

BLACK DEATH IS AMERICA'S ETHOS: THE COHERENCE OF ANTI-BLACK RACISM IN THE COVID-19 CRISIS

By Tommy J. Curry

COVID-19 is one of the most lethal pandemics of the 21st century. The virus can affect any individual of any social class or race, but unsurprisingly, the death tolls of this virus follow the course of disposability charted by the inequalities of the previous century. Marginalized socio-political groups within various nations such as those who suffer poverty or racial and ethnic minoritization have been particularly vulnerable to the most lethal symptoms,ⁱ while male and elderly demographics have been shown to be at disproportionate risk for contracting the disease.ⁱⁱ The worldwide deaths from COVID-19 have inspired no shortage of appeals to the theoretical resources of Giorgio Agamben's state of exception whereby the suspension of law allows the state to usurp the civil liberties and guaranteed freedom of its citizens or Michael Foucault's biopolitical analyses which frame the power of the government through its ability to let certain populations live or die for the benefit of others.ⁱⁱⁱ To make sense of the deaths created by the COVID-19 crisis, there has been an appeal to the more abstract and normative questions of democratic governance to ascertain how governments around the world are failing their citizens. The expectation scholars from Western democratic societies have is that government bears the responsibility for the safety and security of citizens. There is a responsibility born by citizenry that revolves around care. For these thinkers, death signals the failure of the basic ordinance or social contract that sustains if not serves as the very foundation of Western democracy.

Over the last several months, there has been no shortage of commentaries from public intellectuals and scholars about COVID-19. Rarely have these commentaries resulted in clarification or insight into the conditions specific to the pandemic, but a resurrection of their most preferred categories of political identity. While various humanist sciences (philosophy, literature, race & gender studies) often elide actual science, there is expertise gifted to these scholars as commentators on the death of others that can only be understood as satirical. Now the woman, the worker, the immigrant, etc. are offered to an eager public as a way to understand how their group is threatened the most by the derelict of governments and state agencies. Yet, the marginalized position of these groups shows that the recognition being sought and the endless presentations about these groups at conferences and within the pages of academic journals have little effect on the real world. In this appeal to the ameliorative powers of recognition, the academic and celebrity intellectual reimagines the cause of the marginalized groups as solvable problems that merely need the attention of the right group of liberal whites to be saved. These current analyses assert that the death of the racialized populations can be corrected merely through policy or attention to the lives of groups of people who are deemed disposable—the wretched of the Earth.

Black scholars have offered analyses of Black people dying during the pandemic that rely on an unproven assumption, namely that America, the U.K., and various European societies could equally care for Black people if their values and policies would address anti-Black racism's biases and debilitating consequences for Black people. Behind the pleas for equality and salvation from the very real history of structural racism and societal violence against Black people is the idea that this violence is superfluous when in reality the death of Black people is an integral part of maintaining the Western democratic system and the cherished ideal of the citizen. Our present understanding of the racial consequences of COVID-19 is primarily concerned with disparity and reform, not death and dying.

Understanding Racism as Ethos

Upon the corpses of the disadvantaged and disposable, the bourgeois class of American academics has created, from their collective need to attend to the pandemic, new academic products/commodities that can be consumed by other academics and an anxious public. While Black people are dying at higher rates than other groups in the United States and the United Kingdom, there is an assertion that the deaths of Black people and other oppressed groups are remedied by the grace of benevolent whites.^{iv} Racial inequity has historically been enforced through both active violence and the neglect of the Black populations. Said differently, white supremacist states have simply let Black people die to fulfill their desire to achieve racial superiority in the United States and throughout Europe. COVID-19 is not simply about a crisis that introduces shock or disruption into multiple political systems, it is also an event that has been weaponized to achieve a diminishing of the Black population in the United States and the Caribbean. COVID-19 provides an opportunity to conduct racial warfare without declaring war.

