



RACE AND COVID-19

On Race, COVID-19, and “Necropower” in America

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One of the more important concepts that is often ignored in conversations about racial power is that of “necropolitics” and “necropower.” Achille Mbembe describes “necropolitics” and “necropower” as the ability to decide who lives and who dies in a society.¹ Of all the powers that people delegate to government, the power to shape the factors that influence life and death are the most consequential. This power manifests itself in many forms and ranges from the military to public policy. Bearing the concept in mind, perhaps the greatest privilege that white society currently has over communities of color in the United States from the founding of the republic to the modern day is that of “necropower.” The structural racial inequality inherent in the United States is an expression of “necropolitics” and “necropower.” The COVID-19 pandemic has laid this truth bare for all to see.

When the news began to leak highlighting racial disparities concerning COVID-19 related deaths, I felt many emotions; but shock was not among them. I live in

Louisiana, one of the early epicenters of the pandemic, which has the second highest black population per capita in the country at 32 percent. As of the writing of this essay (Tuesday, June 23, 2020), in Louisiana deaths from complications of COVID-19 sit at 3004, and this number is certain to rise.² Of those 3004 souls, 53.11 percent were black.³ Governor John Bel Edwards has been very proactive in his response and forthcoming with data by race. I applaud him for this because he did the right thing knowing that it would trigger the usual chorus of detractors claiming that “he is making this about race.” This is what people say in Louisiana and across the nation, I assume, when they don’t want to face hard truths about the society in which they live. In America, the COVID-19 pandemic was always going to be about race; and the numbers prove that it is very much about race.

Of course, the virus does what it does. It infects hosts who in turn infect other hosts. People of other races are contracting the virus, and many of them will suffer

physically and emotionally. Some of them will die. To acknowledge how race shapes the pandemic is not an attempt to minimize the suffering of anyone; but, rather, it is necessary to confront the spread of the virus and to mitigate the chances that other contagions will reach pandemic level. The reason that COVID-19 is killing more black people across the country at higher rates than other racial groups is because America has been slow to demolish the social structures that facilitate black suffering which are the legacy of official government policies at every level in the United States from the 18th century well into the 20th century.

The United States was founded as a slave state. It remained one until the Slaveholders' Rebellion, which we commonly call the Civil War. Following the sabotage and collapse of Reconstruction by both Republicans and Democrats, the United States became a segregation society under the rule of Jim Crow laws in which the impoverishment of black people was official federal policy through their tolerance of Jim Crow and practices such as redlining. America existed as a racial caste-based state through two World Wars and only became a liberal democracy after the Civil Rights movement created a cultural and legal revolution that began to topple the Jim Crow regimes in the 1960s. Today's black baby boomers were born into a segregation society that did everything in its power to keep them poor. At most, America is three generations removed from the end of its Jim Crow period, and it is still in living memory.

Why do I bring this history up? Because the social structures and social hierarchy founded in the Jim Crow period provides context to the answer of "why are black people dying of COVID-19 in higher numbers than white people across the country?" Black people have higher comorbidity and higher exposure to COVID-19 because they have higher rates of poverty, lower rates of education, lower paying jobs, and higher rates of incarceration. All of this was the goal of US domestic policy regarding black people until the last 50 years. This was always going to happen because our society was designed to maximize black suffering.

Even the ubiquitous mantra "stay safe, stay at home" cannot escape the structural inequality that gives American race relations its shape. Make no mistake, the stay-at-home orders are good public policy, have slowed down the spread of this virus, and saved lives; but even this is evidence of the racialized nature of America's "necropolitics." Many people do not have the option of working from home, and therefore cannot shelter in place and have no reasonable ability to social

distance. According to a March 2020 report released by the Economic Policy Institute, only 19.7 percent of black workers and 16.2 percent of Hispanic workers have jobs where they can work from home.⁴ The same report also shows that the ability to telework increases the higher the wage level.⁵ The hard truth is that many black people and Hispanic people do not have the privilege to work from home because they often do jobs that interact with people—especially in essential work like grocery stores. In the coming months, "necropolitics" and "necropower" will take center stage as lawmakers and constituents debate how to "reopen" the American economy and schools.

When this pandemic is over, we must have necessary conversations about how to prevent another pandemic. Among the debates about health care, urban planning, education, and research, we must face the truth about our society. Yes, we have moved far from the mentality that created the social structures that have allowed COVID-19 to claim a disproportionate number of black lives; but we never removed the structures themselves or confronted the racialized nature of America's "necropolitics" and "necropower." Until we as a society resolve to do this and demand this of our elected officials, pandemics will always remind us how we have truly inherited the sins of our fathers as evidenced by the color of the dead.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Mbembé, J. A., & Meintjes, L. (2003). Necropolitics. *Public Culture*, 15(1), 11-40.
- 2 Data retrieved from <http://ldh.la.gov/coronavirus/>
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Retrieved from <https://www.epi.org/blog/black-and-hispanic-workers-are-much-less-likely-to-be-able-to-work-from-home/>
- 5 Ibid.