

The art of politics: Racial inequality and the police



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By Charles McKelvey

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The protests over the killing of George Floyd and against police violence have been sustained for days, and they have been increasingly non-violent, for the most part; and they have included confrontations, initiated by the police against non-violent protesters. White youth have been participating in significant numbers, in solidarity with the black community. The protesters have received support from high places, including Congresspersons, governors, former presidents, and military chiefs. All of this is good; a positive sign for the future of the nation.

The looting and rioting that occurred principally in the first few days are not good, and they may have outweighed the good that was done by the sustained non-violent protests by significant numbers of people. A movement for any cause has to try to influence as many people as possible to join the cause, and in the context of U.S. political culture, significant numbers of people tend to turn to regressive policies and to a “law and order” approach in response to political violence and social disorder.

The movement leaders should attempt to sustain non-violent demonstrations and try to contain the spontaneous or incited looting, burning, destruction of property, and violence against persons. In addition, they should try to create conditions that avoid confrontations with police, because confrontations do not play well with much of the public, even when it is the police that are provoking the confrontation, physically moving against non-violent protestors. The more that non-violent and peaceful demonstrations can be established in practice, the more people will be moved to join in the marches.

But the causes of police reform and broader social change also would be strengthened if the issues related to race and the police were framed in a more politically intelligent manner, that is, in a form that would attract greater numbers of people to the cause, reducing the influence of those that are determined to preserve an unjust social order defined by social inequalities.

It is not so good to cast the problem as white cops killing blacks. This is a polarizing way to frame the issue, nearly automatically alienating a not insignificant number of people, because it touches the unresolved historic racial conflict and white resentment. It would be better to frame the issue as a problem of the militarization of the police, a problem that especially impacts the African-American community. This framing would indicate a concern for the unarmed white men that have been killed by police, which has occurred less proportionately than with respect to black men, but in absolute numbers, it is more or less as large. One would presume that in many cases these young white men were killed in an equally unjust and brutal manner, and by omitting mention of them, you imply that they do not matter. It is true that black life in the United States is defined by a constant tension with respect to the comportment of the police, regardless of class; and that the situation is different with respect to white society, where middle class whites can in some circumstances depend on the protection of the police, and lower class whites experience police abuse less intensely. Nonetheless, it would be a gesture of solidarity with white society to acknowledge its loss at the hands of the police.

The militarization of the police has occurred in recent decades as a consequence of the reduction of the state, and the turn away from social benefits and social programs. As the people are increasingly abandoned and alienated, it becomes more necessary for the police to take on the characteristics of an occupying military force, controlling the upsurge in criminal behavior that is bound to occur. By framing the issue as the militarization of the police, we avoid the polarizing language of race, even as we acknowledge that the problem especially impacts the black communities.

A politically intelligent approach also would recognize that the issue of the police is itself complex. Police reform has to be addressed with sensitivity, and it should include visible efforts to connect with the sectors of police administration who share a commitment to reform. The militarization of the police is not the fault of individual police men and women. Although the police have power in street confrontations, they are hardly powerful actors in the society. They are not to blame for the fact that the elite took the option of abandoning the people and militarizing the police. They are not to blame for the pervasive social inequalities in our society, yet they are sent to do police work in a difficult situation that is created by those inequalities.

Many people in the nation have an appreciation for the difficult situation in which the police are placed, and for that reason, they have a tendency to come to the defense of the police when accusations against them are made. And if there is a clear case of bad police behavior, many will rush to the defense of the great majority of police officials. Given this political reality, political intelligence mandates sensitivity in advocating police reform.

At the same time, the changes that the nation needs are larger than police reform. The problematic comportment of many police, as well as the resistance of police and other local institutions to police reform, emerge from a larger context of social and political inequality. Police reform ought to be part of a larger proposal for comprehensive social change.

Here again, reframing the larger issue of racial inequality would be helpful. Liberals tend to focus on the ways in which racism endures in significant, albeit less blatant, forms since the civil rights gains of 1964 and 1965; and they emphasize the disproportionate poverty of blacks. Although such formulations are true, if given emphasis, they can imply an indifference to the poverty of whites, which weakens their political appeal.

Following the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, Cuba took a different approach to the problem of the disproportionate extent to which black Cubans suffered from unemployment, poor housing, and lack of access to education and health. The Revolution affirmed, as an unambiguous constitutional and fundamental principle, the full equality of all, regardless of race or color. At the same time, it undertook structural changes addressing unemployment, education, poverty, and health for all, forging improvements in the conditions of all those in need. In fact, blacks were benefitting disproportionately from the process of change, since they had disproportionate need. But the process was not framed as a project to overcome racial inequality, but as a revolution that was empowering all the people and was seeking to protect the social and economic rights of all the people. The benefits of the process of change for blacks were recognized and known by all, but not emphasized.

The Cuban approach to racial inequality was more subtle, addressing racial inequality with a frame of reference that was not racially polarizing. In retrospect, observing the difference in the two societies with respect to race, the Cuban approach was clearly politically intelligent. It was formulated by Fidel consciously, in order to avoid a white backlash, which concerned him as a real possibility, because of widespread racist attitudes among whites. He was aware that many white peasants and workers were committed revolutionaries, except on the question of race. He needed their support to carry forward with the revolutionary project, so he understood that the situation had to be managed with political intelligence. He believed that taking practical steps in defense of the rights of all would gradually reduce racial prejudices, which, he understood, could not be eliminated by revolutionary decree. He believed that through equal educational opportunity, in which black and white children would be attending school together and involved in recreational activities together, racism would be overcome. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., shared this belief, but Dr. King was denied the possibility of guiding his people toward its realization.

With the sustained structural crisis of the world-system, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the nation, a popular rebellion with respect to police violence against blacks, and a polarizing and unstable personality in the White House, the United States is in a critical historical moment. Is the Left prepared? I fear not, but perhaps an alternative, more politically intelligent Left will suddenly come to the fore, lifted up by the political demands of the historic moment.

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