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Class, Race, Gender and U.S. Policing

All Lives Matter

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U.S. capitalism's white supremacist foundation—expressed in phases from primitive wealth accumulation through stolen land and chattel slavery, to segregation, industrial/ agricultural labor exploitation, and relocation, to our current mass incarceration/deportation, and First Nations' land and sovereignty violations—is on full display as more high profile murder-by-cop cases are supposedly resolved through exoneration.

Forever redefining the term “Black Friday,” last weekend's Michael Brown/ anti-policing demonstrations, led by determined Ferguson citizens, (and the cop acquittals and recent protests against Eric Garner's murderer) reveal exoneration of murdering cops might be routine, but there's nothing routine about the anti-policing movement's response. The movement warns authorities that a sustained fight is being waged—led by a generation with the advantage of the past and present: they can access past movements' cumulative knowledge and new social media outlets (as compromised as these outlets can be for organizing.) This is a very heartening and serious time for resistance, and it begs as much careful and considered reflection as it does directed action.

One challenge faced by organizers seeking to connect the dots between struggles— expressed in the chant that moves from “Black Lives Matter” to “All Lives Matter”—is how to concretely

understand the frequently asserted “connections” or (Kimberle Crenshaw’s) “intersections” between class, race, and gender/ sexuality-based struggles. Clearly, women of color, like Detroit’s Renisha McBride, are police harassment and murder victims too. Black and brown people are being singled out by the racist policing/ deportation/incarceration system: this is one very concrete and simple unifying thread between struggles.

But, there is also a deeper unifying factor here: the white supremacist policing practices behind the murder-by-cop epidemic is really a capitalist, white supremacist, heteropatriarchal policing system that must be analyzed and fought as such. In “Fear and Fantasy in Ferguson,” Joe Lowndes dissects Darren Wilson’s fantasy-based testimony about how threatened he felt by Michael Brown. Lowndes concludes that “Wilson becomes an innocent child overpowered by a giant adult, instead of an armed adult who in fact killed a child”. Setting aside, for some other time, analysis of the bizarre simultaneous presentation of police as both competent men’s men/ military experts and helpless victimized babies, we can’t ignore how Wilson’s style of victimization narrative is routinely found in domestic violence and gender-based hate crime narratives as well. 6’2” Wilson was rendered helpless (like a baby/woman) in the face of Brown’s hulking presence (!) But why open up the whole gender can of worms, when we already have a hard enough time relating the systems of white supremacy and capitalism?

The idea that police serve capital’s interest, and thus the category of “class” is central in anti-policing work, is perhaps the most commonly shared radical leftist insight when it comes to the issue of hostile policing. (Was I the only one whose eyes glazed over during post-Wilson verdict Facebook threads where people boldly asserted, in their pseudo-sophisticated manner, that the murder-by-cop epidemic is “more about class” and “less about race”—as if we have to choose?) When examining the police state apparatus, it’s patently obvious that poor neighborhoods are heavily targeted and policed, poor people can’t afford private attorneys and bail, and the American business class’ unregulated and unpunished white-collar crime is permitted as reasonable, even dutiful, wealth acquisition. There’s really not that much sophistication in this type of analysis.

Regarding popular leftist analysis of the current police state apparatus, class comfortably takes its place at the head of the table, with race either right beside it or sitting on its lap— and both are loudly asserting, “Serve me first!” (Gender was never invited.) A mere assertion of the category of “race-class” handles the conceptual challenge of describing “white supremacist or racial capitalism”, for the most part, and it’s amazing to watch the pageantry of avoidance undertaken by various political tendencies—including orthodox Marxists and liberals—in times of crisis, such as now. Orthodox Marxists view anti-racist analysis/activism as some kind of threat to the real revolution or as a misguided form of false consciousness. In an effort to deny their own privilege and personal racial investments, white liberals jump into bed with orthodox Marxists, asserting that murder-by-cop is “about class, not race.” (On the flip side, we see liberals/ progressives of color willing to talk about race here, but avoid its systemic links to capitalism at every turn.) Suddenly, it seems, everyone becomes an amateur Sociological theorist, acting as if sources of systemic violence are self-evident and can be scientifically traced in this late, great, and messy epoch of the corporate state’s war against almost everyone.

The category of “race-class” works well to make the basic, yet poignant, point that we are not going to sacrifice an analysis of white supremacy for a unifying mandate of anti-capitalist struggle (as recent new social movement history reveals, this logic never works out well for the majority of us who are non white males!) It’s difficult enough to establish “race-class” or “racial class” as analytic categories in the anti-policing movement. So, why bring the gender/sexuality category in here at all? The feminized, “cop-victim” language found in Darren Wilson’s testimony, and high profile old and newer cases like Abner Louima’s rape and Marissa Alexander’s forced guilty plea, show that insertion of gender/sexuality into the analysis isn’t opening up a can of worms. That can has been opened up for us by the corporate state’s sanctioning of mass police violence, and we should respond accordingly with the most accurate analysis and activism possible.

American policing’s complex class, race and gender dimensions require more than an “additive model,” where either capitalism or white supremacy is viewed as “the core” system dictating the material effects of power (profiling, harassment, incarceration, and murder), with other categories added as a side dish to the main entree. We need a truly intersectional model where we can consider oppression’s categorical likenesses, co-dependencies, and dissimilarities as manifest in social lives and movements.

