

Dangerous Times

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Critical Sociology
2014, Vol. 40(6) 811–813
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0896920514554883
crs.sagepub.com



Well into the middle of the second decade of the 21st Century, I wonder if we are living in a time warp. As I write, Israel is once again involved in a ground war in Gaza resulting in the death of thousands on the ground, though increasingly the Israelis are using a page out of the US wars in the Middle East using force from a distance to “pinpoint” their assault, essentially bomb indiscriminately. Looking at images, I am reminded of Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon and the resistance of Arafat in Beirut. Over thirty years and little has changed.

Closer to home, Michael Brown is shot dead on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri by a police officer, apparently while his hands were raised. Perhaps eye witness accounts may be somewhat contradictory, perhaps there was more provocation leading up to the event. But what seems to be undeniable is that Michael Brown was unarmed, at a distance from the police officer, and apparently in a surrendering posture. We recently were made aware of the dangers of simply being a young Black male with the shooting of Trayvon Martin in Florida two years ago (by a police wannabe). What makes this shooting of Michael Brown (and I was about to write, this latest shooting until I realized several young Black men have since been shot by the police under questionable circumstances) such a galvanizing event is how frequently this happens, and how this community has reacted¹ in general protest. This reaction is reminiscent of the community’s reaction to the Rodney King beatings by police in 1982, once more anger fueled by long simmering hurt boils over. Another time warp.

People have started to compare photos of the militarized police response to community demonstrations in Ferguson with photos of police responses to Civil Rights demonstrations in the Jim Crow South, as heavily armed police and their attack dogs harassed and assaulted peaceful marchers. Let’s not forget the rioting in Detroit, Newark, and elsewhere in the 1960s as communities rose up in response to long-standing harassment and violence. Another time warp, another reminder that laws passed over the last 50-60 years may reflect progress legislatively, but that day-to-day events point to the reality that this country has not progressed socially, and may indeed have regressed, on matters of race and equality.

We must understand events as a product of a continuous history of oppression and violence that shapes and directs our society. It is perhaps the reason that we see so much gun related violence, why we are confronted by an armed police increasingly eager to use their weapons on the society it is supposed to serve and protect. The British police officers on the street are unarmed (though there is an increasing effort to militarize them) and they seem to be as, if not more, effective in maintaining order. This country ranks first in the number of guns per capita, almost double the next two on the list, which are Serbia and Yemen. What is remarkable is that we consider those two countries

unstable, volatile, either just coming out of or about to go into a period of civil conflict or all-out war. Perhaps we should consider our own country in the same way, as people arm themselves and increasing pass laws under “self-defense” logics permitting the use of those weapons.

Perhaps common sense will slow the pace of senseless shootings, after Theodore Wafer of Dearborn, Michigan was found guilty of second-degree murder for killing a young Black women who wandered on his porch late one night, looking for help after a car accident. Like similar stand your ground laws in other states, Michigan has extensive “Shoot First” laws allowing individuals to use deadly force (as in, discharge your weapon) if it is in self-defense without having to retreat to safety. This is a reversal of past trails where George Zimmerman was found not guilty of the murder of Trayvon Martin, and Michael Dunn (again in Florida) was not found guilty for shooting Jordan Davis in his car for playing loud music in a gas station. Those were trials of “normal” citizens accused of killing a Black person, and in general verdicts tend to favor a White shooter when the victim is Black.

If there ever was a more pressing time to revisit and expand on our understanding of race in our country, it is now. This journal has a long history of publishing analyses of race. Authors of articles both in print and forthcoming have examined diversity and education (Berrey 2011, Brunnsma et al 2013, Embrick 2011, Jackson et al forthcoming), criminal justice and race (Case 2008, Cassano 2009, Moore 2014, Turner forthcoming), and more generally on race theory (Bonilla-Silva 2002, Bracey forthcoming, Byng 2013, Winant forthcoming). More needs to be done, and we have several special issues in preparation that will further explore the nature of race in this society.

This past year this journal, and the social justice movement writ large, has lost a valuable scholar, activist and friend with the sudden passing of Rod Bush. *Critical Sociology*'s annual one-day conference was dedicated in his memory, and devoted several panels to recognize and reflect upon his life and work (<http://www.sssp1.org/index.cfm/pageid/1785/m/600>). Speakers² praised Rod for his vision and, more importantly, for his persistence as he viewed the struggle for social justice and racial equality as a long march. Rod was careful to link historical events to avoid what Rodney Coates, in his comments, called “historical myopia or amnesia” with regard struggles for justice. We must continue this struggle, continue to see events tied together in a long sequence of historical moments, and recognize that we must move beyond a traditional Sociology that reflects European development from an agricultural to industrial society. A Critical Sociology must consider alternative perspectives, including a growing body of Southern theories that questions the centrality of European and North American intellectual traditions and narratives.

Finally, the quality and pace of submissions of very strong articles examining the global political economy has resulted in a decision that this journal will publish 8 issues per volume year, beginning in 2015. This will permit a faster time to print for important scholarship.

Notes

1. As I write these comments, at the end of August, there continues to be unrest and demonstrations each evening. These have now spread, attracting demonstrators from around the country and spilling out to neighboring communities in Missouri.
2. We are in the process of collecting the comments and reflections of speakers for all the conference sessions and making them available on the journal website at criticalsociology.org

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