The coronavirus crisis has put tremendous pressure on healthcare systems, the economy, and the basic organization of life in many countries. Naomi Klein recently argued that “Trump’s plan is: a pandemic shock doctrine, featuring all the most dangerous ideas lying around, from privatizing Social Security to locking down borders to caging even more migrants. Hell, he might even try canceling elections.”^v Focusing her work on the tendency of right-wing governments, Klein suggests that it is in moments of crisis that the state unjustly enriches itself without democratic consent. Like the analyses of Agamben and the echoes of Foucault, the liberal inclinations of today’s white radicals presuppose that democratic governance is needed to infuse altruistic values and create socially conscious policies that expand the safety nets for citizens rather than constrain them or auction them off to private corporations. Klein continues: “Thirteen years ago, I wrote a book called *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, described a brutal and recurring tactic by right-wing governments. After a shocking event — a war, coup, terrorist attack, market crash or natural disaster — they exploit the public’s disorientation, suspend democracy, push through radical free market policies that enrich the 1% at the expense of the poor and middle class.”^{vi}

While Klein does offer some analysis of the authoritarian nature of right-wing regimes in Western societies, she misses that the death of Black people is not simply a result of a Democrat or Republican government. Crisis does accelerate the ability of the government to produce policy and act without democratic consensus but this is a characteristic of liberal and right-wing governments.^{vii} The acceleration of political decision making often results in defaulting to the least democratic branch of government—the executive. The concern for the liberty of citizens and the processes of government are of great importance but assume that Black people in the U.S., U.K., and throughout former colonies would enjoy a qualitative difference under democratic regimes that do not find themselves disrupted or in crisis. Regarding racism, the political party in charge of the government is irrelevant as the death of Black people remains integral to the operation of democracy.^{viii}

Within democratic societies, there has always been a tolerance for violence against Black people. Achille Mbembe argues that liberal democracies have always contained enmity within its borders, and in racialized democracies founded on the legacy of slavery a tolerance for the death of the remnant bodies of its colonial past.^{ix} Even while admitting that democracy fails because of its legacy of racism and its origins in the logics of the slave system, Mbembe imagines a free individual able to travel and reject his or her country. He does not imagine the Black being arrested by various forms of captivity within the United States or U.K. Racism is not merely an articulation of negative cognitions about groups of

people into the world. Racism utilizes social maladies as instruments of death. It is an organizing principle in Western societies that guide mortality and seeks to manage the growth of racial populations that compete with the dominant white populations through death. This insight is certainly not new as Derrick Bell argued over a decade ago that:

We have never understood that the essence of the racism we contended against was not simply that we were exploited in slavery, degraded by segregation, and frustrated by the unmet promises of equal opportunity. The essence of racism in America was the hope that we who were Black would not exist.^x

Unfortunately, however, this reality has not informed how we interpret the will of the state and more importantly the aspirations of white citizens in these countries to exist in a world free of Black people. *America's ethos is anti-Black*, yet the analyses proposed in how Black people should understand racism ignores this reality. It is often assumed that America can be better, even though it has never been so. The problem with this logic is that the hope in the political requires an indifference to the Black blood spilled and the Black lives lost to inspire white America—its population and its institutions—to change.

The Trump administration has sent COVID-19 positive deportees to Haiti, while deliberately denying protective equipment and life-saving technology to Caribbean countries.^{xi} By sending COVID-19 positive individuals to already overburdened Black countries that have little resources, Trump's action increases the likelihood of an unstoppable outbreak. Trump has made it publicly clear that he saw no reason for Haitians to migrate to the U.S. According to Trump, Haiti, like other "shithole" Black countries, offered no benefit to America.^{xii} This racist lens not only indicates the political posture of the Trump administration, but indicates a deeply ethnocentric worldview that envisions America as a white republic that should primarily welcome other white nations. The undesirability of Blackness within the borders of the U.S. offers some contextualization of the neglect of Black countries by the Trump administration. However, we must be clear that the lethality of the coronavirus makes the deliberate attempts to infect whole populations an act of violence, if not genocide.

The situation in the U.S. is no less dire. The history of racism has limited the social and economic mobility of Black Americans for generations. Many Black Americans regardless of whether or not they live in overpopulated urban areas or rural communities remain deprived of adequate healthcare access and medical resources. For decades, scholars and public health officials have noted the lack of access to health care and medical technicians attributed them to America's racial segregation and the economic deprivation of minority communities. While it is commonly acknowledged that racism includes various aspects of health inequalities, very few people have asked why these disparities exist in racist societies and what purpose do they serve to the ends of racial domination. The idea that health inequalities are merely accidents, or the unintended consequences of an unequal society fails to recognize how these inequalities drive mortality, life expectancy, and the overall dynamics of racism.

