



Baltimore Police Killing: Racism, Repression and Resistance

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Just like a horrific version of the film *Groundhog Day*, police killings of African-Americans in the United States repeat themselves endlessly. The latest iteration of this macabre pattern was the brutal assault on 25 year-old Freddie Gray in Baltimore on April 12th, 2015 while in police custody. Gray died a week later from the complications of a severed spinal cord.

Although this is a fast moving story and, as more details come to light, some details will probably change, there are some things that are known and won't change. Freddie Gray did die and his fatal injury happened in police custody. He was denied medical care at the scene and transported in a police van.

Although it was initially reported that he was unarmed, police later claimed that he was armed with a switchblade knife. But this turned out to be a (legal) pocketknife in later reports, including from the office of the city prosecutor.

The incredible (to outsiders) pretext for the arrest was that Freddie made eye contact with one of the six cops that arrested him and then ran away from them. He was chased, knocked down, and thrown into a police van. Somewhere along the way his spinal cord was severed.

Why Freddie Gray ran is unknown. He wasn't holding drugs at the time and he had no outstanding warrants against him. There have been some accounts that the cops had threatened Freddie with bodily harm in the recent past, but those reports are unconfirmed.

The Pattern of Police Terror

Everything about this particular case is eerily similar to other incidents over the last year or so; the vigilante killing of 17 year-old Trayvon Martin in Sanford Florida, on February 12, 2014; the deaths of Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, last summer and of Eric Garner in New York City, the killing of 12 year old Tamir Rice in Cleveland Ohio, the shooting in the back and the planting of a weapon on Walter Scott in South Carolina.

Yet, these are only the main incidents, the ones that made the national and international news. There were many other killings of unarmed, mostly black, men and women by the police between each of these more publicized killings. The question people around the world are asking is, What lies behind this incredible record of police slayings?

The truth of the matter, as shown by history, is that Freddie Gray's death at the hands of the police is just the latest thread in a bloody tapestry of societal oppression and police terror against the black community in the United States. In fact, there is nothing new about such events, it is just that the spotlight of publicity has finally been focused on them, because of the proliferation of cell phone video and the instant communication provided by the Internet and social media sites.

Racial harassment and murder are in the DNA of US police forces. They first began as slave patrols and their function

has always been to protect the 'private property' of the owners of society, including slaves, and the violent control and repression of anyone who might question and challenge the rights to that property. That basic function has not changed.

The Response

There is also a pattern in the responses to these incidents of police terror, where they have been recorded and made accessible through the social media and the Internet, which has undoubtedly spurred on the reaction.

It's difficult to watch Eric Garner pleading that he can't breathe as he dies, or to see Walter Scott being shot in the back as he runs away and then a weapon being placed beside him, without being justifiably outraged by the monstrous injustice of forces supposedly representing the justice system. So, in many of these cases, communities explode in anger.

Police cars and buildings are burned and shops are broken into as the outrage is focused on the nearest symbols of the power and property structure that oppresses young black people. When the police, who were the direct cause of the outrage in the first place, prove unable to handle the situation, the National Guard is sent in, a quasi-military operation to further repress and oppress the community.

In Baltimore, the general in charge stated that their mission was the 'protection of property'. Not protecting the community, protecting property. This is, in a nutshell, what the state is for under the dictatorship of capital; to terrorize the poor and racially oppressed into ceasing their protests and resistance so that the owners of property can sleep easy in their beds.

But, since the summer of 2014, a movement of resistance to these repeated killings has grown. Because everything can now be easily publicized on the Internet, there are immediate solidarity rallies, protests and demonstrations in cities all across the nation. We are all Baltimore, just like we were all Ferguson or New York City. And these actions are, to a greater or lesser extent, also repressed by the power structures of the capitalist state.

In the most recent incidents, starting with the killing of Mike Brown in Ferguson, the dialectic of oppression, resistance, followed by more and heavier repression of that resistance, has been played out in real time in cities all across the country. The resistance grows, and grows more militant, as the oppression and repression mount.

