

The Politics of 'Looting' and 'Violence'

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Television screens throughout the US, and around the world, have broadcast in recent days images of Baltimore in crisis: young people of color on the streets clashing with police, protesters marching peacefully shoulder to shoulder, and a relatively small number of city residents taking food, toiletries, and consumer goods from stores. Naturally, the forces of political reaction both in the media and society at large have attempted to isolate these incidents - 'looting' they call it - in order to demonstrate the purported savagery and lawlessness of people and communities of color.

"You see?" the racist narrative goes, "They have no respect for property or the law," or some such variation on this theme. However, as should be expected, the political and media establishment demonstrate an incredible degree of hypocrisy in portraying the events in such a manner. For while in 2015 media outlets such as the allegedly center-left MSNBC and CNN, and the unabashedly right wing FOX News, propagate a shamelessly racist narrative of "thugs" and "criminals" on the streets of Baltimore or Ferguson, these same media outlets almost without exception worked hand in hand with the Bush administration to justify similar actions in Iraq. So too have the media been complicit in presenting biased narratives of US wars in places like Libya and Syria where the media parroted Washington's talking points to justify and/or condemn whichever actions were politically expedient at the time.

Examining the issue further, the questions of power and "otherness" are also unavoidable. When the powerless and marginalized - those who are not deemed worthy by the establishment - engage in such actions, they are described as violent thugs. When the powerful engage in far worse actions, they are deemed righteous. Whether it is the looting of cultural artifacts by British and French imperialists in Africa, the wholesale slaughter of indigenous peoples by American settlers, or the wholesale plunder and exploitation of entire continents, such actions are somehow justified by their historical context and role in modern social and cultural formation.

From Baltimore to Baghdad

Were one to examine the events of the last week in Baltimore purely through the lens of the corporate media and political class, one would get the sense that the actions of a small minority of the black community constitute egregious and criminal acts of savagery and barbarism, acts that could have no possible justification. Indeed, one could be forgiven for thinking so, as even President Obama (you know, "the First Black President") had nothing but words of condemnation and contempt. As Obama [explained](#) to the media:

There's no excuse for the kind of violence we saw yesterday. It is counterproductive...When individuals get crowbars and start prying open doors to loot, they're not protesting. They're not making a statement. They're

stealing. When they burn down a building, they're committing arson... A handful of people [are] taking advantage of the situation for their own purposes, and they need to be treated as criminals.

Here Obama reveals not only an ignorance of the nature of these actions, but also a complete disregard for the systemic and institutionalized social and economic violence perpetrated against these communities for decades. While Obama waxes poetic about "property owners" being "stolen from" he has little to nothing to say about the fact that the people who live in those communities are almost entirely shut out from property ownership themselves; that the true owners are the real estate developers, speculators, financiers, and economic elites from the affluent communities. This is the class that perpetrates the true violence by exploiting the economic blight left by unequal wealth distribution, the elimination of employment opportunities, the breakdown of communities thanks to police violence, drug abuse, and countless other preventable phenomena that are the symptom, not the cause, of poverty and desperation. And make no mistake, it is poverty, desperation, and frustration that is transmogrified into violence.

But of course, Obama knows these things, he simply cannot address them as they are the fruits of the financial and political elites he serves. Make no mistake: the establishment understands perfectly the phenomenon of looting. As former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld [articulated](#) in the immediate aftermath of the US war on Iraq:

While no one condones looting, on the other hand, one can understand the pent-up feelings that may result from decades of repression and people who have had members of their family killed by that regime, for them to be taking their feelings out on that regime. And I don't think there's anyone in any of those pictures ... (who wouldn't) accept it as part of the price of getting from a repressed regime to freedom.

Reading such a statement devoid of context, one could be forgiven for thinking that it was made by activists in Baltimore, and not the Secretary of Defense in justification for the illegal war he and his cronies had just waged in Iraq. Do communities of color not have pent-up feelings resulting from decades of repression? Have not countless members of those communities had members of their families killed by the "Law and Order" regime that acts as an occupying force on their streets?

