

Capitalism and Coercion: Crisis in the Legitimacy of the U.S. State

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The U.S. state appears to be facing a crisis of its legitimacy amid the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown. The killing of George Floyd, yet another unarmed black man killed by the police, has erupted into popular protest. It is quite possible that the disruption to the routinization of life due to the lockdown to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus may very well have been a factor in creating the conditions for many to form a collective conscious, which translated in the outpour of protest against the racial policing policies in the U.S. and in generating the broad support it is currently receiving.

This crisis in legitimacy appears to be aided by many conditions. With millions displaced from work, people may have had a moment in which they did not blame themselves, their neighbors, or God for their troubles. Instead, people may have looked at the structure of society, as they did in the 1930s and the 1960s. Their outrage transformed into protest and rebellion. We should also consider how there is a significant disruption to the full consumption habits. Furthermore, distractions from the culture industry of Hollywood (Marcuse 1963; Horkheimer et al. 2002) and the interruption in spectator sports (as an opium of the masses, Eitzen et al. 2012) may have possibly played a role in getting people to think and act more critically about the world in which they live.

The U.S.' political order is not solely based on coercion, but based on a multitude of coercive and facilitative measures that seek to co-opt and manufacture consent; thereby, making rebellion rare (Montes 2009; 2016). There is a crisis in the legitimacy of authority when large sections of the population lose trust in the government. The military, police, the courts, the political system (i.e., government) are all institutions of the U.S. state, so when people lose trust in the police, they have lost confidence in the U.S. state's ability to govern.

The police are similar to the military because they are necessary arms of the state; they protect and maintain the continuation of the political order: a political order that is rooted in racial, class, and gender hierarchies. It is vital to understand that when a government, as is currently occurring in the U.S., can no longer manufacture enough consent to legitimize its authority, it resorts to increased use of state coercion (the U.S. state coercion is by no means dormant, not even in non-rebellious times). Thus, this is why the state has amassed the militarized-police, National Guard, and the military, as an axillary force across the United States to suppress the protest of the police killing of George Floyd. The U.S. state is reliant on physical violence, and repression has been essential in protecting and maintaining the continuity of the U.S. capitalist system.

The use of racism has been fundamental to the so-called "greatness" of the United States.

This “greatness” long preceded the Trump administration and has been and continues to be hidden and a not so hidden hallmark of its economic “success.” One can argue that the very inception of the U.S. has been a nation-state engaged racist state-sponsored policies, as in the case of the genocidal policies against the indigenous peoples of North America and the system of slavery, de jure, and post facto racial segregation. This history also involves the usurpation of Mexican land in the southwest, the conquest and colonialization of Cuba, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, Guan, and Alaska, which all have required physical violence, leaving carnage and trauma in its wake. This physical violence does not always involve invasions and the suppression of insurgencies. Still, violence can be seen in the societies and neighborhoods of the oppressed, with high rates of unemployment, poverty, police brutality, and incarceration. Often, it is also turned inward in the form of collective and individual destruction (e.g., suicide, high rates of alcoholism, drug abuse, et cetera). The above is but an example of the imperialist side of capitalism. This is what Karl Marx meant when he said that capitalism comes into the world “dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt” (Marx 2017:639).

Coercion and Capitalism and the U.S. State

The U.S. capitalist-state does not only depend on its military to secure resources abroad and to expand its markets and influence, but it simultaneously needs endless pools of disciplined workers that are desperate enough to work for low wages. Now, maintaining a system where few benefit from the misery of the many requires a great deal of force and particular ideologies that can justify such a system. Such a system has no real commitment to eradicate poverty and racism. According to Chris Parenti (1999), what lies at the heart of the matter is a contradiction: capitalism needs the poor (i.e., surplus populations of laborers) and creates poverty. Yet, capitalism is also directly and indirectly threatened by the poor. It is the role of police, prisons, and the criminal justice system to manage this contradiction (Parenti 1999:238).

