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We Can't Breathe

Trapped in a System Where Nothing Changes

by TARIQ ALI

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‘We live in a post-racial society,’ Obama enthused, referring to his own victory, soon after entering the White House. It sounded hollow at the time, though many wanted to believe it. Nobody does today. Not even Toni Morrison. But the response of tens of thousands of young US citizens to the recent outrages in Ferguson, Cleveland and New York is much more important and interesting than the vapours being emitted in DC.

There is a vital energy to these protests. The scale, speed and intelligence of the protesters took the country by surprise. In New York they emerged unannounced at different locations avoiding the pitched battle scenario in Berkeley, created by the Bay Area cops whose penchant for rioting at the first possible opportunity is well known. Two miles outside Ferguson, white supremacists torched a black church while cops maintained order in the city. There is police-state talk of making the use of phone cameras illegal in these situations. In other words, mass arrests.

In Chicago, medicine and law students came out and lay down on the ground. It’s hardly a secret that they tend to be among the more conservative students on campus, eclipsed only by the engineering faculty and lavishly funded business studies departments. Their solidarity with the victims of state brutality against African-Americans is an impressive sight. Might it be more than a one-off?

Radical politics in the US was badly derailed by the destroyed hopes and betrayed illusions of the early Obama years (not a few of those who occupied squares in the 99 per cent movement voted to give him a second term, despite the wars and drones and a refusal to hold Bush, Cheney and gang responsible for manufactured lies and torture). Has the worm finally turned or will we see a similar outpouring of joy for Hillary Clinton, led this time by deluded feminists? If a mixed-race president could not move towards a post-racial society, what chance is there of another warmongering Clinton (with dodgy positions on almost everything including abortion rights) paving the way towards post-patriarchy? We need a break and perhaps this generation will provide one. Perhaps.

Dozens of black Americans have been killed by cops in recent years without exciting similar outrage. Most of the traditional black leaders capitulated without shame to the Obama White House. Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton are two of the better known names, the latter now trying to hustle a quick march on DC to regain at least one credential. The black caucus in Congress is loyal to White House and Wall Street alike. A similar situation exists for the rest of the country. People feel unrepresented. The anger over the recent deaths reflects, I think, a growing disgust with a system in which nothing changes regardless of who is elected.

The torture revelations, too, are bound to have an effect. The worst aspects are still hidden from public view, but it's been going on for a long time. In 1975 the former CIA operative Philip Agee broke with his employers and published *Inside the Company*, an account of unremitting torture in South America. In Vietnam, US marines would disembowel one prisoner to scare another into revealing locations. We still do not have a full account of the way women prisoners were humiliated and tortured in Iraq. And everything since 9/11 happened with the collusion of the EU. Tony Blair, Jack Straw, David Miliband were all aware of what they had sanctioned. As were their French, German and Italian counterparts. The East Europeans, too, were more than happy to serve their new masters.

Perhaps the students and others protesting in America now will spark off something new and permanent to challenge the system on many levels. I hope.