

Race in Contemporary America: Protest, Police and Media in Ferguson

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in keeping their subjects "intact" in laboratory conditions. It overlooks political movements, especially for human rights, against caste and gender discrimination emerging from within the imagined "subject" or "community".

## NOTE

- 1 My own involvement with the Indo-Dutch-Program-for-Alternative-Development (IDPAD) project at Babu Trust, Pune (2003-06) began with a belief in the restorative benefits of traditional healing. This position gradually changed during my enduring research and commitment to the issue of gender and caste within the study of religion and public health throughout my PhD and afterwards. I came to see the enormous casteist and non-secular implications of such a standpoint that conflated categories with its different developmental histories and meanings that ended with

constructing an orientalist world view about an "other" that further intensified hegemony.

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## Race in Contemporary America Protest, Police and Media in Ferguson

DIVYA RAVINDRANATH, MAXINE DAVIS, BETH PRUSACZYK, WHITNEY SEWELL

In all spheres today, a covert institutionalised racism can be witnessed in the United States, denying the black community access to opportunities and privileges enjoyed by the white majority. The killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old African American, by a white police officer in St Louis is symptomatic of this malaise afflicting American society.

On 9 August 2014, 18-year-old Michael Brown, an African American,<sup>1</sup> was shot and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, a suburb of St Louis in Missouri, the United States (us). Brown's body lay unattended in the street for four hours in his own predominantly African American neighbourhood, sparking angry protests in the region. There are multiple conflicting versions describing the events leading up to this incident. Eyewitnesses suggest that Brown and his friend were stopped by a police officer when they were walking in their neighbourhood. When Brown tried to pull away, the police officer shot him. Brown turned around with his hands raised in the air but the officer continued to fire shots into his head and body, killing the young man. Another version claims that the police officer acted in self-defence following a scuffle.

While it is for the court to establish if charges will be brought against the police officer and then if the officer will be found guilty or not, it is important not to be distracted by the differences in the two narratives. Instead, it is imperative to

view Brown's death in light of at least five other similar killings in which ordinary unarmed African Americans were killed by white police officers in different parts of the us in just the past month. According to a 2012 report by the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, every 28 hours a black person is killed either by police or white vigilante violence, all of which speak of much bigger issues in the us (Hudson 2013).

Since the tragedy, Brown's family has received a tremendous outpouring of solidarity from throughout the region and other parts of the country. The collective mourning has turned into protests, town-hall meetings and community interventions. As the region recovers from this dark episode, it is necessary to pause and reflect on this incident, as it has several implications for St Louis, a city that has historically been infamous for its segregated communities. For the African Americans living here, such acts of violence are haunting realities that affect their daily lives.

This article locates the killing of Brown in a larger context of deeply institutionalised racial discrimination. In order to do so, we first present a brief history of the St Louis region to uncover the causes and process of segregation. Next, we reflect on the responses of the community and the various methods it has used to proactively counter and reject violence of this nature. This section

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is based on personal experiences of two of the authors of this article who have actively participated in the protests following this incident. We also look at the police response that has seemed to provoke more anger and distrust. We then discuss the role played by mainstream media and online social networks, and finally conclude with our reflections on race in contemporary America.

### A Brief History of St Louis

The history of St Louis is partly shaped by its peculiar geographical boundaries. In 1876, the citizens of St Louis voted to separate the city from its county, creating an independent municipality for the inner city. On the other hand, the smaller municipalities in St Louis county, though independent of each other, came together as part of St Louis county. This was a part of the process of “white flight”, a phenomenon that was seen in various parts of the us, in which wealthier, white residents of the city moved to the suburbs. This was further aided by racially discriminant government ordinances and real estate practices that legally and purposefully prevented black residents from purchasing homes in many of the municipalities in the county, thus ensuring that the white suburbs remained white. It was not until 1948 that the court found these practices and covenants unconstitutional. However, by then systematic segregation had deeply defined the region.

Since then, the white households have moved further away from the city and African American residents have remained disproportionately in the north half of the city and have also moved into the northern part of the county, primarily settling in the ring of suburban municipalities just outside the city limits. This inner suburban-ring is wrought with racial tension as the generations of white families that originally left the inner city are faced with sharing their suburban enclaves with African American residents moving from the city to the county. In these areas, the positions of power are more likely to be held by white residents, including mayors, city council members, police chiefs

and school board members for a community whose residents are now primarily African American. Ferguson is one such town in the inner suburban-ring on the northern side of the city.

In places like Ferguson, racism is an institutionalised form of oppression that strategically targets racial minorities denying the groups access to the privileges and resources of the majority.

Brown's death was preceded by numerous police killings of unarmed black men in August 2014 in various parts of the us. These incidents are not isolated, but a common occurrence in many parts of the country. The us statistical evidence reveals that police officers are more likely to kill unarmed blacks than armed whites, even if the situation of interaction is the same (Plant and Peruche 2005). Many African Americans fear the misuse of police power and are distrusting of officers and their respective departments due to a history of racial profiling and harassment that disproportionately impacts people of colour.<sup>2</sup> The relationship between the black community and Ferguson police department, which has very few African Americans on the force, has been wrought with tension for decades. Unfortunately, this relationship resembles many police and community interactions throughout the us, especially and primarily in communities of colour.

### Protestors and Police Response

Brown's death has evoked a wide range of reactions. The initial protests held in Ferguson were led by the youth of the community, including rival gang members. Protesters were later accompanied and supported by older generations and members of the clergy. Those involved are protesting against police killings, brutality, racial profiling, and legal cover-ups that occur all too often. The protestors have two major demands: (1) for the county's prosecuting attorney to remove himself from the case and a different special prosecutor to be appointed, and (2) for the arrest of the police officer who shot Michael Brown.