As the new crime control policies took hold in the aftermath of a very explosive period of protest and rebellion in the 1960s, incarceration rates by the mid-1970s began to peak (Parenti 1999; Wacquant 2005). According to Glenn Tonry, the architects of the so-called “war on drug” were aware that this war would be fought mainly in minority areas of U.S. urban cities, which would result in a disproportionate number of young blacks and Latinos incarcerated (Wacquant 2005:21). For Wacquant, the ghetto was where much of the “war on drugs” policies were carried out; it is an institution based on closure and power, whereby a population is deemed dishonest and dangerous and is at once secluded and controlled (1998:143). Pamala Oliver, for example, state repression includes mass incarceration, because of the role that prisons played as repressive agents on black males in the U.S. during the Black Power Movement (2004). The extension of state repression beyond “subversives” suggests that the most oppressed not only can disrupt the system (e.g., there were over 300 urban rebellions in the 1960s) but can become revolutionary (Oliver 2004). Parenti (1999), Oliver (2004), and Wacquant (2005) suggest that crime control is a form of state repression.

The system of capitalism is a system based on private ownership and profit, and competition (read: in most cases, corporate-state monopolies). Wealth development is not socially owned; it is individually owned, and for this system to exist, it requires ideologies that can justify why rewards and prestige are so unequally distributed. Where does wealth come from? It comes from the exploitation of labor, and the usurpation of land and resources.

The origins of policing are said to be in England in 1829 when the British state concluded that “what was needed was a force that could both maintain political control and help produce a new economic order of industrial capitalism” (Vitale 2017:36). Therefore, the police role was to manage the disorder from capitalism and to protect the “propertied classes from the rabble” (Vitale 2017:36). This policing was also used to manage the British colonial occupation of Ireland, seen as an innovative way to control insurrections, riots, and political uprisings. For Alex S. Vitale, the police in the U.S. are intimately tied to the management of inequalities of race and class, suppressing workers and surveilling and managing black and brown people have always been at the center of policing (2017). The role of policing in the U.S. is about the protection of private property, the suppression of rebellions, and putting down strikes and other industrial actions. It had also aided the system of slavery, the colonization of the Philippines, the repression of native populations in Texas, as a means for U.S. state expansion, and represses and neutralizes protest (Vitale 2017:40-50).

The present use of policing has maintained its original goal, which is to manage the surplus populations and contain the poor and racial minority communities whose labor is considered redundant due to automation, deindustrialization, and deregulation. As Parenti stated, the “war on drugs” has been the trojan horse for these policies (1999:10).

The political neutrality of policing or state coercion has always been questioned. Charles Tilly’s research identified a link between coercion and legitimacy. He wrote that whatever else states do (e.g., the idea of the social contract), “they organize and, wherever possible, monopolize violence” (1985:171). For Tilly, state legitimacy is obtained over time because eventually “the personnel of states purveyed violence on a larger scale, more effectively, more efficiently, with wider assent from their subject populations, and with readier collaboration from neighboring authorities than did the personnel of other organizations” (1985:173). Consequently, states, in part, maintain power by legitimizing themselves by creating ideologies, which socializes individuals to the norms and values of the state. As Tilly makes clear, control over the physical forces of violence is fundamental to nation-state’s authority, and the fact that legitimacy depends on the conformity to abstract principles such as the consent of the governed only helps to rationalize the monopoly of force (1985:171). After all, for Tilly, it is through the concentration and accumulation of capital and coercion and successful inter-state war waging that the present nation-state emerged (1992).

Stephanie Kent and David Jacobs argue that a society based solely on coercion could not survive, not even the most authoritarian use coercion by itself, but is often mixed with other means (2004). Kent and Jacobs’ research provide examples that illustrate what occurs when police suddenly become paralyzed (e.g., on strike) and do not respond; the poor tend not to accept the conditions of inequality and would engage in redistribution of wealth. Robert Cover provides an excellent example of the state’s reliance on force by illustrating how “a convicted defendant may walk to a prolonged confinement, but this seemingly voluntary walk is influenced by the use of force. In other words, if he does not walk on his own, he will most certainly be dragged or beaten” (in Green and Ward 2004:3). As pointed out above, coercion a crucial component for the establishment and continuation of the political order. Stability is problematic even in the most democratic societies because resource distribution is so unequal that only a few genuinely benefit and have access to freedom, rights, and security. It is undeniable that race continues to be a significant marker of a person’s social, economic status, as well as the degree in which one is targeted and entangled in the criminal justice system.