In its landmark [report](#), the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement concluded through extensive research that a Black person is killed extra-judicially every 28 hours by law enforcement or quasi-law enforcement. Such brutal repression would certainly qualify as eliciting pent-up feelings of anger. And yet, Black youth in Baltimore are nothing but criminals according to Obama, the corporate media, and White America. Is it because of the objective value of their actions? Or is it because the sort of repression that they experience every day simply does not count because, rather than serving to legitimize the political and economic agenda of the ruling class, it challenges it, exposing it as fundamentally racist?

Indeed, it is power, not objective reality, which determines what is and is not acceptable violence. To take by force in Baghdad in 2003 is liberating and justified; to take by force in Baltimore in 2015 is violent "thuggery" and unjustifiable. The relation of any group to the agenda of power is the only determinant of righteousness and sin according to the morality of the Empire.

Hypocrisy: America's Top Export

Sadly it is no surprise that the corporate media would spin a narrative of mindless violence and race riots, barbarism and chaos. The media exists not to inform, but to reflect the values and objectives of the forces that own and control it. It is interesting though to compare the portrayal of the events in Baltimore and Ferguson with other violent actions around the world.

When the US and its NATO allies were bombing in support of Al-Qaeda terrorists - affectionately referred to as rebels and freedom fighters - in Libya, there was little mention of the brutal trail of violence and bloodshed they left in their wake. The brutal [lynchings](#) and [ethnic cleansing](#) of black Libyans, and anyone else who opposed the foreign-backed aggression, was almost completely suppressed from the media narrative of the neat and tidy "war for democracy and freedom." Such violence served Washington's interests, therefore it was deemed to be unworthy of reportage.

Similarly in Syria, the US and its NATO-GCC-Turkey-Israel allies have been arming and financing terrorist forces infiltrating the country to wage war against the legitimate government. These terrorists have directly caused the deaths of tens of thousands (if not more) of innocent Syrians, to say nothing of the refugees and internally displaced whose lives have been forever shattered by the US-backed war on their country. However, this extreme violence is somehow acceptable in the service of the war against a "brutal regime" which, conveniently enough, presents a political obstacle to the Empire.

In Gaza however, a people living under a vicious and illegal occupation and inhuman siege are denied even the right to resist by the US and Israel. The Palestinians are portrayed as barbaric terrorists whose inhumanity is manifested by their each and every action. Never mind the fact that they have been robbed of their basic rights, had their homes destroyed, and their land stolen. Never mind the fact that their economy is suppressed by a military occupation, their employment opportunities almost non-existent, and their children made to live as second class citizens, racial inferiors to the Israeli settlers. Objectively speaking, a Palestinian is in many ways in a similar socio-economic position to many Black Americans in the poorest communities of color.

One could point to countless other examples, from the demonization of rebels in Eastern Ukraine fighting against a US-backed fascist-oligarch government that calls them "terrorists," to the Sandinistas of Nicaragua, to the Serbs of the former Yugoslavia - all groups that have been crudely characterized as violent thugs because of their opposition to Washington's favored groups. Conversely, the death squads of Central America, mujahideen of Afghanistan, Chechen extremists, and countless other terror groups, they are kindly referred to as "freedom fighters," primarily because they fight for the freedom of the Empire to continue to make war and dictate the fate of peoples and nations.

It is power - political, economic, military - that draws the line between good and bad violence, between rebels and terrorists. It is the establishment that wields the power that determines when a rebellion in Baltimore is a violent riot, and when "taking" becomes "looting." But of course, we're not forced to accept these crude, bigoted, racist generalizations as truths to be held self-evident. We know what we've seen in Baltimore and Ferguson, just as what we see in Gaza, is not simply violence...it is resistance!

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