Race and the Politics of Institutional Violence

David Fasenfest

Wayne State University, USA

> *Where the government fails to protect the Negro he is entitled to do it himself. He is within his rights. I have found the only white elements who do not want this advice given to undefensive [sic] Blacks are the racist liberals. They use the press to project us in the image of violence. (Malcolm X, 1965)*

During Hurricane Katrina, as the citizens of low-lying neighborhoods flooded by failing dykes struggled to survive, we were regularly offered news reports in which white residents entering stores were presented as marshaling resources in that difficult moment, while similar acts by black residents were presented in the newspapers as looters or worse. The print media and 24-hr news networks were consistent in presenting the dangers of the moment, discussing lawlessness even as they glossed over the images of desperate people on rooftops or crammed into the stadium (and reports of violence and assault inside the stadium ended up not being supported by facts).

Your favorite team lost an important game, or even if it won (Madison, WI or Lexington, KY), what do you do? According to newspapers you 'let off some steam' or engaged in understandable rowdy and destructive behavior as cars were burned, windows smashed, and crowds of young mainly white men roamed with little police action other than to contain the direction and scope of the mayhem. And when it does get totally out of control – say after a surfing contest in California, yet another momentous social calamity – the police are called in to calm things down, but the language used in reports, if these events are even covered by the news media, refrains from any sort of socio-pathological explanations of these participants, or discussions about broken homes, missing parents, or cultures of poverty and despair.

The same cannot be said when the demonstrations start out peacefully by outraged citizens protesting police brutality, as was the case of the fatal shooting of a young black man in Ferguson, MO, or the escalating reaction to the killing in custody of another young black man, this time in Baltimore, a reaction fueled by decades of neglect and systematic destruction of that community and the residential housing. We were not given explanations of enthusiastic reactions gone awry. Rather, words like 'thug' and worse were used to describe a community rife with all the worst ills generated by decades of single parenthood, of mothers with many illegitimate children, of residents that pathologically did not respect the places where they lived or the businesses in their own communities.

One might be tempted to say Malcolm X was prophetic in his pronouncements above half a century earlier. But that would ignore the almost 300-year history of representation that preceded his comments, a history in which blacks, first as slaves then as sharecroppers indentured to a post-Civil War plantation system, through Jim Crow and post-Reconstruction imagery in the South, and finally during the migrations out of the South to cities in the west and north, were routinely vilified. Young and old, black men were presented as predators assaulting the honor of white women, of challenging property, or otherwise as less-than-human, ending up victims of the 'understandable'

reaction of mobs that lynched, burned or otherwise killed these men. Communities from Tulsa to Chicago and then to the cities of the Northeast were similarly cast as havens for crime and corruption, even when (and perhaps – as was the case in Tulsa – especially because) there was no basis for these representations.

We are also experiencing a massive outcry against police violence as both young and old, male and female, African-Americans are dying as a result of excessive and usually unnecessary force used by the very institutions that are supposed to defend the community (for a small but frightening representation of this, see http://bit.ly/1zGejtJ). Once again we can turn to Malcolm X, speaking to Mike Wallace in an undated video (http://bit.ly/1vOCXuJ, especially starting at the 1:20 mark), when he points out that the police are encouraged to take whatever measures are necessary to 'hold the Negros in check' because statistics that appear in the local news make everyone think 'Harlem is a complete criminal area, that everyone is prone to violence', giving the police the impression that they can then come into the community 'to brutalize the Negro' in order to maintain law and order in defense of the greater society, even if that means imposing violence and mayhem on those very people in that community. And when the African-Americans organize to defend themselves, the response by the police is to use even more force employed in an even more violent manner – whether it is the way they assaulted the Black Panther Party in the 1960s and 1970s or the heavily militarized presence of police during demonstrations in black communities today.

And once again, Malcolm X is recounting a reality that is not a new reality, but one that reflects the relationship between community policing and African-Americans that began with the slave economy that brought so many people to this continent. What may be new, within the 24-hr news cycles and the widespread use of cameras that capture photos and now videos, is the speed with which we are becoming aware of this heretofore commonplace but unspoken occurrence. Much as we remain amazed that politicians continue to expose themselves (in all senses of that word) in an era of instant communication, we (at least the white community) are beginning to be stunned by the frequent images of abuse, beatings, unjustified police harassment, rough treatment, and in a recent event the actual killing of a black man shot in the back while running away from a police officer, appear on local and national news broadcasts. These videos also now make it a bit harder for police to claim they felt endangered or under threat, as most do in the aftermath of a shooting – though courts and prosecutors are still reluctant to charge or find the officers guilty of homicide. Much as Malcolm was aware, almost every black person in this country is aware these are not new events, just newly revealed events. Black children are schooled in necessary behavior in an attempt by parents to shield them from the inherent dangers faced just walking to and from school.

With the expansion of *Critical Sociology* to eight issues, we are allocating one issue each year (Issue 6, appearing in September) to include review essays, book reviews, and a set of commentaries by scholars on major topics of the day. This issue contains commentaries from noted race scholars and social critics dealing with policing, the institutional frame within which the police operate, and how our institutions create and maintain this culture of violence.

Reference

Malcolm X (1965) Talk given at the London School of Economics, 11 July. *Malcolm X: The most complete collection of Malcolm X speeches, debates and interviews ever assembled*. Available (accessed 23 May 2015) at: http://malcolmxfiles.blogspot.com/2013/07/london-school-of-economics-february-11.html.