst into the consciousness of a whole generation when protesters in Bristol targeted the statue of Edward Colston, a Tory and 17th century slave trafficker, pulling him down from his pedestal – both literally and metaphorically – and casting him into the cold waters of Bristol harbour. The furore which greeted this event on the part of the mainstream media and large sections of the population more broadly was something which surprised even the current writer, even though his politics had grown notably more cynical in the months which had passed before.

The destruction of the statue was criticised from every angle; it was regarded as a deeply undemocratic manoeuvre on the part of the BLM campaign, for they hadn't removed it through conventional 'democratic' channels by petitioning the city council; it was also assaulted from the relativist point of view which suggests that any historical figure contains something of the politics of their time, and – despite Colston's more unsavoury elements which belonged to the epoch in which he lived – nevertheless he was a man of the people, a philanthropist who had contributed greatly to the growth and enrichment of Bristol as a city; last but not least it was decried as an attack on 'British history', because – whatever else – men like Colston were a real part of history, and crudely trying to erase them would lead to only amnesia and ignorance.

These arguments were, at best, ungainly. It was swiftly revealed that, in fact, for 'years, members of Bristol's black community, historians and campaigners had been lobbying for the statue to be removed', all to no avail, with the rather slippery conservative elements in the city council – through dissembling tactics and delay – even managing to veto a plaque which was to have been placed on the plinth of the statue and would have made some acknowledgement of the enslaved and murdered who had passed through Colston's bloody commercial hands. In other words, it was not that the BLM campaign had acted against the democratic process; if anything they had realised it in and through a mass mobilisation – over and against the ossified and conservative bureaucracy which had hitherto undermined and stifled it.

The second count – the notion that Colston was simply a man of his time – fares no better than the first. The anti-slavery movement of the Quakers had already begun to gather steam when that group (contemporaneous with Colston) denounced slavery in the Americas in the late 17th century, but there had been a tradition of anti-slavery rhetoric which had appeared in the late-medieval thought of religious scholars such as Bartolomé de las Casas in the 16th century, and – most importantly of all – the phenomenon of slave rebellions and revolts in the

Americas itself punctuates the history of the slave trade throughout; the first took place as early as 1526 in what is now South Carolina, whereby a group of Africans set fire to a slave owner's house and escaped into the forests – while nine years before Colston's death, a slave revolt broke out in New York city which saw at least nine slave owners executed and much of their property go up in flames. These things too were 'products' of the time.

And the notion that Colston could in some way be exonerated by taking into account the 'philanthropy' he exhibited as a leading city figure was satirised in its absurdity when people who were peddling this view were then asked if they were prepared to have a Jimmy Saville statue erected in their garden – not in celebration of his paedophilia, you understand – but in celebration of all the good work Saville did for charity.

The final claim is perhaps the most insidious. Those who say that the toppling of Edward Colston's statue in Bristol is an attack on history. The statue was a monument to a particular historical moment, that much is undeniable. A moment in which a small and wealthy elite were able to enshrine and glorify its own ability to truck in human flesh in and through the most despicable acts of violence and mass-murder. But the destruction of the statue at the hands of protestors represents a historical moment in its own right. The right of generations of the oppressed as they endeavour to carve out a very different type of world with a very different set of standards and expectations. In the words of the historian David Olusoga '[t]he toppling of Edward Colston's statue is not an attack on history. It is history'.

But perhaps it was not so much the content, but the fact that these arguments were even being made in the first place which was the most shocking thing of all. As Olusoga also notes, of some 84, 000 human beings that Colston helped traffic, 'around 19,000 died in the stagnant bellies of the company's slave ships during the infamous Middle Passage from the coast of Africa to the plantations of the new world. The bodies of the dead were cast into the water where they were devoured by the sharks that, over the centuries of the Atlantic slave trade, learned to seek out slave ships and follow the bloody paths of slave routes across the ocean'.

Somehow, in some strange and warped fashion, the people who were making the argument that the toppling of Colston's statue was in some way unjust, immoral or unprincipled were also people who had been shaped in just such a way by the society around them that the spectacle of seeing a lifeless mould of gradually eroding metal tipped into the sea actually provoked more feeling, more outrage, than the thought of the murder of 19,000 voiceless human beings consigned to cold, watery graves. That was the unspoken and terrible fact which all the sophistry and casuistry flowed around, and perhaps it was the fact which lay at the heart of so many ruined friendships and relationships which were broken in the aftermath of the BLM campaign, people of all different backgrounds who could no longer sustain connections with those who wished to rationalise the atrocities in the past, in order to demean those who were struggling for freedom and justice in the present.

