

# Race and Class in Obama's U.S.

Becca Bor



'Black Lives Matter'

Protests against police brutality have erupted across U.S. cities and campuses since the end of November. Over a hundred thousand people, mainly young, and led by Black youth, have come out on the streets raising the banner of 'Black Lives Matter.' Protesters have used a variety of tactics, from mass rallies to die-ins, highway blockades, student walkouts and shutting down subways. These protests have forced a national spotlight on rampant police violence and racism in the United States, in the context of the supposed post-racial era of the Obama presidency.

This protest movement began in Ferguson, Missouri when Officer Darren Wilson murdered Michael Brown, an unarmed, Black youth in broad daylight and left his body lying in the street for four hours. In many ways, the police murder of a Black man is a typical occurrence in the U.S., where a Black person is killed every 28 hours by a police officer, security guard or a vigilante<sup>1</sup>. But what made Ferguson different was that the people of Ferguson, mainly young and Black, organised a protest, vigil or rally every single day - for 108 days - until the grand jury announced that it would not indict Officer Wilson. It

<sup>1</sup><https://mxgm.org/operation-ghetto-storm-2012-annual-report-on-the-extrajudicial-killing-of-313-black-people/>

was the eruption of protest and the violent response of the police who confronted the protesters with tear gas and rubber bullets that drew national attention to Michael Brown's murder.

Michelle Alexander, civil rights activist and author of *The New Jim Crow*, acknowledged why the whole world was paying attention to Ferguson on her facebook wall:

As we await the grand jury's decision, I want to take this opportunity to say thank you – a deep, heart-wrenching thank you – to all the organizers and activists who took to the streets following Michael Brown's killing and who refused to stop marching, raising their voices, and crying out for justice. It is because of them – their courage, boldness, vision and stamina – that the world is paying attention to what is happening in a suburb called Ferguson. The world is not watching because an unarmed black man was killed by the police. That's not news. What made this police killing different was that the people in Ferguson – particularly the young people – rose up and said 'We Will Not Take It Any More'. 'Our Lives Matter' 'Black Lives Matter'. And their cry has been heard around the world. No matter what the grand jury does, let us remember that true justice will come

only when our criminal injustice system is radically transformed: when we no longer have militarized police forces, wars on our communities, a school-to-prison pipeline, and police departments that shoot first and ask questions later. True justice will be rendered not when a single ‘guilty’ verdict is rendered in one man’s case, but when the system as a whole has been found guilty and we, as a nation, have committed ourselves to repairing, as best we can, the immeasurable harm that has been done.

The grand jury’s decision to not indict Darren Wilson was not surprising, yet it sparked outrage and protests broke out in every corner of the U.S. The movement’s flames were fanned when days later, a grand jury in New York announced that it would not indict Officer Daniel Pantaleo who killed Eric Garner, another unarmed Black man, in a chokehold that was captured on video.

The slogan of the protests ‘Black Lives Matter’ is critically important. It affirms that in the US Black lives do not matter and can be discarded in the middle of the day, like Mike Brown’s body. It is a basic demand for equality, dignity and respect - and a clear assertion that in 2015, Black lives are still regarded as less than white lives, a fact that was enshrined in the US Constitution under slavery with the 3/5 Compromise. This was a constitutional assertion that Blacks were 3/5 of a white person for the purposes of taxation, as slaves were property, and so that slaves, who could not vote themselves, could be counted towards population fig-

ures for representation. This gave slaveholding states more representation per voting citizen - white, landholding men - than other states. Though the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments technically repealed the 3/5 Compromise, the reality of inequality and racism in the United States reaffirms the need to fight for true political and economic equality for African Americans.

## State of Black America

The Black population in the United States makes up only 14 percent of the total population. Yet, the U.S. is so segregated that white Americans have social networks that are 91 percent white; and 75 percent of whites do not socialise with any people of colour.<sup>2</sup> This is important backdrop to understand why the response to the movement against police brutality looks so different amongst white Americans and African Americans. It is also why large swaths of the U.S. can ignore the material conditions for African Americans after the economic crisis.