The other response of the protestors has been in the form of civil disobedience. Using this tactic, protestors shut down

highways during rush hour at 4:30 pm (representative of the time Brown's body was picked up); halting traffic for four and a half minutes (representative of the number of hours Brown's body lay in the street uncovered without medical attention).

The protestors also used creative slogans, some of which are described below:

- “Hands up-don't shoot”: Born out of literal necessity, residents of Ferguson raised their hands up and told the police not to shoot them in the hours following Brown's death, when police attempted to intimidate and control residents who were at the scene of the crime. Probably the most popularised, this message later sought to represent the condition in which Brown was killed, reinforcing the idea that such a clear message should be enough to refrain from shooting an unarmed person. This phrase also represents Brown's last words “My hands are up, don't shoot”.

- “If we can't get it, shut it down”: Used in large, organised protest, this call and response chant sought to give the direct message that if justice for Brown could not be obtained, then the repercussion would be to literally shut down the operations of the police department by leading protests that would block street access to/from the police buildings and block major roadways near the crime scene. The message is also a figurative response to the lack of racial diversity in the police force, implying that if members of the black community cannot obtain equal representation in the police force, then protestors would react by shutting down roadways through organised peaceful protest.

- “No justice – no peace”: Until justice is served, there will be no peace inasmuch as protests will continue.

- “I am Mike Brown”: Primarily used by people of colour (both men and women), to humanise them. The phrase implies that “I” too could have been killed in the same manner as Mike Brown, simply for the colour of one's skin.

While a large proportion of the protests held in this region have been peaceful, there have been stray incidents of looting and property damage to local businesses that occurred in the

initial days of protests. These infrequent incidences have however overshadowed the protests that have largely remained peaceful in nature. It is also known through subsequent arrest reports that many of the looters are not residents of the Ferguson community or even from the state of Missouri, and seem to have taken advantage of the dire situation for their personal gain.

Peaceful protests have always been and remain the common practice of the local community. Without police presence, the protests contain supportive, familial energy in which meals are shared amongst strangers, drums are played and songs are sung.

Despite the small portion of unlawful activities taking place alongside the peaceful protests and civil disobedience, the police response in Ferguson has been disproportional to the events. Within hours of Brown's death, Ferguson police were patrolling the streets dressed in full riot gear and wielding assault rifles. This militarised response fuelled the anger among protestors, which led to more people joining the protest. This created a tense situation where each night thousands of people – both peaceful protestors and people looting and damaging property – would flood the streets in Ferguson to square off against a police department throwing tear gas and pointing AK-47s at them from the top of armoured tanks.

The militarisation of local police departments is a growing problem in the US due to a government programme where police departments can obtain unused equipment such as guns, tanks, and body armour from the military. Even at its peak, none of the activities happening in Ferguson warranted this disproportional response by the police. And it was this response of the police that drew much of the world's media attention to the events in Ferguson.

### Role of the Media

The chain of reactionary events to the death of Brown led to an unprecedented media presence in the small town with television, newspaper, radio and web-based media intensively covering the area. Without this coverage, Brown's

death would likely have remained unnoticed like that of numerous others in the past. However, the media has also been criticised for its skewed coverage. For example, the media presence appeared to significantly increase only after two journalists were arrested during the protests. It has also been criticised for not paying attention to the historical issues that gave context to the situation and instead focusing on looting and rioting. The attention also seems to be excessively on the tanks and tear gas instead of the death of an 18-year-old boy.

While some of the mainstream media may have lost sight of the real issues, guerrilla – or citizen – journalists, also covered the events and focused on these issues. These journalists typically include citizens who are not affiliated with mainstream media houses, and instead use online platforms like blogs or YouTube. These individuals were on the ground in Ferguson talking to local residents trying to expound on the issues lying beneath the surface. Social media networks like Facebook and Twitter were used as important forums to discuss issues and organise mass numbers of protesters. It also served as the first place where Brown's stepfather exposed the execution of his son.

### Conclusions

Race as a social construct was not created just to oppress people of colour; it was created to benefit and privilege white people. Racism in America is deeply rooted in the country's foundational history of colonialism and slavery. Racism towards black Americans can be dated back to the 1600s during the transatlantic slave trade. After the emancipation of slavery, black Americans were still denied rights as American citizens. Over time the overt nature of racism, i.e., lynchings, segregation, and Jim Crow Laws morphed into a more covert institutionalised racism that one may witness today with housing, educational gaps, health, and criminal justice disparities. When distilled down to the core of the outrage, the events in Ferguson are racially charged. Racism has a role in this matter.

It is an irony that Michael Brown and numerous others have fallen prey to heinous incidents of this nature in the 50th year of the Civil Rights Movement, which brought about major changes to social and institutional policies that were racist and oppressive by design. When critically examining the institutional structures in America, one may notice the lack of diversity and inclusivity. The system continues to maintain, encourage, and produce the social and institutional power to oppress people of colour and criminalise black Americans. While racism may not be as overt as enslavement and "coloured-only" drinking fountains of the past, the events in Ferguson provide a clear picture that racism is still a pervasive theme in the US.

### NOTES

- 1 In this article we intentionally use the terms African American and Black American interchangeably. African American is a term used to describe a group of African descent whose experiences and socialisation is significantly tied to American Society (Sellers et al 1998). The term black refers to a group that includes but is not limited to persons of African descent, and suggests being inclusive of those of Caribbean and Afro-Latino/a descent.
- 2 The phrase "people of colour" is a commonly used term and is inclusive of people who are Hispanic, Latino, Asian and other non-white groups.

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