The current writer lost a once dear friend on exactly this kind of basis. But the way in which relationships have been undermined, the way in which people's deepest and most latent political sensibilities have been forced to the surface by the protests as they wrack the world order has, more than anything else, made me think about ideology and what it means. Are all the people who dissemble and detract from the BLM campaign, employing slogans like 'all lives matter' in order to take the charge out of the protests – are they all individuals committed to the politics of white supremacy? Would they actually like to see the return of slavery or Jim Crow? One feels that – although there is indeed a core ingredient with exactly this type of explicitly 'white power' politicking – nevertheless the majority of those reacting so negatively are not necessarily of the most extreme elements on the political spectrum. Many of them are rather ordinary; their politics reflecting those of the 'centre ground' and the moderate wing of the right, and yet the phenomenon they feel so riled about, so instinctively uncomfortable in regard to, is simply the assertion – in and through mass protest – that black people and other oppressed minorities should be allowed to 'breathe' unhindered by murderous racial oppression. Why does this incite such instinctive discomfort even amongst so-called moderates?

In the first part of his autobiography, ***Moab is My Washpot*** – the British writer and raconteur Stephen Fry describes an early childhood memory in which he was visiting a friend's house one Sunday for tea. The day was going well but then the young Fry caught a glimpse of something which thoroughly unnerved him. He had noticed, while using his friend's lavatory, that his friend's parents had Domestos bleach in their toilet rather than the Harpic brand which Fry's parents used at home. The realisation that his friend's family had actually chosen to do this provoked in the small boy a genuine sense of disequilibrium, of discomfort: 'I remember thinking poorly of these people…[I] felt slightly repelled: didn't they realise they had got it all wrong?' This is, I think, an experience to which many of us can relate – a close friend of mind reminded me recently of how instinctively horrified he felt when we were around seven, and I was having dinner at this house and asked to put butter on my rice – something which was unknown in the context of his own family meals. For me, of course, the thought of eating rice without butter was itself unheard of. But why are children so disturbed by what appear to be arbitrary and inconsequential things?

In the case of the branding of goods one might surmise it could relate to social status. One brand is seen as in some way inferior to another, and yet it is about more than this, I think. When the young Stephen Fry sees that alternative brand of bleach in his friend's toilet he is profoundly unnerved. As children, the world appears to us first through the eyes of our parents. It is their moral, political and ethical conceptions which provide the elemental material by which we are able to eventually fashion our own. The young child inherits a world which is not only provided by their parents, materially speaking, but is also made intelligible by their parent's routines and point of view. Such intelligibility is often

manifested in the smallest and most unconscious of ways. The awareness that there is a right way to hold a knife and folk for, example. The sense that a certain time of day is the appropriate time at which to crawl under your covers and go to sleep. This myriad of almost microscopic details comes together to form a whole which – unified and harmonious – is underpinned by a routine and rationale which not only provides to the child a sense of place and purpose, but also a sense of security.

The sense that the world which is unfolded through the activity of your family life is the 'right' one, and even when you transgress, even when you are naughty, nevertheless you always have the opportunity to sync yourself with it again, to be a 'good' boy or girl. I think when Fry, as a young child, was confronted with the bottle of bleach in his friend's toilet – the fact that it was 'other' in some way presented a gateway into the possibility of a world which was run according to a very different set of prerogatives and rationales than the one he knew. That alternative brand of bleach, in undermining one tiny aspect of the reality the young child inhabits acted as a thread which might be pulled on, and in pulling that thread, all the logic and the cohesion which structures the semblance of the world the child has raised up in his mind is threatened with collapse. The moment in which the young boy's gaze fell on that bleach wasn't simply a moment of anodyne difference; rather it provided the earliest glimmering of what one might describe as an existential crisis, precisely because – even from an early age – we are compelled to form a 'rational' image of a unified reality in order to imbue our own actions with some form of intelligibility; in order to provide the premise to act in the first instance. And yet, our rationalised and conceptual image of the 'whole' is always in danger of being perforated by the changes we encounter in reality itself.