The August 9, 1997, rape-by-cops of Haitian immigrant Abner Louima is a real eye-opener regarding the relevance of (Kimberle Crenshaw’s) “intersectional”-class, race, and gender-analysis. White police officers from Manhattan’s 70th precinct arrested 30 year old male, Louima, because he was apparently mistaken for someone else. They arrested him and took him to their precinct where they beat him with several objects (and their fists) before finally anally raping him with a toilet plunger’s and broom’s wooden handles. Louima survived the attack, and in a rare case of justice delivered, the police were prosecuted. This case looms large as an egregious example of police brutality in the form of sadistic rape. It’s evident that the need for gender/ sexuality analysis can not be denied here. Louima’s rape-by-cops needs to be analyzed in the historic context of post-slave era race relations, as rape was a projected white male fear used to justify the lynching system.

During the post-Emancipation South’s lynching era, sexual dominance and rape became an important regulator of race relations. In *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth Century South*, Martha Hodes states that before emancipation and during the Civil War, white society reacted to affairs between white women and black men with tolerance or denial. But when the slave system’s racial order came crashing down, fictitious tales of aggressive black male sexuality took a hold of the white imagination. This imagined, over sexed, black male enemy was used to justify the lynch system. It was at this time that gendered norms of (passive/white) female and (active/black) men became culturally encoded and sexualized—and lynching became systematically employed to punish imagined rape through real murder.

Abner Louima’s rape-by-cops reveals racialized police violence has a historically resonant gender/ sexuality dimension; no doubt those cops were consciously or unconsciously enacting revenge against all presumed black male rapists in a sexualized gesture of racial dominance. (The white psychic origins of the “black male rapist” is difficult to explain, but nonetheless real.) Racial violence has its sexual expressions just as sexual violence has its racial

expressions. Or to put it another way, the practice of rape, which has been one historic hallmark of feminist/womanist struggle, does not remain squarely in the gender/ sexuality system. Rape-ism is a hostile expression of racism: it was a central method used by white male masters to subordinate black female slaves, after all.

Gender/sexuality in the anti-policing struggle does not stop at police harassment, rape, and murder of trans/women of color, or the more sensational cases like Louima's. We see the gender/sexuality dimension of the policing system laid bare in the legal system's enforcement of generalized "female/ passive" and "male/active" gender roles (although the strict equation of female/passive is itself dependent upon racial identities). Consider sentencing disparities for women defending themselves in domestic violence cases, or even, sentencing disparities for men and women who commit murder in intimate partner violence contexts. According to the Michigan Women's Justice and Clemency Project,"the average prison sentence for men who kill their intimate partners is 2 to 6 years. Women who kill their partners are sentenced, on average, to 15 years". This simple statistic reveals that there is a higher price to pay for women than men when it comes to committing violent acts. Couple this with the fact that women of color and low income women are disproportionately affected by mandatory arrest policies for domestic violence, we see how gender and race oppression work together to produce these disparate sentencing outcomes.

Floridian Marissa Alexander's self-defense case exposes the racially-coded Stand your Ground law's white supremacist facilitation of a quick defense strategy for white perpetrators in a racist, trigger-happy gun culture environment—see George Zimmerman's acquittal in the harassment, stalking, and murder of Trayvon Martin for more details. That the state initially sought to incarcerate Alexander (who is black) for 60 years because she fired a warning shot while feeling threatened in a domestic violence altercation, shows that Stand Your Ground, which was not used as her defense when it actually applied, is not intended for use by black shooters. (I don't know if we can find better evidence of the white supremacist intent behind Stand Your Ground than Alexander's case). But Alexander's case also shows us that a black female defending herself in a domestic violence situation will receive the most heavy-handed weight of the racist patriarchal legal/ policing apparatus. Alexander is dealing with the double jeopardy of her race and gender in this extreme case of sentencing and punishment (she recently agreed to end the four year case by pleading guilty, receiving time served, and she will be released on January 27, 2014.)

The racial framing of Alexander's guilt as an "aggressive and armed" black perpetrator, combined with the gendered framing of her guilt as a woman with the nerve to defend herself during a violent male threat has led to her trial's "guilty" outcome. In addition to Stand Your Ground's racial purpose being placed front and center in this case, we are again reminded that the legal/policing apparatus has to enforce gender roles, because they are far from natural. So anything other than female passivity is punished through domestic violence victims' harsh sentencing because they fight back instead of accept violence —"like a real woman."

How does this all get back to Michael Brown and Eric Garner's murders—and the anti-policing movement? We are inundated by capitalist, white supremacist patriarchal legal/ policing ideologies that locate, frame, and decide guilt and innocence in historically prescribed terms

rooted in yesteryear's violent lynching system—and colonial conquest/ slavery before that. That lynching's ideological locus was not simply motivated by white supremacy, but a perversely preoccupied discourse of imagined sexual dominance of the white female at the black male's hands. This reminds us that events of social domination—including the racist epidemic of murder-by-cop and vigilante murder (George Zimmerman and Michael Dunn in Florida)—are not singularly expressed along prescribed systemic lines (class, race, and gender/ sexuality), but these events definitely emanate from the corporate state's white male heterosexual ethos. This is an ethos that is essentially a crisis, due to its illegitimacy. In a seemingly psychotic paradox, this system has all its (military) equipment, but it persists in evoking its imagined white vulnerability in the face of darker people's also imagined predatory (and highly sexualized) prowess.

Class, race, and gender/sexuality swirl together like colors in one of those psychedelic paintings made so popular during the last big upheaval of the 1960's and 70's. Amidst this complex swirl of institutions, ideologies, and identity positions—or systems, standpoints, and subjects—one ultimate unifying truth stands out. The corporate state relies on policing the social body because submission is not natural. Submission is a crafted, highly policed, and imagined social fiction that benefits the few, and unites the majority of us, against this policing ethos—this capitalist, white supremacist, and heteropatriarchal omni-crisis.