

The Race and Ethnicity Hub

Overseer to (Police) Officer; Crime, injustice and anti-Blackness

Anthony Gunter:

Hi, everyone. Thanks for joining us. Today, we're going to be talking about crime, justice, and anti-blackness, and we're going to look at it from a-- looking at the police officer from the overseer to the police officer. Today, what we're going to talk about is looking at the link between policing and going back in time 500 years to colonialism.

And lots of people think, well, what does that have to do with now? What does that have to do with the present? Well, it has a lot to do with the present, and one of the interesting things is when we talk about Black Lives Matter.

The Black Lives Matter has generated a lot of interest and enthusiasm and lots of people-- now everything around race or justice is linked to the Black Lives Matter movement. And I suppose we can make parallels between the Black Lives Matter movement and the Civil Rights movement with Martin Luther King. And even though at the time it was a pretty radical movement, over time, liberal politics kind of like has adopted that movement into a sort of like acceptable face of black protest. And I would argue that Black Lives Matter is similar to that. And if you look at, say, the New Black Panther Party, they are not talking about #blacklivesmatter.

They actually believe that you need to get guns and arms to defend yourself because if the police are basically shooting you in your bed, which was a case with Brianna Taylor, then you need to have arms and defend yourself. And that taps into 500 years of resistance within the black movement and the struggle around the black diaspora from Nat Turner to Toussaint Louverture in Haiti, Sam Sharp in Jamaica, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, women who played a very prominent role in the fight for justice.

So, the issue isn't also just about George Floyd in the US. It's also about lethal police violence in the democracies of Western Europe-- say, in France, here in the UK, as well as in the former colonial territories like Jamaica and Brazil. And interestingly, there's debates at the moment in Nigeria about the anti-robbery squad. Anyone who knows Jamaica knows that there's lots of discussions about police brutality in Jamaica.

And you would argue, well, these are all black territories. What's that got to do with colonialism? Well, interestingly, the Jamaica constabulary force was established by the British colonial powers going back to 1716, early 1700s, and played a prominent role in the massacre of the black protesters at the Morant Bay rebellion. Similar to Nigeria, that force was established in, I think, the 1860s.

And again, it was used by the British to mute unrest in Nigeria.

So, the force and brutality of policing that we see around the world in places like Australia, Brazil, Jamaica, and America has its link to colonialism and slavery. But today, we're going to mainly focus on the United States and the UK.

So all right, I'm going to play you Blast master KRS ONE. Anyone who is into the old school hip hop, the teacher.

[MUSIC - KRS ONE, "SOUND OF DA POLICE"]

Whoop whoop! That's the sound—

--for peace and equality. With my car hooked up, you know you want to follow me. Your laws are minimal because you won't even think about looking at the real criminal. This has got to cease. Cause we be getting hyped to the sound of the police.

Whoop, whoop, that's the sound of the police. Whoop, whoop, that's the sound of the beast. Whoop, whoop, that's the sound of the police. Whoop, whoop, that's the sound of the beast.

Now here's a little truth. Open up your eye. While you're checking out the boom-bap, check the exercise. Take the word overseer, like a sample. Repeat it very quickly in a crew, for example. Overseer, overseer, overseer, overseer, officer, officer, officer, officer, officer. Yeah, officer from overseer. You need a little clarity? Check the similarity.

The overseer rode around the plantation. The officer is off patrolling all the nation. The overseer could stop you what you're doing. The officer will pull you over just when he's pursuing.

The overseer had the right to get ill. And if you fought back, the overseer had the right to kill. The officer has the right to arrest. And if you fight back, they put a hole in your chest. Woo! They both ride horses. After 400 years, I got no choice—

SPEAKER 1: Yep, that was 1993, and I think that that rap really surmises the link between colonialism and slavery and present-day police brutality. And I thought, you know, just how brilliant, in a musical way, to actually at least call it teacher, teacher.

But really, he was-- you know, so Black Lives Matter has happened in the past four, five years. This has been ongoing, you know, people talked about this for centuries and decades and rapping about it from 1993 and earlier. So, racism, slavery, and colonialism-- let's look at a link.

It's no coincidence that Britain became the first industrialized nation and the United States became the second industrialized nation. Eric Williams, the black scholar from the Caribbean, was talking about this as far back as 1944. Unfortunately, many white academics, historians, poo-pooed that idea. And even today, they still deny the link between slavery and the Industrial Revolution in Britain.

And in fact, it was Baptiste in 2014 who again talked about how America became the second industrialized nation on the backs of enslaved Africans. So, you know, slavery was very important, very-- it created loads of money. And for that reason, slave masters and colonialists didn't want to give it up without a fight.