In the broadest sense of the world, it is this conception of a 'rational whole' which we form, often unconsciously, and which we describe as ideology. Following the end of the Second World War, there was a two-decade long global economic boom whereby many people in Western Europe, the US and other First World countries could indulge a particular ideological conception of the whole – even if they weren't themselves well-off. They could imagine that the world was structured according to an inherent rationality and fairness; if you worked hard, over the years you would progress modestly through the ranks of the same workplace; if you were sensible and thoughtful and diligent, you could build the basis for a flourishing family; if your children became ill, the state you'd contributed toward would take care of them, and, as you entered into the twilight of your own old-age, a social contract was in place which would make sure that your tax contributions and hard work would allow for a gentle and benevolent retirement.

The idea that the world worked this way was enforced because for a good number – and for a period of time – it actually did; but that same sense of stability was progressively undermined by the rise of neoliberalism and the unleashing of market forces in the most chaotic and destructive of fashions. Nevertheless a good proportion of people continued to cling to the

notion that the social world was essentially structured according to a coherent and just paradigm whereby those who lead a good civic life will eventually be rewarded for it, even if those who don't fall through the gaps. And integral to this is the notion that the state is an essentially benevolent entity, a guarantor of freedom from oppression in and through the forces of law and order – rather than something which structures and perpetuates its own forms of oppression on the population it is meant to safeguard.

People who cling to this view, do not do so because of politics in the narrow sense; they don't necessarily have a fully conscious and coherent political conception of reality; rather their feelings and sensibilities which pertain to the justness of the establishment and the natural order of things are the unconscious premise of their own ability to act in the world, to labour, to produce and reproduce their family life and so on. But what happens when, like the small child, they see that bottle of bleach in a neighbour's house? What happens when their harmonised conception of a social whole is existentially undermined and begins to unravel?

The word that comes to mind is 'tragedy'. I think about Arthur Miller's great American play, *Death of a Salesman*, written in the aftermath of the Wall Street crash. The protagonist is a tragic figure, precisely because he has, in his own mind, created a unified and harmonious world in which people like him – if they demonstrate the requisite amount of hard work, guile, and charm – will inevitably be propelled upwards into the higher echelons of wealth, respect and social standing. Willy Loman believes that the social reality works this way, that his own blood, sweat and tears will eventually be rewarded, and his tragedy lies in the gulf which opens up between his idealisation of the social order in which he is located and the remorseless and relentless economic forces which are unleashed upon his existence by that same social order, systematically undermining the vision of a brighter future he nurtures.

The crippling juxtaposition between Loman's idealized conception of the social whole and its reality is one he is incapable of reconciling, and thus he retreats first into sentimental fantasy, and then into the utter despair which eventually leads to the taking of his own life. And it is the Wall Street Crash which provides the invisible but almost omniscient backdrop to the play, because an economic crisis on such a gargantuan scale exacerbates and forces into the light those social and economic contradictions which are at work behind the scenes – behind the appearance of a harmonious and unblemished social whole. No doubts the Wall Street Crash created hundreds of thousands of Willy Lomans, people launched toward incomprehension and despair by the sheer force and gravity of an economic cataclysm which threatened to rip apart all the venerable and stabilizing illusions which they once held sacred.

And in some ways, the Coronavirus and the BLM campaign have achieved something similar. They have forced the social contradictions and forms of oppression which structure society from behind the scenes out into the open on a global level and in so doing have compelled many to confront their ideological conception of the social world as a unified whole, as an essentially a benevolent system which works in the best interests of the 'decent'

majority. Of course, if you are a member of an oppressed minority, if you are sundered in poverty, if you are an immigrant who is living on a hand-to-mouth basis, if you are a worker in the precarious economy on a zero hours contract, if you are a young black man being stopped and searched for the umpteenth time – then your ability to conceive the social order as a unified and safe guarantor of its citizens interests is already compromised. But for those people who haven't actually had those experiences or similar, the realities of class and race exploitation often remain invisible, and when they are unearthed by great social movements like the Black Lives Matter campaign, that sudden and violent visibility can prove to be incredibly painful and disorientating to lives which have been furnished and bolstered by a broader belief in the underlying rationality of the status quo.