Unequal relations are maintained in the U.S. by there being over 12 million members of coercive forces -e.g., policing and military and billions of tax-payer's dollars allocated to this mission. Coercive forces that range from the police, corrections, national security, to the military. They are conjoined in their various task in upholding domestic and foreign policies designed to maintain the status quo in the U.S. and U.S. hegemony around the globe. As a result, there are approximately 7 million individuals under correctional supervision in the U.S. alone and many populations around the world that live in wretched conditions so that the U.S. state can maintain its global dominance (Montes 2016).

The U.S. population consists of approximately 12% black and 15% Latino; however, some reports illustrate that these two groups represent about 60% of those incarcerated. In 2012, the incarceration rate per 100,000 was 2,841 for blacks, 1,158 for Latinos, and 463 for whites (Carson and Golinelli 2013). The rate of incarceration by race demonstrates racial disparity within the criminal justice system. The U.S. incarceration rate is the highest in the industrial world, but it is even higher when aggregating for race. Yet, Bruce Western illustrates that mass incarceration affects the poorest of blacks, which points to the class element (2006:26). In short, one can argue that mass incarceration involves the containment of the most marginalized, in which blacks, brown people, and Native Americans are disproportionately the poorest. The groups that have the most significant distance from wealth and privilege are perceived as the greatest threats to the political order. This theorizing explains racial profiling and how race is a marker for criminality. As a result, there is more reliance on the policing of the poor and racial minority communities. However, the type of crime that should be the focus is the state crimes of omission; this is when state's failure to protect the rights and to serve the needs of all people within the territory of a particular nation-state; thereby, creating the conditions for non-state crime (Barak 2011: 35-48). Essentially, when these needs are not met, as mentioned above, they can create a breakdown in the legitimacy of state authority, which creates conditions favorable for protest and rebellion.

Crisis in Legitimacy

Image on the right: George Floyd Mattered graffiti along 38th St in Minneapolis on Wednesday, after the death of George Floyd on Monday night in Minneapolis, Minnesota (Source: Flickr)



The explosion of widespread protest over the killing of George Floyd has become a flashpoint of anger for all the other unarmed black males killed by the police in the United States. For many of the protesters, this had been yet another senseless and unjustified murder. In which the police would once again not be held accountable. The impunity of law enforcement has long enraged black, Latino, Native Americans, and poor communities

across the United States.

Just about every community of color and poor community in the U.S. has a list of victims of police brutality. This tension and frustration have been building up for some time, and more recently, with the high media profile cases of Eric Garder (2014), Michael Brown (2014), and Freddy Grey (2016). For many, this problem could no longer be dismissed. As a result of protest and rebellion, ordinary everyday people had to take notice of the repeated police killing of unarmed black youth and men. According to tracking by the *Washington Post*, half of the people shot and killed by police are white. However, [blacks are shot at a disproportionate rate](#). They account for less than 13% of the U.S. population but are killed by police at more than twice the rate of whites. Police also kill Latinos at a disproportionate rate. Overall, the police kill more people at a higher rate in the U.S. than do police in similar industrial nations. The circumstances of these killings vary - e.g., from being unarmed to being armed to being in the commission of a crime to being a suspect and racially profiled. However, what appears consistent is that law enforcement is not be trusted to investigate themselves. In many cases, had it not been civilians using their phone cameras and/or protesters forcing an investigation, many people would have accepted the official police and political officials' narrative. What has been bought to light by afflicted black and communities of color has been the systemic nature of police brutality and how it is not restricted to a few police officers or a few police departments.

The system was confronted with a crisis in its authority once the U.S. state and the corporate media could no longer dismiss the protest as just black protest from marginalized areas. The success of the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM) kept the murder of black men and youth at the center of their organizing efforts. The BLM linked together, the spontaneous protests and rebellion of black and people of color communities when they experienced police brutality, propelling these injustices to national and international levels of attention. The multicultural outpour of support, which has included celebrities and professional athletes, has lent their support. One cannot overlook how suddenly everyone appears now to be antiracist. Nor can one deny how this moment seems to have opened up the opportunity for political opportunism, particularly within the duopoly political party system, and the corporate media. It is at these times that the political elite from both parties and the corporate media attempts to angle their messages in such a way as to restore trust in the political order while being semi-critical of it. When politicians and news anchors of the corporate media -e.g., verbally condemn the killing of George Floyd, but at the same time, uphold the status quo. This angling lends itself to discussions about better training in police procedures, the firing and convictions of the officers involved, more racial sensitivity trainings, and pleas to channel the outrage into voting Democrat. Unfortunately, this negates an understanding of the fundamental role policing plays in the U.S. state and its task in upholding an unequal society.