So if you look at the slave codes, they were like laws that basically controlled slave life from cradle to the grave in terms of who they could speak to, who they could marry, what languages they could speak, playing an instrument. So, if you look at Jamaican music as an example, it's very much bass and drum heavy.

When you look at US music, it's less drum heavy because drums were banned in America. So, the blues and gospel have a different form to, say, Brazilian or Cuban music because of things like you couldn't use a drum because they thought they were talking to themselves to get a rebellion. So that's the slave codes.

But then after slavery, things didn't get any better. And what we then have is what we call Black Codes and the codification and institutionalization of second-class black citizenship. And that was in America as well as the Caribbean islands.

And in the south of America, the southern landowners were unwilling to let go of their former free labour force because it created this huge empire. It gave them a status in the world that they didn't want to let go of if they had to now pay these people wages.

So, they created these laws. If they broke the laws, what happened was under the 13th Amendment in the United States of America, which I'll come to now, you were only-- which freed the slaves.

Those slaves were only free as long as they didn't commit a crime. So, what these devilish slave owners did in the south was that they decided to create all these things like vagrancy laws and so forth, which meant that you could arrest ex-slaves. And then once they're arrested and convicted, what do you do with them?

They were no longer free. You could now lease them back to the slave owners and don't pay them. So, it was Dubois called the new slavery.

And if anyone wants to see this, you can see on Netflix "The 13th Amendment." I'm sure many of you have, but if you haven't seen it, it's really tough watching, but it's a really amazing and insightful, beautiful film. And it's also got a great rap score from Common. Again, very emotive, but I think it really elicits the sorts of situations that's been going on in America for the past 400 or 500 years.

So with the pernicious legacy of slavery and colonialism, the Jim Crow system of white supremacy in the South, again, because it was very profitable, you then had the application of segregationist laws which barred black people from schools and restaurants as well as repressive laws targeting, again, vagrancy and voter registration. But you also had what we call extra-legal terror from the Ku Klux Klan who would basically keep Blacks in their place.

So if anyone had ever seen a wonderful video about how they burnt down a very special place in America-- it was the first place in America that was almost like the Wall Street; and because they were frightened of black people having their own businesses and doing really, really well, they basically bunt it to the ground. And that's what you're dealing with.

People talk about the racist north-- so the racist south but the enlightened north. The northern cities were no better. They didn't have particularly segregationist laws.

But what they did do was they stopped black people from living in particular areas. What they did, they meant that rents went up. They also made black people live in certain places where they were poisoning the water. So, in places like Baltimore, there's children born with the effects of 40, 50 years ago having to drink that water. and so really dreadful stuff that has been going on and, of course, police brutality, which is an ongoing thing.

So, one of the things about the Black Lives Matter movement is it's all about America. It's all about George Floyd. But we're in the UK. So, a lot of liberal minded people in the UK will say, oh yeah, you know, look at Britain, you know?

We're not like that weird. We're decent, you know? We do things correctly. We were the first country to get rid of slavery, you know?

Well, unfortunately, that's not the case. And again, we can see the link between colonialism and slavery and present-day policing and what we call colonial policing-- so going back to what I talked about in terms of Jamaica and Nigeria. We had that.

But of course, with Windrush, 1950s-60s coloured immigration, we now have internal colonies.

So, in places like Bristol, in Handsworth in Birmingham, St. Paul's in Bristol, in Toxteth, in Moss Side Manchester, all of these areas that had large numbers of black people in them, the police treat those internal populations differently to the White population. So if you look at the Metropolitan Police force, which it was, at a time-- which was created in the 1830s, it was created under the idea that it was about using minimal force, and you worked with the consent of the community.

However, that didn't work when it was a black population. You know, the police have never worked with community consent, and they've never used minimal force when you're talking about the black population of the UK. And this was most certainly brought to light in the 1970s with the whole mugging crisis.

And I would argue that Britain's race relations problem and particularly its crime problem is as a reflection to Enoch Powell. It's basically saying Enoch Powell was right. Enoch Powell, his rivers of blood speech-- I think it was 1968-- was very interesting, that he lost his job as the frontbench politician. But many in the country actually felt he was silenced and that he was talking a truth. And for me, it's no coincidence that four years after Enoch Powell's rivers of blood speech, the Metropolitan Police start to release crime statistics which show the overrepresentation of young black African Caribbean kids in crime and mugging.

And I believe-- you know, not just I believe, but I think research would tell us that actually, it was a way of maintaining the racist narrative without being seeming to be racist. So, the thing about crime is it's a fact. You know, black people do crime. They're muggers.

