

MODERN DAY LYNCHING: The Murder of Trayvon Martin. The Crime and the Context

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George Zimmerman shoots Trayvon Martin dead and then walks free. All over the country, tens of thousands take to the streets in protest. Finally, more than six weeks after this horrible crime, Zimmerman is charged with second degree murder. But the struggle for justice is far from over.

The modern-day American lynching of Trayvon Martin put a big spotlight on *the history and current reality of what it means to be a Black person in the United States of America*. It raised big questions about whether things could be another way. It created a moment where many people might begin to question the very legitimacy of the whole system responsible for the murder of Trayvon—to see this as NOT an isolated incident but only the latest in an endless chain of such acts perpetrated, condoned, and covered up by the powers-that-be.

Yet now we're being told to calm down, shift our focus to the legal arena, stuff our anger back inside, and "let the wheels of justice turn"—no matter what the outcome. Now there is all kinds of speculation, talk, and many in the media are trying to create public opinion *in a certain direction*, before this case even goes to trial.

The Wrong—and the Right—Context

This is the underlying message: Forget all the BIG questions this murder raises about the way society is; about how Black youth are racially profiled and criminalized; how this murder echoes the murder of Emmett Till in the Jim Crow South of the 1950s. Forget your anger and perhaps your determination to work for a world in which there will be no more tragedies like the death of Trayvon Martin.

Instead, we hear: Let's endlessly discuss what George Zimmerman did in the "context" of what happened *after* he got out of his car. In other words, let's just forget about the fact that if Zimmerman had done what the 911 dispatcher told him to do, which is to NOT follow Trayvon Martin, then none of this would have happened. But instead there is discussion after discussion about who started the confrontation, who was crying for help, who was on top of who, how bloody was Zimmerman's nose, and so on.

But let's step back one step. What *is* the actual context for what happened? Again, Zimmerman called 911 and was told to stay in his car. But he got out and followed Trayvon, who had gone to the store to buy Skittles and iced tea and was walking through the neighborhood—all perfectly legal, something millions do every day in this country. But he ended up dead, murdered, taken from his loved ones.

In fact, a report from the Sanford Police Department dated March 13, nearly a month before

charges were brought against Zimmerman, concluded:

“The encounter between George Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin was ultimately *avoidable* [my emphasis] by Zimmerman, if Zimmerman had remained in his vehicle and awaited the arrival of law enforcement, or conversely, if he had identified himself to Martin as a concerned citizen and initiated dialog in an effort to dispel each party’s concern.”

One political analyst put it this way: “As for Zimmerman’s claim of self-defense? *Bullshit*. That defense went out the window the second he stepped from his locked car with a loaded semi-automatic weapon.” (Andy Ostroff, *Huffington Post*, May 21, 2012)

To get caught up in arguing what happened after Zimmerman left his car will put you into a deadly trap that covers over and leads away from the real issues of right and wrong, just and unjust.

The Bigger Context

Now, let’s pull the lens back even further to the bigger context.

The oppression of Black people has been woven into the *whole economic and social fabric* of U.S. society, from the days of slavery to today. It continues to be part of the very glue that holds U.S. society together—even as it has gone through different changes and been enforced in different ways. The outright ownership of Black people under slavery gave way to Jim Crow segregation and Ku Klux Klan terror. And now we have what has been called “the new Jim Crow” of police brutality and murder and the mass incarceration of hundreds of thousands of Black and Latino people.

The murder of Trayvon Martin and the outrage that erupted around the country reveal important truths about the nature of this society.

The echo of generations of those cut down so young for nothing other than being Black and therefore “suspicious.”

14-year-old Emmett Till, murdered in 1955 for whistling at a white woman in Mississippi. Thousands of others, dragged from their homes or just kidnapped off a road by the KKK and lynched before a howling, jeering mob. Flash forward: 23-year-old Guinean immigrant Amadou Diallo, killed by NYPD officers who shot 41 times, saying they thought a wallet was a gun. Oscar Grant, shot and killed, point blank, in cold blood, on New Year’s day 2009 by San Francisco Bay Area transit police, for doing *nothing*. And the list of *Stolen Lives* continues to grow every single day.

Racist brutality is alive and well in the USA. A survey of just recent months: In March, three white men in Jackson, Mississippi, plead guilty to federal hate crime charges, admitting to repeatedly harassing and assaulting Black people, killing James C. Anderson in June 2011 by driving over him with a pickup truck. In April, two white men in Tulsa, Oklahoma, go on a shooting spree in a Black neighborhood, randomly targeting and killing three Black people and injuring two others. In May a 16-month-old girl in Arizona is shot and killed along with her mother, grandmother, and mother’s boyfriend. The shooter is a white supremacist, border vigilante, and longtime neo-Nazi.

And look what got unleashed by the murder of Trayvon Martin: One Florida business

reported they quickly sold out of gun-range targets depicting a faceless figure wearing a hoodie, holding an iced tea and a bag of Skittles. The description of the product read: “Everyone knows the story of Zimmerman and Martin. Obviously we support Zimmerman and believe he is innocent and that he shot a thug.” At Cornell University a group sitting on the roof of a frat house threw bottles and other objects at Black students walking by, and when asked to stop responded by saying, “Come up here, Trayvon,” and other racial comments.

People stepped forward to speak bitterness about something that happens *all the time all over this country*—Black and Latino youth, targeted, demonized, brutalized, and murdered. The signs, T-shirts, and chants saying “We are All Trayvon”—all speak to the fact that this system treats a whole generation of Black youth as a “generation of suspects” to be murdered and jailed. Mothers got up, one after another, to recount how they had to give their sons “the talk” about how to talk, dress, and act—to try and avoid getting stopped, jacked up, killed by the police. What does it say about a society where a son comes home from a boarding school for the summer and his mother feels compelled—because it is literally a life and death question—to send an email to the neighbors: “Don’t be alarmed if you see a Black kid walking around; he’s my son and he lives here”? (Laura W. Murphy, Director, ACLU Washington Legislative Office)

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The cold, hard fact of American life is that a Black youth wearing a hoodie is considered suspect by the standards of the powers-that-be. This capitalist system has no way to profitably exploit these generations of Black youth, and its response has been criminalization and incarceration: decades of a so-called “war on drugs,” aimed mainly at locking up Blacks and Latinos; a whole section of society has been criminalized; and now, in the minds of many people someone like Trayvon Martin is nothing but a thug who deserves to be hunted down, locked up and if need be, tortured in solitary confinement.

This is the workings of a system that produces killer cops and vigilantes like George Zimmerman. This is what leads to things like the NYPD’s stop-and-frisk policy where hundreds of thousands are racially profiled and harassed, or worse. *This is how we have gotten to a situation where 2.4 million people are imprisoned, the majority Black and Latino.*

It was tremendously important—and it made a real difference—that tens of thousands of people took to the streets to demand justice for Trayvon Martin. No doubt, Zimmerman would be walking free today if this hadn’t happened. But now, we’re being told it’s time to just let their “justice system” work. But the system was working when it let Zimmerman go free the night of the murder; when it tested Trayvon’s dead body for drugs, but not Zimmerman; when it portrayed Zimmerman as the victim and Trayvon as a juvenile delinquent. Right now it’s critically important that we not sit back, but instead, find the ways to express our determination to get justice, that we not be silent.

We need to fight for justice for Trayvon Martin. And we need to link that to the importance, and urgency, of building a determined mass movement against mass incarceration.

Justice for Trayvon!

Mass Incarceration + Silence = Genocide

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