The economic recession hit the U.S. extremely hard in the aftermath of the 2008 banking crisis. As the banks were bailed out, American wages stagnated, their houses foreclosed and unemployment ballooned. Yet, the recession hit Black America the hardest.

The foreclosure rate of Black homeowners was twice than of whites. This is both because subprime mortgage lenders targeted Black communities into taking out the riskiest of loans and because Black workers were the hardest hit with unemployment and have the lowest rates of overall wealth, in savings and assets. Not only did the housing crisis hit homeowners, but renters, who are overwhelmingly poorer, were also hit hard. Studies have

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/08/self-segregation-why-its-hard-for-whites-to-understand-ferguson/378928/>

shown that Black women have felt the brunt of evictions and are twice as likely to be evicted as male tenants. The research in Milwaukee, a mid-size Midwestern city, showed that Black women made up 40 percent of evictions, even though they are only 13 percent of tenants.<sup>3</sup> The rate of evictions and foreclosures in Black America has further destabilised families struggling to make ends meet. Furthermore, 45 percent of the U.S. poor and 40 percent of the U.S. homeless are African American, and 90 percent of Black children live in homes that at some point will be dependent on food stamps.

Income disparities between white and Black households have gotten worse since the 1960s. Today, Black households on average make only 59 percent of their white counterparts. Median income for Black households is only 39,760 (US dollars), whereas it is \$67,175 for white households. In the 1960s, the difference between households was \$19,000, while today it is \$27,000, when adjusted for inflation.<sup>4</sup>

Unemployment rates for African Americans, though falling since the beginning of the recession, are twice the level of those of whites, with 20 percent of Black men and 47 percent of Black youth unemployment rates. In some urban areas, such as Detroit and the Southside of Chicago, unemployment is almost 50 percent for Black men. The devastation of union jobs in cities across the rust belt, like Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, Cincinnati and Gary, meant that Black and white auto and steel workers lost their livelihood. Jobs lost in these cities were lost for good, with no industry moving in to replace it. Additionally, there have been major cuts to the pub-

lic sector in the past 30 years, as privatisation has steamed forward and lawmakers pushed through austerity measures, while they paid out the banks and bondholders. The cuts in the public sector disproportionately impacted Black communities, not only for people who use public services, but also the backbone of the workers who administer these services. Cuts to education, health care, the post office and sanitation meant layoffs to stable working class Blacks and women, who disproportionately work in the public sector because of federal, state and municipal non-discrimination laws. Therefore, when inner-city schools are closed, they are not only schools with high percentages of Black students in attendance, but it is their Black teachers who are laid-off, often to not find another job. In Chicago, where Mayor Rahm Emanuel, President Obama's former Chief of Staff, and his appointed school board closed 50 schools in 2013, three quarters of the schools closed were in poor neighborhoods with a student population that was greater than 90 percent Black.

School segregation remains a huge problem in the U.S. with Black and Latino students less likely to attend diverse schools than 20 years ago.<sup>5</sup> This is astonishing given the fact that school desegregation was a central issue in the civil rights movement. The Supreme Court decision in 1954 of *Brown vs. Board of Education* declared that separate schooling was not equal schooling, therefore segregated schools was unconstitutional. For the next 20 years after this decision, African Americans demanded that the federal government enforce their own Supreme Court

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<sup>3</sup><http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=123973493>

<sup>4</sup><http://www.businessinsider.com/the-income-gap-between-blacks-and-whites-2013-8?IR=T>

<sup>5</sup><http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/9/25/56-years-after-littlerockusschoolssegatedbyraceandclass.html>

decision and create policies to integrate schools, such as bussing and quotas. In the 1990s many of these policies were deemed unnecessary and the resegregation of schools ensued.