Also, the conflating the outrage of the killing of George Floyd with the protesters who are not "peaceful," disobey curfew, and loot and burn is another way in which the state officials and corporate media presenters attempt to restore trust in the U.S. state. So, what is absent is a focus on how the various means of protest, civil disobedience, and the destruction and defacing of the property of corporations, the U.S. flag, and the police are symbols of what many perceive is the problem. The problem is the U.S. state and how it is increasingly not protecting the freedoms, safety, and economic wellbeing of all its people, but is protecting its own interests, which includes the interests of corporations, which are interlocking. And configured in this equation is policing and the military, ensuring that the particular political

order is maintained.

Discrediting protesters as thugs, terrorists, or the orchestration of external forces such as Russia, and/or Antifa is to absolve the U.S. state of any culpability. Even in the pre-Covid-19 world, there were millions of people in the U.S. who have long lost trust in the system and felt alienated from the political process because they believed that politicians represent their own interests and those interests are allied with the continuation of the political order. As Emma Goldman, a famous anarchist, stated, "If voting changed anything, they'd make it illegal." As mentioned above, the racialized and exploitative system has long preceded the Trump administration. In fact, the rise of the Occupy Movement in 2011 and the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement in 2013 was because they had no confidence in the political establishment. There is a reason why these movements were grassroots organizations and struggle to remain as such because the political elite did not act on their behalf. For example, the Obama administration did not use executive orders to step in during the many instances of police killings and protests, such as in Ferguson. Furthermore, these movements had no interest in being co-opted by the politics of the duopoly political party system.

This crisis in legitimacy can also be seen in how both parties supported the bailout of Wall Street during the Great Recession. Bailouts of corporations are also occurring currently, amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Both parties were responsible for "tough on crime" legislation, such as the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 passed by the Clinton administration. This act, in part, is responsible for furthering mass incarceration and for creating more laws that target racial minorities. Both parties are also responsible for creating more economic insecurity for the poor and people of color by implementing neoliberal policies. The Republican Party and Democratic Party both partake in the gutting of the safety net programs. The Clinton administration – e.g., Welfare Reform Bill of 1996, the repeal of the Glass Steagall Act in 1999, and NAFTA in 1994. Also, the Obama administration supported the bailout of Wall Street, single-payer health care over universal health care, and the 2014 Farm Bill (that included cuts to food stamps).

Both are different wings of the duopoly political parties, maintaining the status quo of the state. Glen Ford's astute analysis of what he refers to as the "racist-capitalist state" has remained intact even when political officials are no longer white. For Glen Ford, Obama's legacy can be seen as protecting corporate power and advancing the imperial agenda, while promoting the myth of a post-racial society (Hedges 2017). During the 1960s, various state strategies were deployed to diffuse urban rebellion, one of them was the incorporation of blacks and other people of color in law enforcement and political office such as mayors to provide the illusion of reform (Katz 2007). The point made is a very sociological one. If the U.S. state does not change from being a capitalist-imperial state and is reliant on coercion to maintain the political order, then no amount of selective incorporation or mimetic reforms (Katz 2007) will change the role of policing.

It is safe to say that this crisis in legitimacy involves the distrust in two wings of the duopoly system (i.e., the government) because the police are but an arm of the state. And this can be seen repeatedly with the endless protest and demonstrations in the streets. A real important indicator of how deep this crisis will be is if the police themselves, from the top brass and the rank and file, find it difficult to hide behind the blue wall of silence. If there is the realization that what separates the people is not the thin blue line or the military mindset of us vs. them, but between equality vs. inequality. Many employed in coercive occupations receive state-sponsored elevated honorific statuses and stable employment

with high salaries during insecure economic times. Besides being highly bureaucratic organizations that instill particular self-fulfilling ideologies, the state and other agents of socialization, such as the corporate media and educational institutions, all extend great deference to this institution, making them a difficult group to win over.

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