At some point, something breaks or a new paradigm is created. In most cases in recent history it has been the resistance that broke, but not always. Baltimore was an example of the resistance upping the ante into what could be considered open rebellion. The scene of a line of cops retreating under a hail of rocks and bottles from angry protesters is an example of the tenuous nature of the control that exists today in most cities in the United States. Without the backing of the military, open rebellion becomes more and more likely as the police terror continues.

Democratic Party Complicity in Oppression

One of the particular features of black oppression in the United States is the complicity of the Democratic Party, and especially black Democrats, in the oppression of black people today. Since the 1960s, the Democrats have played the role of being 'on the side' of black people. They have done this thanks to the veterans of the far more radical Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s, such as Rev Jesse Jackson and Rev Al Sharpton, who managed to politically expropriate those movements in the decades that followed.

They were able to do this because northern and western Democrats were the primary proposers in the White House and Congress of the bills that destroyed the last vestiges of the Jim Crow laws that enforced racial segregation in the American south. Another reason was the killing of many of the more radical leaders of those movements. Most of the older civil rights veterans joined the Democrats and later generations of politically minded black people followed suit.

The Democrats have reaped the electoral benefits of fostering a soft version of 'identity' politics ever since, holding up the mirage of integration into the American Dream of middle class prosperity.

Since the goal of the civil rights struggles was integration into American society and into capitalism, and there was no mass working class or socialist party that could intervene and give an anticapitalist lead to the struggle, this initial impetus towards the Democrats was to be expected. With it was lost the social aspect of focusing on poverty, bad housing, lack of well-paid jobs and inferior schooling that the Black Panthers and even Martin Luther King, in the months before his assassination, had raised. The middle class leaders concentrated on the advancement of their class out of the mass of poor black people, with the excuse that they were providing role models and all the latter had to do was become more aspirational. The election of Barack Obama seemed the pinnacle of achievement for this strategy. Events from Ferguson onwards have shown how hollow this was.

It has become obvious to most black people, and even to large numbers of the white majority, that, in spite of the black faces in positions of authority, like Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, those faces are incapable of changing the paradigm that is killing black youth every day. Indeed, when it comes to mass protests on the streets, they are willing to condemn the courageous protesters as 'thugs who are trying to tear down what so many fought for' as did President Obama, and rush to call in the National Guard like Mayor Rawlings-Blake did.

Not only is the Mayor of Baltimore black, so is the Police Commissioner. Not only is the President of the USA black but so were his last two Attorney Generals. But, for all this, the murderous police reign of terror continues unabated in the communities of the poor, the disadvantaged and the working class.

This is all inextricably connected to the economic devastation that the neo-liberal capitalist model, ascendant since the Reagan years, has had on American cities. As a bourgeois party, Democrats, including black Democrats, have bought fully into the neo-liberal mindset that has targeted the gains in employment opportunities and social services that working class people made through the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. The Democrats merely promise that they will be 'kinder and gentler' when cutting services for the rest of us, while offering repeated tax cuts for the wealthy and the corporate behemoths.

Baltimore is merely one example of these economic policies. It starts with good jobs leaving the city for places in the world where exploitation is easier and more profitable. Then the white population, most of whom are more regularly employed and on higher wages, leave the cities for the suburbs, putting pressure on the tax base and city services. With the lack of opportunity caused by the lack of jobs and this 'white flight', the population left behind becomes poorer and poorer.

Desperate people are always more prone to take any way out, even if it is illegal. In many cases, city authorities use the laws to levy fines in order to make up budget shortfalls, further exacerbating the financial plight of the poorest and their interactions with the police. And, of course, the draconian drug laws are always available to harass and squeeze a few more dollars from the ones who can least afford it. And, if the monies can't be paid, then there's a 'for profit' prison awaiting you.

Prisons have become the last resort for warehousing the poor for profit in a return to a modern version of slavery. It's a never-ending cycle of oppression that results in hopelessness, tension, despair and, all too often, an early and violent death.

It's no wonder that Freddie Gray's record of police interactions through the years was one of petty drug crimes of one sort or another. In many cities, in the poorer areas, dealing drugs is not only the best paying job there is, it's the only job there is.