The sharpest edge of racism in the U.S. is mass incarceration and what Michelle Alexander termed 'The New Jim Crow.' Mass incarceration has been fuelled by the War on Drugs and the US has the highest incarceration rate in the world with 2.3 million people in prison today. At the time of the passing of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act in 1986, which marked the beginning of the War on Drugs, the prison population was 300,000. Over the course of the last 30 years, there has been major militarisation of the police, expansion of the prison complexes, increase of surveillance and harassment of people engaged, and perceived to be engaged, in petty crime, increased sentences and no tolerance policies that led to greater imprisonment for lesser crimes, and massive racial profiling of Black and brown people. Out of this craze, came the three strikes policy in California that mandated maximum sentences for anyone on their third conviction, regardless of the crime; the Rockefeller Drug laws, which increased sentencing for crack cocaine often found in poor ghettos, but not the cocaine found in wealthy penthouses and elite college campuses; the expansion of the death penalty and incarceration under the *Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act* of 1996; and the policy of Broken Windows policing, in which police officers arrest people for petty crimes, such as jumping a turnstile in the Subway or loitering on a corner<sup>6</sup>, just to name a few. These policies have led to unprecedented levels of arrests

and incarcerations.

Multiple studies show that white Americans are more likely to use drugs, however Blacks are three times as likely to be arrested than whites, and 45 percent of convicted drug offenders are Black.<sup>7</sup> The Stop and Frisk policy in New York and other cities used the pretext of the War on Drugs to drum up its support. 87 percent of the people stopped in these searches were Black or Latino, even though Blacks and Latinos only make up 52 percent of the population of New York. Additionally, police found nothing on 86 percent of the searches. This policy was only defeated after massive protests, organising and a class-action lawsuit against NYC forced the city to admit that Stop and Frisk was unconstitutional.<sup>8</sup>

In this atmosphere of criminalising Black people, it is no wonder that one in three Black Americans will go through the criminal justice system at some point in their lives. According to a New York Times study, there are more Black Americans in jail, on probation or parole than there were enslaved in 1850 before the Civil War.

Today, the sharpest, most naked form of the criminal justice system is the brutal police violence, which has recently come to the fore. Between 2007-2012 police killed at least two black men a week. In fact, the number of police murders today is larger than the number of lynchings in the five years before the anti-lynching legislation was passed in 1922.<sup>9</sup> The Malcolm X Grassroots organisation found in a study that police, vigilantes or security guards kill a Black man every 28 hours. This is in the context of a falling crime rate in the United States. The extra-judicial murder

<sup>6</sup>[http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/crime/2014/12/edward\\_banfield\\_the\\_racist\\_classist\\_origins\\_of\\_broken\\_windows\\_policing.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/crime/2014/12/edward_banfield_the_racist_classist_origins_of_broken_windows_policing.html)

<sup>7</sup>[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/17/racial-disparity-drug-use\\_n\\_3941346.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/17/racial-disparity-drug-use_n_3941346.html)

<sup>8</sup><http://socialistworker.org/2012/06/19/new-york-march-against-stop-and-frisk>

<sup>9</sup><http://socialistworker.org/2014/11/26/when-racism-wears-a-badge>

of civilians, mainly Black and overwhelmingly unarmed, has become the focus of the Black Lives Matter movement, because it is the most outrageous and sickening manifestation of racism today.

Police murder is so common that in the days right before the grand jury decision to not indict Darren Wilson, there were a string of police murders. Police in Cleveland killed Tanisha Anderson, when they slammed her head against the pavement. Tamir Rice, a 12 year old boy, was murdered two seconds after police arrived in the playground where he was playing with a fake gun. And, Akai Gurley was shot by police as he walked down the stairs in his apartment building.

This entrenched police racism is only possible because of racist policies and a culture that dehumanises African Americans. The Black body has been fully criminalised in the U.S. to the extent that being Black assumes guilt. Black children in school are suspended and even arrested for developmentally appropriate behaviors, such as playground fighting, refusing to obey teachers' authority or even displaying behaviors caused by a disability.

