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What does Social Justice Look Like?

By Robert Gillens

What should social justice look like in an American democracy today? One would at least expect there to be justice for all – no matter what race, religion, gender, age or sexual orientation. However, police brutality and mass incarceration play critical roles in our quest for social justice in America.

The video footage of a group of white police officers beating an unarmed Rodney King on March 3, 1991, went viral. The world watched horrified as men sworn to protect and serve committed heinous acts that were caught on tape by a concerned plumber named George Holiday. Adding injury to the unwarranted attack, an all-white jury acquitted all the cops of any wrongdoing. This led to an uprising in Los Angeles which engulfed the city in flames and ultimately claimed more than sixty lives.

Three decades later, and after numerous unwarranted and controversial police killings of Blacks (Amadou Diallo, Sean Belki, Kathryn Johnston, Oscar Grant, Trayvon Martin, Rekia Boyd, Mario Romero, Timothy Russell, Malissa Williams, Eric Garner, Laquan McDonald, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, Mansur Ball-Bey, Mario Woods, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Breonna Taylor, along with so many others), the violence continues. Recently, Derek Chauvin, a white Minneapolis police officer, was criminally charged with smothering unarmed African-American George Floyd to death by pressing his knee on Floyd's neck. The more than nine-minute incident, captured on a cell phone recording, was Rodney King all over again – but this time on steroids. The recording revealed Chauvin nonchalantly snatching

Floyd's life away as he blatantly ignored Floyd's cries of "I can't breathe" more than twenty times. We also heard Floyd calling for his deceased mother. This outraged millions of Americans of all races, and the world united like never before. Around the globe people came together to protest the killing. Together they said: this is wrong; this is unacceptable, America!

The fact remains, we have rarely seen a group of Black or Latinx cops kill an unarmed white person. Is it because they adhere to the rule of due process? Or are they just more careful? Regardless of the reasons, for us to achieve change, we must honestly recognize that racial profiling and brutality by the police is rooted in institutionalized racism that can be traced to the Atlantic slave trade. Since the end of the slave trade, the violence has continued in the form of kidnapping, rapes, lynching, and other brutal crimes whites have committed against the African family. Many often wonder what have people of color done to deserve such long-term hatred? Is it merely because of the color of their skin? After all, the creator chose to create man with various colors, sizes, and characteristics. The audacity of anyone to question their own maker's creation should be more than troublesome.

Solution: because racism and an abuse of authority can be a deadly cocktail, police candidates should undergo ethical, racial and discriminatory training, and thorough background checks before becoming police officers. There also needs to be greater oversight and supervision over police officers. In addition, there must be accountability for officers who choose to violate these ethical regulations. There must be sovereign immunity civil law amendments and other laws put in place by Congress to end the shoot to kill, or choke to kill an unarmed American.

We have witnessed countless cases where white cops are clearly seen on tape killing unarmed Blacks. However, if they are ever criminally charged, they are systematically acquitted by all-white jurors. Nonetheless, American jurors play a vital role in America's obtaining social justice. Through the criminal justice system, jurors are empowered to be the voice of the voiceless. When jurors, however, fail to convict those blatantly guilty of taking an unarmed American's life, social justice too is smothered to death.

Mass incarceration: America is coined the "land of opportunity." If so, why does America lock up more of its citizens in prison than any other nation in the world? Have we become an aggressive police nation obsessed with engaging our own people? Are we shunning the real rehabilitation that's needed to reform Americans and help them become productive members of our society? Truth be told, mass incarceration sweeps the nation's poorest into a cycle of harsh prison sentences, superficial rehabilitation, excessive catch-22 supervised release, parole and probation terms that lead to more imprisonment.

President Joe Biden has admitted that the 1986 Anti-Crime Bill and the 1994 Crime Bill were among the key factors that led to unwarranted and draconian prison sentences for many Americans, contributing to the country's mass incarcerations problem. Both bills incorporate the "lock-up-throw-away-the-key" approach and the racial disparity in crack-cocaine sentencing laws.

Many ask, why does the federal government have over 98% conviction rate in prosecuting Americans? Any system that is that lopsided is evidence of unfair practices and the lack of social justice. "Our current federal sentencing laws are out of date and often counterproductive," said Republican Congressman Mike Lee from Utah. "We should do as,

President Biden has suggested, seek the elimination of mandatory minimum (prison sentences)...We don't have to seek the highest possible offense with the highest possible sentence...legislatively, we should look at equalizing...what's known as the crack powder ratio, which has had an enormously disproportionate impact on communities of color," said Attorney General Merrick Garland at his February confirmation hearing.

Mass incarceration in America will end and when Congress re-examines and reduces the federal and state sentencing guidelines, when it ends ghost drugs conspiracy charges (based on hearsay and other faulty factors) and multiple sentencing enhancements for prior convictions (after prison terms have already been completed), and when it implements a more fair and transparent criminal justice system, where time actually fits the crime. Then, and only then can social justice truly be effective and shine and sparkle across this nation.

Genre:

Social Justice Essay

Tags

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