This is particularly the case with Black Lives Matter. The very essence of that campaign strikes out at the heart of Liberal America. In 1964 the Civil Rights Act was signed which prohibited the segregation of black people in public spaces and it was followed by the Voting Rights Act of 1965 which prohibited any racial discrimination in voting. But as significant as these steps were, it would be difficult to argue that they came close to achieving what they had set out to do, that is – to put an end to the practise of wide-spread and systematic racial discrimination in the US. In 2013, for instance, it was estimated that more 'African-American men [were] under state and federal criminal justice supervision' than there were African American men enslaved in 1850'. The way in which the apparatus of the state is still being mobilized disproportionately and intensively against black people in the USA is supplemented by broader economic trends in which black men experienced the largest pay gap in the US of any ethnic minority relative to their white counterparts: 'On average, black men earned 87 cents for every dollar a white man earned' – while at the same time '[b]lack women's share of the high-wage workforce—jobs that pay more than $48 per hour, or about $100,000 annually—is less than half their representation in the overall workforce.' These figures are themselves compounded by the fact that black Americans endure higher unemployment rates, not least because they have less access to jobs than whites and the jobs they do have access to tend to offer less benefits and markedly less job security.

The fact that the attainment of 'legal equality' – the reforms which were passed through the bastions of political power, through the state congress and were, therefore, rubber-stamped by the seal of the elite – perhaps goes someway to explaining their limitations, and the character of the Black Lives Matter protests themselves. In a time when the two major parties have pursued the same neoliberal economics, have in many cases supported and prosecuted the same imperial wars; the idea that the structural and economic disparities which help provide the basis for a social and cultural world with such a pronounced racist inflection – can simply be 'reformed' out of existence by this same elite political apparatus is increasingly untenable. Especially for those who lived through the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement and in many ways saw their conditions of life actually worsened.

The feeling that the veneer of rights and political equality to which a Barack Obama alludes so eloquently – have now become the cover under which can be continued the repression and decimation of a whole social group is something which has clearly shaped the Black Lives Matter movement – and it is worth noting though this movement has reached its apex in the time of Trump it was born to the time of the Obama presidency itself. The BLM movement was born to an epoch in which there was a palpable sense of just how much the mechanisms of democracy had been bought and paid for by Wall Street and the large corporations, how the act of casting your vote increasingly offered only the illusion of choice while the main political parties more and more came to reflect the interests of a glittering elite whose massive campaign donations corrupted the terrain in which laws came to be shaped.

The BLM protests are often sporadic and unorganised, chaotic and overwhelming, joyful and angry. Bound up with the anguish and rage about the depth of racism and exploitation is, as well, the sense that forms of parliamentarianism across the world are incapable of dealing with it. That they are more often part of the problem than the solution. The scope and scale of the BLM protests show how forms of political organisation from below can be shaped and wielded, not only on a society-wide basis, but on a global scale, and by mobilising millions of people onto the political stage, they begin to strike out against the notion that the only form of legitimate change can come through vast fortified buildings in which the wealthy and socially advantaged gather in small concentrated cliques to declaim on how the destinies of billions are to be shaped.

For those who have been acculturated in conditions of relative smoothness and harmony, who have imbibed the sense that the social whole is essentially a well-ordered and rational entity in which the vast number of people manifest their democratic will in and through the forms of a parliamentary democracy, and that politicians themselves ultimately work to serve this end – the liberal leader in the mould of a Barack Obama or an Ed Miliband becomes a vital, I would say an existential, proposition.

For when reality, and its myriad forms of systematic injustice, presses against their political consciousness; when those in power reveal the sheer rapacious sharpness of their teeth – such people always have a political alternative to postulate. Ah yes, the Trumps and Johnsons of this world are not good, but with a bit of luck we can get an Obama in again, we can restore harmony to an essentially benign political process. Or to say the same thing, yes certain politicians might mismanage certain issues, but if we are able to elect those with a liberal bent to their politics, those with a progressive concern for human rights, those who recognise the importance of charities and NGOs – then the worst excesses of capitalism itself might be softened out of existence.

And that is why liberals are discomforted by BLM in inverse proportion to the degree of love they bestow on a figure like Obama – despite the fact that the latter has spearheaded the bombing of civilian populations across the world. Despite the fact that for every hour in his

last year in office, liberal humanitarian Barack Obama dropped on average of nearly three bombs on other countries. Despite the fact that he expanded by 130 percent the number of military operators who were active internationally during the Bush administration. Despite the fact that he launched attacks or military raids in country after country: Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan. And despite the fact that, under his watch, the use of drone technology became endemic. But liberals either ignore these facts altogether – or respond to them with derision by saying something to the effect of all leaders have done 'bad things' but one can't afford to be too much of an idealist.