Black people are not only dying because they cannot access care. They are dying because they are being refused care.^{xiii} Black people with symptoms are not being tested or treated by hospitals and emergency clinicians.^{xiv} In the cases where Black people are being admitted, doctors and nurses are letting them die because they are prioritizing other lives.^{xv} What does it mean to simply let Black people die? How do we make sense of the individual doctor's rationalization of this cruelty? Is it merely a coincidence or do such decisions replicate the dominant ethos of the U.S. which insists that Black life has no real meaning? Aiding society's goal through an individual's choice to let sick Black people die has

historically been an aspect of racism.^{xvi} The problem as presented by the virus is not in fact the disruption of the actual practices of racist discrimination but their acceleration. Whereas other facets of life and societal organization are interrupted by COVID-19, the death of Black people finds coherence.^{xvii} The shock to the political, economic, and cultural system of Western democracy draws upon the ethos of white America to maintain the primacy of white life. Disaster ignites a powerful impulse among whites to preserve their racial kind. This is not only in the neglect of the disproportionately affected racial and ethnic populations within these geographies, but the deliberate actions on the part of white individuals and institutions to value white life over all others during a crisis.

As I have argued previously, “Racism is a complex nexus, a cognitive architecture used to invent, reimagine, and evolve the presumed political, social, economic, sexual, and psychological superiority of the white races in society, while materializing the imagined inferiority and hastening the death of inferior races. Said differently, racism is the manifestation of the social processes and concurrent logics that facilitate the death and dying of racially subjugated peoples.”^{xviii} The economic and political segregation of Black people throughout Western societies results in demographics that are particularly vulnerable to disease and health-related deaths.^{xix} These demographics of death and dying are deliberately built into the infrastructure of Western democracies.^{xx} Ethical demands for access and better care have not dealt with the weaponization of disease to pursue the goals of white supremacy and racial domination.

COVID-19 has provided the West with an unparalleled opportunity to decrease the population of its *problem peoples*. The utilization of this virus to achieve the ends of racism has not seriously been discussed among Black opinion-makers. The tomes of Black public intellectuals offer populations burdened with death the idea that hope, policy, and a transformation of values are viable amidst this chaos. But these suggestions are a failure, precisely because they sacrifice the populations dying for an audience with the engineers of the very system that kills. We must move beyond the idea that recognition affords a semblance of life. Now, as an object of discourse the world can see, no, understand what their burdens of life are. In this way, thinking about suffering becomes a philanthropic enterprise, or following Zygmunt Bauman, theorizing the wretched of the Earth is an activity that ignores that how we can think about solutions to problems because every remedy proposed extends the reach of the very institutions implicated by the problem itself.^{xxi}

Conclusion

In the United States and Europe, white theorists have concerned themselves primarily with the limits or excess of government—how the state has used this catastrophe to coerce populations, many of which are citizens, into surrendering liberty for security, capitalism, and the larger responsibilities of democracy, —Black philosophers and theorists have reminded us all, yet again, that racism—understood largely as racial bias—continues to result in the disproportionate death of Black peoples. Their discourse, however, is largely reformist. In the lawlessness ushered in by the coronavirus crisis, white citizens find order. Guidance in their appeal to racial destiny and the protection of their racial kinship. This informs the choice of white clinicians who refuse to treat Black patients, the white vigilantes who kill innocent Black men for the sake of public safety, and who refuse to acknowledge that their dependence on the labor of essential workers is a death sentence.^{xxii} The crisis brought about by disaster deputizes whites to enforce the communion of whiteness through violence.^{xxiii} COVID-19 traumatizes our habitual thinking about the relationship between the Black citizen and the state. It demands us to explain the clarity white citizens have towards Blacks that seems to align with the strategies of the Trump administration more broadly.

There are seemingly endless commentaries which aim to theorize the harsh lessons of history concerning Black folks in the United States and across the globe. The issue is no longer a debate about the consequences of racism on the life chances of Blacks, the central concern is how do Black people as a collective survive and identify the mechanisms of our demise. The complacency of our thinkers towards the ongoing calamity of Black existence that incentivizes the fleeing from ourselves, the persistent struggle to abandon Black flesh, describes the paradoxical choice Blacks are forced to make: remain among those Black people who are dying—living with worse outcomes and a lower quality of life than most—but still alive, or become the corpse; dead. The corpses of the world will continue to share a resemblance to us, but somehow Black folks are forced to rationalize this as preferable to their premature demise. It is this holding on to the living, the attempt to stave off death and not be the corpse, which inspires in Black people a will and delusion to rationalize themselves as part of a society and world that profits from their demise and devises their destruction. COVID-19 merely highlights this undeniable aspect of Black life within racist democratic societies. Black Americans are meant to die from health disparities and disease deliberately, and white democratic societies create these conditions to increase the likelihood that Black people remain an impoverished and inferior racial stock.

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