



EDGEWOOD COLLEGE

HISTORY DEPARTMENT

DEPARTMENT STATEMENT on the GEORGE FLOYD CASE

As part of the course here at Edgewood entitled “African Americans and Film” we watch Spike Lee’s 1989 film, *Do the Right Thing*. Towards the very end of the film an African American character, “Radio Raheem,” is choked to death by white New York City police officers. As the students and instructor discuss the film they examine the history of police brutality against African American communities. It always ends up being a lengthy discussion as there is so just much to go over.

The George Floyd case in Minneapolis is yet another killing of an unarmed African American person at the hand of police officers. For those grappling with an additional instance of anti-Black violence by the police and the subsequent understandable rage and frustration it produces in response, understanding our history is of critical importance as it clearly shows that the Floyd case is not an aberration in the history of policing African American communities.

Policing in much of the United States grew out of slave catching patrols. In the immediate post-slavery era these slave catching patrols were no longer needed, but many of the very same individuals who had once populated the ranks of the slave catchers now joined police forces that had been developing over the past half century. These early police departments that developed throughout the country were riddled with unqualified candidates as well as corruption through the turn of the 19th century. As America went through the Progressive era in the beginning of the 1900s, it reformed countless areas of American life, from labor and food safety laws, to voting rights. As part of the larger efforts to better our society during these years, Americans also tackled our flawed policing system and we started to see the beginning of the professionalization of police forces throughout the country. Officers received greater formal training and the profession offered relatively decent pay to ideally lure in the best candidates. Unfortunately, police departments did not operate in a vacuum free from the larger anti-Black racism that engulfed the United States, and therefore racism continued to plague police forces throughout the United States.

As the African American Freedom Struggle peaked during the 1940s-1960s, illustrated by massive protests and legal challenges against segregation, African Americans also responded to the continued police brutality against them with anger and sometimes retaliatory violence. Insurrections occurred in Black communities throughout the country, ranging from Watts in 1965, to Chicago in 1966, to Detroit, Newark, Milwaukee and Minneapolis in 1967, to myriad rebellions in the aftermath of King’s assassination in 1968. The Federal Government formed the Kerner Commission to look into the causes of these insurrections, and the Commission cited the terrible relations between the Black community and law enforcement as a prime reason for why so many cities saw violence far, far worse than what is going on in Minneapolis and elsewhere right now.

Also, in the 1960s, largely because of racism and the anti-Black police brutality that is an offshoot of that larger racism, America witnessed the emergence of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California. The original name of the Panthers was “The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense” because one of the main reasons they were formed

was to combat police brutality in their community. The Panthers spread throughout the country to Seattle, New Orleans, Chicago and Milwaukee and roughly 25 other cities. Not only did the Panthers spread as an organization, but so did their tactic of standing up to police forces that were brutalizing communities of color. Partially because of the Panthers as well as because of the police brutality against the Native American community, the American Indian Movement (AIM) was formed in Minneapolis in 1968. As Black people in Minneapolis could attest to, however, police brutality was not restricted to Native Americans, as numerous instances of harassment, beatings, and killings illustrate. In fact, the Floyd case is so disturbing partially because it is so similar to the David Smith case (Minneapolis, 2010), which is comparable to the well-known Eric Garner case (NYC, 2014).

Yet another case that is reminiscent of the Floyd case is the somewhat lesser known death of Derek Williams (2011). Williams, after fleeing from Milwaukee police was pinned down by officers, handcuffed and placed in the back of a police car, where he died, on camera, after gasping for air and pleading for help for over 7 minutes. If this situation could be any worse, the brutal killing of Ernest Lacy (1981) in the back of a Milwaukee police van was supposed to make it so that if a suspect requested medical assistance than the police needed to provide that assistance.

Apparently, we as a society do not learn from our past mistakes and we need to, otherwise we will have many more any instances of police violence against people of color such as Michael Brown (Ferguson, MO., 2014), Dontre Hamilton (Milwaukee, 2014), Laquan McDonald (Chicago, 2014), Tony Robinson (Madison, 2015), Jamar Clark (Minneapolis, 2015), Freddy Gray (Baltimore, 2015), Philando Castile (Minnesota, 2016), Thurman Blevins (Minneapolis, 2018), Breonna Taylor (Louisville, 2020). This is obviously a very incomplete list of violence against Black people by the police, but I would imagine that you get the point.

Looking at the historical record one could say that there is no hope for policing to better itself, and that is inaccurate. Police departments did improve their quality during the Progressive era in terms of their training and expertise. Police departments have also made strides in recent years to use less deadly force, wear body cameras (be more accountable), and become more diverse themselves. Policing, like America however, is still deeply flawed especially when it comes to dealing with issues of race. We must demand policing, and America itself, get better because the consequences could be dire if it, and we, do not.

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