

Race and Militarism from Ferguson to Syria: A letter to African Americans

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“A Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give. When the white man who is always the aggressor knows he runs as great risk of biting the dust every time his Afro-American victim does, he will have greater respect for Afro-American life.” – Ida B. Wells

“The value put on black life by the occupation force in Ferguson and in our communities across the country is no different than the value put on the lives of the “natives” in Afghanistan and Iraq by the U.S. occupation forces.”

The Black radical tradition has always understood the inextricable link between racism and militarism: racism as a manifestation of white supremacist ideology, and militarism as the mechanism to enforce that ideology.

That fundamental link grounds our analysis of the Obama administration’s policies in Iraq and Syria. But the link between race (white supremacy) and the deployment of violence to enforce the interests of white supremacy also explains the repressive mission and role of the police in the colonized barrios and segregated African American communities within the U.S.

Achelle Mbembe explains in “[Necropolitics](#)” that “...in modern philosophical thought and European political practice ..., the colony represents the site where sovereignty consists fundamentally in the exercise of a power outside the law ... where ‘peace’ is more likely to take on the face of a ‘war without end.’” In the non-white world of the internal and global colonies, the rules are different. In those zones where the consent of the oppressed is not expected, colonial/capitalist domination is reinforced with force and violence.

In those colonized spaces it is clear that the people are not the ones to be “protected and served,” and even gestures such as throwing one’s hands up to surrender only means that the police have a better shot. Even the time-honored idea of national sovereignty is different in the non-European world than what is taught in political science and international relations classes, according to Mbembe. As we have witnessed in Iraq, Libya and Syria, sovereignty “relies, to a large degree, in the power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die.”

That is why the Obama administration has not bothered to give its actions in Syria any legal justification. As Samantha Powers, Obama’s lunatic representative to the United Nations claimed, the U.S. has all of the authority it needs to bomb in Syria.

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The African Americans who are supporting the latest war plans in Iraq and Syria while simultaneously calling for something called justice in Ferguson have forgotten, or never completely understood, that the war being waged by the U.S. to maintain global Western hegemony also includes them as a target. If Congress can give unanimous consent to the murder of more than 2,000 people in Gaza, the majority of them women and children, why would anyone think that those same people would really care about a few hundred African Americans who are being murdered annually by police forces charged with containing a population that has been rendered economically superfluous?

The value put on black life by the occupation force in Ferguson and in our communities across the country is no different than the value put on the lives of the “natives” in Afghanistan and Iraq by the U.S. occupation forces. The cavalier way in which white policymakers decide issues of war in the non-white nations of the global South and place tens of thousands of innocents at risk mirrors the value they put on non-white life in the U.S., especially when those non-white bodies are involved in activities that they define as threatening – like resisting, or at this point simply existing.

We must always remind ourselves that in the colonies of the world as well as the racialized, segregated communities in the capitalist metropolis, the non-white is seen as the living negation of everything deemed important to the European mind – the underclass, the violent, the welfare queens, gangbangers, the terrorists – the quintessence of evil. And in reminding ourselves of this reality we can remain clear about what forces and interests we should oppose and with whom to be in solidarity.

What this means is that we cannot afford the comforting myths of U.S. benevolence that attempt to conceal the naked deployment of U.S. state power in the service of Western capitalist/colonialist interests. And we must view with suspicion, if not treat with disdain, our comrades, white and black, who support U.S. interventions, even if they frame that support in leftist justifications. For oppressed nations and peoples’ of the world, the U.S. white supremacist colonial/capitalist patriarchy is and remains the principle contradiction. There must not be any nationalist sentimentality or equivocation on that position.

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The current phase of naked aggression in Syria is not a reflection of U.S. strength but rather its weakness. Nonetheless, we cannot underestimate the threat that the continued reliance on militarism and repression poses for African Americans and the peoples of the world. In the U.S., the national security apparatus has been moving systematically to strengthen its ability to target, contain, disrupt and repress when necessary all domestic oppositional movements. The threat of domestic terrorism provided the convenient cover for intensifying those efforts in the post-9/11 period, the result being graphically demonstrated by the militarized police in Boston and their police-state tactics in the aftermath of the Boston bombing, and in Ferguson, Missouri in response to a few hundred demonstrators protesting another killing of an unarmed black person.

The white supremacist, colonial/capitalist, patriarchal ruling classes of the U.S. and Europe are clear, even if we are not, that war and repression will be used with brutal efficiency to maintain their hegemony. Their brief turn toward utilizing “soft power” to shore up “legitimacy” in response to popular opposition to the Bush administration with the “selection” of Barack Obama (the smiling brown face of imperialist domination), was only a short-term tactical innovation of that strategy.

Scholars, pundits and commentators from across the political spectrum in the U.S. have already started to speculate on the legacy of Obama’s presidency. And even though his record of “accomplishments” is thin, very few will identify the most significant but insidious legacy of his presidency – concealing the reality of racialized violence in the service of Western global white supremacy.

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