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## Racist Violence is Used to Maintain an Unjust Social Order

by ROB URIE  
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Speakers at a recent rally and march to protest the murder of the unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin by a white, self-appointed, guardian of the racist social order in Florida rightly pointed to the broader institutional racism that permeates race relations in America. Institutional impunity was added to Trayvon's murder when the local police in Florida took the ludicrous claim of self-defense made by his murderer at face value.

The young Trayvon's murder was a particular crime and a particular tragedy but it took place in the context of the persistent race-based murder and the massive unjust incarceration of black and brown youth and men. The particulars of Trayvon's case are now likely to be addressed given the public uproar over the murder. But the fact that terror against, and oppression of, America's black and Latino communities serves an economic and political purpose that benefits its purveyors needs to be addressed and redressed, by force if necessary, before it will end.

It is with no small irony that capital accumulation facilitated by slavery lies at the heart of the system of financial capitalism that now holds America hostage. The late, and now infamous, Wall Street giant Lehman Brothers began as a cotton trading shop that profited from labor stolen from slaves. Irony entered when the firm was brought down in some fair measure by its racist "sub-prime" money lending business that targeted African Americans with overpriced home loans when many qualified for lower-cost loans. The result: several generations of accumulated

black wealth disappeared in a few days in 2008 along with the firm (one of many) built on stolen wealth.

Today the racist incarceration of black and brown youth and men feeds the for-profit prison system that requires that people be imprisoned for profits to accrue. As articulated below, racist policing practices assure that the socially disadvantaged provide the bodies needed to fill these prisons. And in this racist society African Americans and Latinos are the delegated disadvantaged groups. That this arrangement is a de facto re-institution of slavery is hidden by the fact that all modern day slaves need provide is their bodies, whereas in the prior incarnation labor was also forced from them. (Labor is still forced from the imprisoned but the minimum needed to economically benefit the new slave-masters is a body to fill a cell).

The canard of “crime” reduction used to justify the innocent Trayvon’s murder relies on definitions of criminality devised by the perpetrators of racist violence and by those who benefit economically and politically from the continuation of this system of racial oppression. Even if the innocent Trayvon had been doing what white racists feared that he was, his murder would still have been entirely unjustified by any act short of pulling a loaded gun and threatening to shoot the perpetrator. And if racially neutral definitions of criminality based on actual social harms caused were used most of America’s ruling class would be behind bars.

The New York Police Department’s “stop and frisk” policy provides a good illustration of the institutional terrorism inflicted on New York’s (America’s) black and brown communities. Approximately 700,000 overwhelmingly black and brown youth were stopped, questioned and searched by the NYPD last year without probable cause. This charge is not contentious: the NYPD openly admits that probable cause was not needed to stop and terrorize innocent youth. Were the purpose really to reduce “crime” then why would the practice not be equally carried out against America’s white population, particularly the rich?

The radically uninformed answer to this question offered by a majority of white respondents in polls is that some (six percent) of the victims of stop and frisk end up being charged with crimes, their inference being that the level of alleged criminality of black and brown youth justifies the policy. But the only way to judge the relative level of criminality by racial groups is to (1) base the penal code on actual social harms caused and (2) to apply the law in a manner absolutely blind to race (and class, gender, sexual orientation etc.). America’s legacy of slavery and the subsequent century and a half of continuing racial oppression has left us with laws designed to maintain a racist and unjust social order under the rubric of controlling crime and a system of racist law enforcement that uses racism to earn profits for connected capitalists.

So, one more time here: if the goal of racist policing policies is really to reduce crime, then expanding the suspect population to white people increases the size of the “criminal” population to be found out. But of course (1) were white kids stopped and frisked in equal proportion to black and brown youth the policy would be ended in five minutes, and (2) the fact that expansion of the policy to white youth in rich neighborhoods is not being proposed lays bare the fact that stop and frisk is a policy of racial terror and oppression rather than a legitimate policing policy. And furthermore, even if stop and frisk provided a larger perceived benefit in “crime” reduction,

who benefits from the reduction in crime if black and Latino communities live in permanent fear of the police?

One paradox of Trayvon's murder is that communities of color that have legitimate reasons to be wary of the police are now asking the police to do their jobs and arrest and prosecute Trayvon's murderer. Was it not for the police role as enforcers of this system of racial oppression, there would be no paradox. In Trayvon's case the police already had the evidence and the resources to charge the murderer and they chose not to do so. This illustrates that the problem of racist oppression is systemic. So while it would be gratifying and is socially necessary to bring Trayvon's murderer to justice, the continuation of America's system of racial oppression must also be ended or we just wait for the inevitable next wrongfully murdered black youth.

The ongoing circumstance of racist whites and the police acting as invading armies in communities of color is in significant ways similar to that that led to the rise of the Black Panther Party in the 1960s. Today there are black community leaders who clearly see community self-defense as a potential solution to cases like Trayvon's. But it would be a tragedy of history were it not also seen that the unjust economic system that has long benefited from racial oppression has now added a significant proportion of current and former middle class whites to its list of victims.

Complications of America's racist history aside, there now exists a unity of interest in replacing the economic system that feeds on exploitation and misery for profit with one based on social justice. Race and class are not equivalents, but neither are they static objects—at different times in history they deserve different bearing on political calculations. The same bankers and plutocrats who stole the accumulated wealth of African Americans in 2008 are well on their way to doing the same to middle class whites. Occupy Wall Street understands this and has partnered with "End Stop and Frisk," anti-foreclosure groups are working in communities of color, and recently we joined forces in the Million Hoodie rally and march demanding justice for Trayvon Martin. The time is right to build larger coalitions based on ending racist violence and the system of economic oppression that feeds on it.

In New York we march against police violence and racial oppression this Saturday, March 24th, 12:00 noon from Liberty Plaza (Zuccotti Park).