Criminalisation of African Americans is not new in the United States. Police are the 'armed bodies of men' who protect state interests and private property. The entire criminal justice system is organised to benefit those in power and racism is central to this dynamic. After Reconstruction was defeated, white supremacy developed a racist hysteria about the dangers of Black men to justify segregation and lynching. This was enabled by an alliance between Northern industrialists and the Southern planter class to roll back Reconstruction and divide the white and black working class. Angela Davis writes about the image of the Black man lurking in the shadows to rape white women and the way in

which this racist boogeyman led to countless Black men arrested for rapes of white women that they did not commit. She also writes of stereotype of the 'promiscuous Black women' which justified rape of Black women by white men.

After the economic crisis of the 1970s, in an attempt to justify gutting of social services, another Black monster was created. This time it was the welfare queens driving Cadillacs and cashing in their welfare checks and the crack babies born of Black women addicted to crack cocaine.

In fact, anti-Black racism is so entrenched, that Darren Wilson's testimony to the grand jury can only be understood as logical through a racist paradigm. As Keeanga Yamahtta-Taylor pointed out, Wilson's account of how he shot Mike Brown was filled with language that would never be seen as a plausible story if Mike Brown were white.

It is, in fact, the racist dehumanization of Brown that holds Wilson's story together. The only way to believe Darren Wilson is to suspend belief in Brown's humanity, his literal humanness. In Wilson's testimony, Brown becomes a wild animal—or a "demon," as the officer refers to Brown—who tossed Wilson around like a rag doll, "grunted aggressively," was impervious to gunshot wounds and only stopped when he was shot in the head.<sup>10</sup>

Wilson turned Mike Brown into an object: A scary thing. A thing that was dangerous and guilty in his being, regardless of his actions. That is the reality for African Americans in the United States. After Trayvon Martin was murdered by

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<sup>10</sup><http://socialistworker.org/2014/11/26/when-racism-wears-a-badge>

George Zimmerman, there was a national conversation, so to speak, about the ‘talk’ that every Black parent has with his or her child, particularly if that child is a boy. The talk is that you have to be careful, because you might be seen as a threat - don’t run down the street, never put your hands in your pocket, don’t loiter anywhere, don’t leave a store without buying something, don’t disagree with a policeman, don’t sag your pants, don’t grow your hair, etc. In other words, it is not safe to be Black in America because there is a good chance you will be a victim of violence from the state, regardless of your own actions.<sup>11</sup>

It is not safe to walk home from the store, because you may be gunned down like Trayvon Martin or Mike Brown.

It is not safe to ride the subway, because you might be murdered like Oscar Grant.

It is not safe to hang out with friends in a park, because you might be killed like Rekia Boyd.

It is not safe to walk down the stairs in your own apartment building, because you may be shot like Akai Gurley.

It is not safe to go to your own bachelor party, because you might be murdered in a hail of bullets like Sean Bell.

It is not even safe to be in your own home because the police might kill you, like Stephan Watts.

The list goes on and on.

The Black Lives Matter movement comes in the context of the Obama presidency. His election in 2008 was characterised by hope, excitement, euphoria and change. So many people, particularly young people, voted for him as a rejection of the Bush years marked by economic collapse, the racism of Katrina and the endless wars. Candidate Obama spoke about inequality and the hope for a different,

more just America. With his election, the first Black family moved into the White House, built by slaves. And, with his election, came many claims that the U.S. has finally become a post-racial society. That, at long last, Obama represented a culmination of Black political history - that finally, Black America had made it.

Regardless of Obama’s 90 percent approval rating from Black America, life for African Americans has actually gotten worse under his presidency. Rather than focusing on meaningful reforms to the structural racism that African Americans face, Obama lectured Black Americans on their ‘moral shortcomings.’ This is the continued personal responsibility refrain that has characterised the neoliberal period, namely that success and failure can be boiled down to the individual and is not based on social relations. Obama has told Black youth to ‘pull up their pants,’ Black fathers that ‘fatherhood does not end at conception,’ and told Black families to stop eating cold fried chicken and to stop complaining about racism. Yet, he doesn’t present structural solutions to food deserts, which cause many families to eat unhealthily; or to mass incarceration, which causes many fathers to be separated from their families; or to school closings in mainly Black neighborhood, which needs to be understood as a racist policy.

