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**Racial justice**

The racial justice protests of the summer of 2020 tied to four years of #Resistance, but more precisely to the unresolved Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests of 2014 – 2015 that preceded it. What both BLM movements accomplished was to elevate racial justice as a talking point without altering the distribution of power. Broader questions regarding the nature and purpose of the police were brought to the fore. But these were countered using the same analytical framework that was used to claim racial bias in police killing of citizens. The Progressive social science of the twentieth century successfully instantiated the idea of ‘black criminality’ that served the political purpose of legitimating race-based police repression.

When called upon to answer for New York City’s stop-and-frisk program, former Mayor Michael Bloomberg offered that black and brown youth were targeted because ‘that is where the crime is.’ This idea of racial disparity in criminality has a long, inglorious history in the U.S. Of current relevance is the twentieth century Progressive effort to explain social outcomes like ‘crime’ using racist premises. With more detail provided below, when race is used to organize arrest data in order to explain crime, then by construction, race ‘explains’ crime. However, the same is true when race is used to explain police killing of citizens. The answer one gets is a product of the structure of the question.

Within a broader framework of social justice regarding police violence, twenty-six citizens of the US are killed by the police for every one German citizen that is. The ratio of men to women killed by the police in the US is 25:1. Those in the bottom income quintile are more than three times as likely to be killed by the police than those in the top. Where race shows up is that across the income distribution blacks are more likely to be killed by the police than whites. However, the 25:1 gender ratio means that far more white men are killed by the police than black women\*. Explanations can be developed for this outcome. But the need for additional information illustrates the racist basis of claiming that race is determinative.

\*(Assume the population-adjusted ratio of blacks to whites killed by the police is 3:1. Simplistically, but to an extent that isn’t likely to be undone with qualifying data, this provides a 25:3 ratio of white men to black women killed by the police).

The point here isn’t to claim that any of these is the one true answer, but rather that disparity is a flawed and reactionary way of considering social justice problems. Consider, if nationality alone is used to ‘explain’ police killing of citizens, the ‘problem’ is being American. If gender is used, the problem is being male. If Family Income is used, the problem is low family income. And if race is used, the problem is being black. As the graphs above and below illustrate, more blacks are poor than rich. Mathematically, even if racial disparity in police killing was ended, more blacks than whites would still be killed through their relative class position.

As with mass incarceration, the scale and scope of police killing of citizens in the US is so far outside of analogous international experience that limiting the problem to racial difference is to leave out crucial information about the nature of this racial difference. Were racial parity within the US achieved, American blacks would still be killed by the police at twenty-six times the rate of Germans and three times the rate of Canadians. And they would still be killed by the police at one-and-one-half-times the rate of white Americans. This is half the population adjusted ratio of blacks killed relative to whites because having lower income ‘explains’ half of the race-based difference in police violence.

As should be clear, considering other categories of disparity has nothing to do with the fey claim that ‘all lives matter.’ The use of race-based analyses throughout the twentieth century to legitimate policies of racial repression – including sending the police to violently repress communities of color under the rubric of ‘fighting crime,’ should beg the question of why it is now perceived as a basis for liberation politics? The fact that two iterations of Black Lives Matter came to prominence without redistributing power gives context to the question.

This doesn’t mean that race is irrelevant as a social discriminator or empty as social identity. In the U.S., it is quite potent as both. What is does mean is that when social-scientific claims like a relationship between gender and the police killing of citizens is put forward, it neither demonstrates a causal relationship between gender and police killings, nor does it give credence to ‘gender’ as an object in a scientific sense. Race as it is used in disparity analyses is implied to do both. Conversely, if other categories like class explain half of police killing of blacks in the US, race as a category (and class, gender) doesn’t represent what it is claimed to represent.

That the categorical conception of race neither proves that race is a thing, nor its relationship to social outcomes, is important to understand. Efforts to codify race as a thing were found in American Jim Crow laws and in the Nazi’s Nuremberg Laws. Briefly, is the child of one black parent and one white parent half-black or half-white? The difference matters when race is codified. Also, who/what are the archetypes of ‘black’ and ‘white’ needed map descent? Judaism is a religion that the Nazis codified as race. Was a non-racial Jew who practices Judaism a Jew or not according to Nazi law? These absurdities illustrate how dodgy race is as a concept.

A soft notion of race and/or gender identity denoting social belongingness as it is perceived by people is occasionally brought forward in contrast to the hard categorical identity of social science. The first paradox is group identity held by individuals. Group identity is by definition ‘externally’ determined within an individualist view if identity creation. Furthermore, the idea that identity is chosen runs counter the very idea that it is ‘real’ in the sense that it is socially determinative. Consider, for the police to target people by race, a questionnaire isn’t distributed asking people which groups they self-identify as belonging to.

Excerpted: ‘Police Violence, Racial Justice and Class’

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