Behind the hollow timbre of such wretched rationalisations – the easy and blithe dismissal of lives extinguished in lands faraway – there is, as always, that deeper feeling lurking. Fear. For liberals the Obamas of this world offer a palliative; they offer the unending possibility that – some way down the line a more benevolent capitalism can be realised, that despite the underlying structures of class and economic exploitation, the gulf between poverty and wealth, the never-ending wars and economic crises – nevertheless if there are just a few 'reasonable' 'human' and 'enlightened' voices at the helm (people who, coincidentally, resemble the politics and social position of themselves), then the system can be tamed and reformed, and if that has yet to happen – then it is only a matter of time. Such a possibility is just round the corner, always around the corner.

But if the liberal is to lose faith in the Obama-type figure, then that can precipitate a deeper spiritual crisis: one loses touch with the possibility that the system can simply be adjusted and recalibrated from the top. The possibility that it might well be irredeemable. And then one is forced to look at that same system in its entirety – to ask the fundamental question: In the interests of what group of people does the 'liberal' or 'conservative' politician ultimately act? From what economic group are the 'representatives' of 'democracy' nearly always drawn from? And when those kind of questions are asked, one begins to question the entire system itself. The image of the unified whole begins to crack and break down. And there is nothing more painful to the liberal consciousness than this.

And, in a certain way, the BLM protests raise the same issue. If the state and the organs of parliamentary democracy are somehow tied to more profound and structural forms of exploitation, if they can't themselves provide an effective route to combatting fundamental types of oppression –then perhaps the mass protests erupting from below are the only things which can. Or to say the same, these are not just the social convulsions expressed by rioting and looting and the deep and spontaneous rage felt therein; rather they provide the practical recognition that the system itself is grounded in endemic forms of exploitation and in the same moment they place on the table the possibility of an alternative form of political organisation. A different type of social world.

And so, while the BLM critic might say that he or she is against the protests because they are denying history, or because they are just about senseless looting or any one of the score of

other reasons which have been carried by the mainstream media in order to stigmatize them – these kinds of criticisms are rarely the underlying issue. What is really going on is that those people are very much like that little boy who sees the bleach in their neighbour's toilet and it provokes that existential feeling of discomfort and fear. Because the protests are that thread, which if pulled upon, will unravel a unified vision of the world, providing a glimpse into a very different form of social order in which the political destines of the majority can be determined by that majority itself. And despite the fervent talk of equality and rights and progressivism and all of that shiny rhetoric about the need to eradicate poverty, there is nothing more terrifying to the liberal soul than this latter. The thought that the ordinary grunts might have some real and powerful input into shaping the political consensus is often more than it can bear. And it is something which, beneath the veneer of civility and progressivism, drives it into a frenzy.

Recently, the new leader of the Labour Party, Sir Kier Starmer, having been confronted by the BLM protests, describing them in witheringly dismissive terms as just a 'moment' and decried their main political demand – the defunding of police – as a simple 'nonsense'. This was interesting in as much as it was the moment when the mask slipped; many liberals had felt compelled to make concessions to BLM at that point in time because of its popularity, to try and make some sympathetic noises even as they felt a sense of deeper nausea for such an unruly demonstration of people's power. But Starmer's words underlined the deep liberal distaste for the movement which pulsed just beneath the surface.

More interestingly still, however, was that his comments were picked up by one Nigel Farage, a key figure on the far-right who wrote 'heartily agree with Kier Starmer's condemnation of the Black Lives Matter organisation'. In text books across the board we are taught that liberalism is the diametric opposite of fascism, liberalism standing for freedom of movement and expression, of political rights and the democratic process. Fascism standing for the obliteration of all those things. And yet Fascism and liberalism share in common the aghast sense of disgust for the people at the bottom developing their own political process uncoupled from those at the top. It is here where the fault lines between liberal and fascist thought opens up. And that, more than anything else, must be the lesson we take forward into the future. Because it provides a warning, the augury of things to come.

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Notes.

1) This phrase was famously coined by Ronald and Nancy Raegan in the 1980s, it is true, but the strategy had been in place since the 60s when law enforcement agencies targeted Black communities in terms of heroin and the anti-war movement more generally in terms of marijuana ↑

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