At a commencement speech at Morehouse College, a historically Black college, Obama had this to say to the young graduates:

We know that too many young men in our community continue to make bad choices. And I have to say, growing up, I made quite a few myself. Sometimes I wrote off my own failings as just another ex-

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<sup>11</sup><http://socialistworker.org/2012/03/29/what-all-black-men-must-learn>

ample of the world trying to keep a black man down. I had a tendency sometimes to make excuses for me not doing the right thing. But one of the things that all of you have learned over the last four years is there's no longer any room for excuses. . . . Nobody cares how tough your upbringing was. Nobody cares if you suffered some discrimination. And moreover, you have to remember that whatever you've gone through, it pales in comparison to the hardships previous generations endured – and they overcame them. And if they overcame them, you can overcome them, too.<sup>12</sup>

Obama and other Black leaders of today capitalise on an ideology of colourblindness. They came of age in the period after the civil rights movement and during a retreat from protest politics. They downplay race, ignore institutionalised and structural racism, emphasise pragmatic and acceptable politics and focus on individual rather than collective antidotes for economic and political grievances.<sup>13</sup>

The Black Lives Matter protests have pushed back against the discourse of colourblindness and notions of a post-racial America, which has brought to light clear divisions within the movement. This was most notable at a mass rally in December that was called by Al Sharpton's National Action Network (NAN). NAN tightly controlled the stage and did not recognise or invite to speak any of the young people instrumental to building the national movement. Young Black women

from Ferguson demanded to take the stage and eventually were able to speak out, causing both embarrassment for Sharpton and leading to a new round of criticism against the young activists.<sup>14</sup>

Yet, the post-racial discourse did not appear out of nowhere. It has been a systematic attempt by those in power to delegitimise revolutionary change and focus on small reforms thereby asserting that capitalism is both generally successful and racially neutral. The mainstream mantra claims that racism no longer exists now that there is no longer legal segregation, lynch mobs no longer attack Black men in the open, media and politicians no longer commonly use the n-word, and crosses are rarely burnt on the lawns of Black families. Since overt racism is now unacceptable, it no longer is a problem.

This is obviously not the case.

The civil rights movement took on racism enshrined in law, but also de facto and institutionalized racism in the U.S. The discrepancies between white and Black America led to demands to change policies that had unequal outcomes, regardless of whether or not the intentions were racist, such as discrimination in housing, education, and policing policies. In fact, it was the impact of the civil rights movement that forced the government to address racial inequity and poverty, in every skin colour, in the 1960s. These so called Great Society programmes that President Lyndon B. Johnson enacted between 1964-65 began to address systematic failures of the state.

At the end of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life, he campaigned vociferously for the poor, initiating the Poor People's Campaign and ultimately losing support from

<sup>12</sup><http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/19/remarks-president-morehouse-college-commencement-ceremony>

<sup>13</sup><http://wearemany.org/a/2013/06/political-economy-of-racism>

<sup>14</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XmBVQqAa9Y4>

many middle class whites and Blacks. Right before he was murdered, MLK went to Memphis to support a sanitation workers strike and as Brian Jones describes one of his last speeches:

King told the Biblical story of Dives, who went to hell because he passed Lazarus every day and refused to see his plight. King warned, to raucous applause, ‘If America does not use her vast resource of wealth to end poverty and make it possible for all of God’s children to have the basic necessities of life, she too is going to hell.’ He went on to

show how the strike was a part of the new direction the movement needed to take:

‘With Selma and the voting rights bill one era of our struggle came to a close and a new era came into being. Now our struggle is for genuine equality, which means economic equality. For we know that it isn’t enough to integrate lunch counters. What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn’t earn enough money to buy a hamburger and cup of coffee?’