Rebellion, But Not Revolution, Yet

Despite the growth of movements like Black Lives Matter and the spontaneous protests after every major incident, this is not yet a truly mass movement. As yet, a majority of the citizenry have not been directly affected by police terror. When the most blatant repression is largely confined to the most oppressed strata, the people of colour, the most desperately poor and homeless, the majority still find it easy to look the other way. This brings the danger that rebellions remain marginalized and confined to the fringes of society and, hence, easily put down. In both Ferguson and now Baltimore, the presence of the National Guard is still enough to stamp out most of the protests.

What is needed is easy enough to say but more difficult to accomplish. Basically, it boils down to organization. In most of the major cities of the USA, new organizations have arisen to combat and publicize the abuses of police departments, but they are not very well coordinated with each other. Even within cities, the necessary coordination is usually lacking. This leads to more of a reactive than a proactive approach. In order to take the next step, the resistance needs to be much more organized.

Councils, with representatives from all of the organizations present, should be called in every city. In each, a steering committee should be elected and meet regularly to plan strategies and tactics for publicizing and confronting police terror and they need to draw in the organizations that represent the working class, the unions.

This is a real possibility because US workers are now beginning to show important signs of a fightback against the anti-union policies, wage-cutting and job losses of the past decades. The San Francisco longshore union, ILWU Local 10, picketed the docks and joined the May Day marches in Oakland and other Bay Area ports in solidarity with the victims of police killings. Their campaign against police killings goes back to the death of Oscar Grant, a union meat cutter who was killed by a local transit police officer who, despite the fact that the victim was handcuffed and face down, claimed he had tried to take his taser. In Charleston, South Carolina, port workers of Local 1422 also joined the May Day protests, linking them to the killing of Walter Scott, whose brother and several cousins are longshore workers.

If wider and wider sections of the working class, white workers as well as people of colour stand up (and walk out) for justice and the dismantling of the apparatus of police repression, then a truly mass movement, like that of the '60s, not only for democratic and civil rights but for social and workplace rights, too, is a real possibility.

Whilst it is necessary to call for the cops and the National Guard to be withdrawn from the black neighbourhoods they oppress and occupy, the more difficult task is to work out the tactics that could implement the calls for community control of policing.

Clearly, a community militia, in which ordinary working class people predominate and which protects lives, mediates between neighbours who have conflicts and protects ordinary people's homes and workplaces, is vital. It also has to protect them against the state forces and to support democratic protests, strikes etc. Importantly, it also raises the question of which laws they enforce and who do they really work for? And this is just one facet of a true, bottom up, workers' democracy. In short, it raises the issue of who should hold the power in society at large.

Alternative Power Organizations: A Necessity Against Police Terror

As hard a struggle as it will be to put together such councils and a militia, they are a necessity if anyone really hopes to ameliorate the police terror that took the life of Freddie Gray and the long, long list of others who have died at the hands of the enforcement arm of capitalism. Even then, it would only challenge, and to some extent limit, the terror, because, under a capitalist state, violence, oppression, and repression are the norm, not an abhorrent exception. Oppression serves the making of profit and to eradicate it altogether capitalism itself must be overthrown and replaced by socialism.

The visibility and the nationwide protests meant that the cops whose actions led to the death Freddie Gray were charged

with various crimes, on Mayday, 2015. Clearly, the authorities feared that the May Day protest would be a launch pad for something much bigger unless they showed that, in this case at least, the normal impunity of the perpetrators would not hold. In part, this is because of the spotlight the case has thrown on the Democrats, including the black Democratic establishment. Nonetheless, it is a long way from indictment to conviction and one case amongst so many proves little.

The only way, not just to honour Freddie Gray, Michael Brown, Walter Scott, Eric Garner and Trayvon Martin but also the less well-known victims of the racist police and vigilante terror, is to begin the work to make the system that generates and condones this terror obsolete for good.

Malcolm X once famously said, 'You can't have capitalism without racism?'. That was over fifty years ago and it doesn't seem that much has changed. It is up to this generation to change it.

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