

A NEW REPORT FROM OCCUPIED TERRITORY

A Reflection by John Shively

In 1966, James Baldwin wrote his famous essay, “A Report from Occupied Territory.” In it, he recounts the story of a salesman from Harlem, a young father of two, who was accused of committing a crime by asking the police why they were beating up a child on the side of the street. For that simple inquiry, the police beat and arrested the man and took him back to the station where they beat him again. The man escaped with his life, but he was hospitalized and lost an eye from the battering he received.

While Baldwin’s insightful essay focuses on police brutality in Harlem, his larger aim is to look at America as a whole. He writes:

I have witnessed and endured the brutality of the police many more times than once—but, of course, I cannot prove it. I cannot prove it because the Police Department investigates itself, quite as though it were answerable only to itself. But it cannot be allowed to be answerable only to itself. It must be made to answer to the community which pays it, and which it is legally sworn to protect, and if American Negroes are not a part of the American community, then all of the American professions are a fraud.

Whenever I try to talk with my white peers about racism in our country today, I am often confronted with arguments about ways conditions have generally improved for black Americans. So goes a typical argument: “It’s no longer socially acceptable for people to use racial slurs, people of color can build wealth, and we even had a black president!” The problem is that such indicators do not mean an absence of racism, but that its expressions are more subtle and covert, because such attitudes are socially unacceptable. As a result, these subdued forms go underground and make it harder for us to identify and deal with them. The myth of progress convinces us that things have improved. But this myth is particularly pernicious in the way it lulls us into believing things have changed for the better when they have not. America still has not really wrestled with its original sin of slavery and racism, and particularly the ways structural racism is often built into policing institutions.

I think about the recent death of George Floyd on a Minneapolis sidewalk. Police officers watched one of their coworkers kill a black man who pleaded for his life with onlookers present. I wonder if, in some ways, the only difference between now and 1966 is that the incident is on camera for the whole world to see. In 1968, prominent segregationist and former Alabama Governor George Wallace was running for President when he quipped, “When the looting starts, the shooting starts.” President Donald Trump tweeted the same words recently as the protestors took over Minneapolis’ third police precinct.

This is not to say that progress has been lacking since the 1960s. But it is clear that in America’s desire to create a post-racial society—perhaps much like our approach to the COVID-19 virus—we grew weary of the actual work and talked ourselves into believing racism was simply over, or at least conquered.

I think about the response of police toward protestors in Minneapolis, as opposed to typical police response in other parts of the country. The protestors in Minneapolis were not openly armed, and yet the police met them with tear gas, rubber bullets, and pepper spray. By contrast,

weeks ago, armed protestors entered government buildings, in places like Michigan, with no resistance, few arrests, and a generally reserved response by law enforcement.

Though I do not condone violence, I was hardly shocked when violence erupted in Minneapolis after police met a peaceful protest with force. Aggressive policing of protests is a tactic often used to escalate tensions in hopes that protestors will respond in kind, thus justifying the level of police response while portraying protestors as violent and unreasonable.

In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “In the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear?” America has failed to hear the cry of people of color as their communities are overpoliced and routinely subjected to unreasonable violence by those sworn to protect them.

I think about the strong concerns expressed about looting, yet there hasn’t been enough anger over the violence inflicted on an unarmed man in handcuffs who meets death while three officers sit on top of him, one with his knee on his neck, while the man begs for respite and finally dies—all in front of witnesses in broad daylight. As Louis Hyman, professor of history at Cornell, stated in 2016, “Riots occur because these police killings just keep happening, no matter how many peaceful marches happen. It is, in every sense, maddening.”

In recent months, several other killings of young black people have stirred a great sense of injustice around the country. Twenty-five-year-old Ahmaud Arbery was shot near Brunswick, Georgia, while jogging past three white men who claimed to be making a “citizen’s arrest” with no more suspicion than the color of Mr. Arbery’s skin. The men responsible were not arrested until video of the incident was made public, and an outcry demanded they be held accountable.

On March 13, Breonna Taylor was shot by police in Louisville, Kentucky, as they served a “no knock” warrant on her apartment. As the police forced entry without announcing themselves, Ms. Taylor’s boyfriend shot at law enforcement, believing them to be intruders. Her family has filed a wrongful death lawsuit, after it was revealed the police already had a wanted suspect in custody.

I think about the continued injustice of being black in America, and my heart breaks. It breaks my heart because this is not a new injustice, but one that is built into the fabric of American institutions. It breaks my heart because so many white people have remained silent for far too long—and that includes myself. It is time for every one of us to do the hard work of dismantling and reconstructing the systems that perpetuate racism in America.

For now, we should hold accountable the officers responsible for George Floyd’s death. We owe our prayers to Mr. Floyd, his family, the City of Minneapolis, and all those who experience racism and discrimination. Then we need to act to make sure that killings like this become a thing of the past.

When James Baldwin writes we are in “occupied territory,” he reveals an important truth. But an even deeper truth is that God’s Spirit occupies this territory. As co-laborers with God, we must ALL—as the Spirit gives utterance—consider our role in overcoming racism in all its various forms and sources. May we be up to the task!

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