So therefore, they need to be policed more. And if we provide statistics that the media utilize, that's evidence. And so, I think the narrative around race and crime is one of around race, climate, and immigration. It's linked to the idea that we should never have let these black and brown people into the country.

But we won't say that we're racist by saying that. It's just a fact of their behaviour, which is inconsistent with the values and morals of present Britain. And this goes back to the history of black fears.

We've had the race/youth/crime nexus when we have that image there of young black kids and gangs. And we have national and local news media, politicians, and some white academics who obsess about the threats posed by, as we said, before black muggers, rioters, the yardies, and now we have the black gangs. They're ready for us.

And there are those who say, well, they are robbing and killing each other. They are rapping and putting up YouTube videos. You know, people like me, I'm an apologist for black criminality.

But this is not the case. And if we look at now lots of stories about county lines-- and at a newspaper like The Guardian, on the one hand, they say they're very liberal. They talk about deaths in custody and police brutality and so forth.

But The Guardian newspaper is always feeding us this story about gangs in the county lines. And these two pictures here-- and this is supposedly of some big black gang dealer-- gang member. And we can see that he's got a big knife. He's got his trainers. And look, he's got his bling on. And this is supposed to be Al Capone of the 21st century Britain.

You know, as someone who's worked with young people from so many years, this is just a young man who is probably dealing on a very, very low level. But accompanying this media report was an actual academic report by an academic criminologist who tells us how county lines is working and how these young men are making all this money, and they're buying trainers and sportswear and designer wear we see with this money. This is, to me, a problem, and it's a problem because I see it as white male academic obsession with black gangbangers and another reason why we have to decolonize the criminology curriculum as well as the social science curriculum.

I've put up three pictures of three books around gangs. I could have also put up pictures of the authors. And they are all middle aged, middle class white men who-- I don't want to be flippant, but I don't think they would last two minutes if they were to go into a crackdown with black gang bangers. You know, they couldn't.

But yet these people are taken as the experts. They know what they're talking about. They talk about the mandem and on road and the youngsters, completely misinterpreting the language of the street and what actually is going on. But they are white professors, so what they say goes.

So all of these books are colour-blind. They don't talk about race. But when you delve inside them, they basically describe fell, inhuman, violent black folks-- you know, animals.

You know, that's what they are in this book. But they don't-- but you wouldn't look and get that from the cover of the book. And the key-- Biko Agozino says that criminology and other social natural sciences colluded with the colonialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy and provided the scientific justification for their ongoing atrocities and crimes against humanity.

But the key thing is their criminology is preoccupied with the pathologies and lawbreaking activities of individuals at the low end of the food chain in the service of the dominant classes.

They do it on the part of those who have power in society. So, they ignore the crimes of the powerful but focus on the crimes of the least powerful in society.

And this is why I have a major problem with these so-called gang studies which put across a scientific fact to prove why we need stop and search, why there's a prison explosion amongst young black people. And it goes back to the fear of black bodies where we have a continued, systematic criminalization and punishment of black children because under 18s are children, you know?

They are not adults. They may look like big adults, but they're still children. They're developing.

But yet the police, criminal justice system, treat them like they are 30, 40-year-old adults. It's aided and abetted by media and by white male academic criminologists. But the reality is that organized crime reflects the racist world of the legal white institutions. And this obsessive focus on low hanging black fruits is easy and also counterproductive but also dangerous.

And one of the things that I've always got back from my research that I've done in the communities of the young people I've worked with is that they all say, well, we don't bring the guns in. We don't bring the class A drugs into the country. And they don't.

That picture of that young black man with the Nike trainers, he was raided in a council flat. He wasn't riding in a mansion in Essex somewhere. So again, if we really want to stop this, we need to go a bit higher up the food chain than we are at the moment.

So, in conclusion, then, it all goes back to-- I was at another talk where someone said that racism kills. And it's been killing for 500 years. And we have stop and search. We have deaths in custody. There's been over 500 suspicious deaths in custody of black and minority ethnic people over the past 30, 40 years.

We have fatal police shootings of so-called gangbangers who therefore, it's OK to shoot them even if they didn't have a gun on their possession, but we were told they did. And what is really alarming-- prison estate. Between 2006 and 2016, the proportion of, let's be clear, black and Muslim-- when we use the term BME, we need to be focusing on its black and Muslim that are disproportionately affected-- who are under 18 rose from 25% to just over 40%. As of December 2019, more than half of male young offenders in the prison estate were black or Muslim.

This is astounding, and it's a problem. And it has to be linked to this notion of coloniality and a fear of blackness that stems back to colonialism and slavery. OK, I'm done now. Thanks for listening.