

Treasure Ibe

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UGS Blackness and Mass Incarceration

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In Slavery and In Freedom: The Chains That Link Policing, Black Criminalization and White
Empowerment

Before one can speak about mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex, there must be a contextualization of the very system that brutalizes, stigmatizes and causes the existence of the incarcerated; this being the policing system within the United States. Even before that, there must likewise be a discussion about its model and its foundational beliefs and techniques used to justify policing: slavery and its racialization of blackness and whiteness. Using Orlando Patterson's theory of slavery, the parallels between the institution of slavery and policing in the way both are manifestations of "the relation of domination" between those with "total power," white masters and a police system made with the participation and empowerment of white people, and those with "total powerlessness," black slaves and the first generation of African Americans post-abolition, are highly evident (1). Modern policing is rooted in the aspects of slavery including direct violence, natal alienation, and general dishonor outlined by Patterson and likewise acts as a vehicle of white empowerment and black denigration through incarceration.

The conception of the incessant policing of African Americans was rooted in a violence meant to physically and mentally debilitate. This violence came both in the form of a

“repeat[ed], original violent act[s]” of physical harm, often in the form of “whipping,” and the mental impressment of the slave’s eternal condition as “an extension of his [white] master’s power” without self-determination or “social person[hood]” (Patterson, p. 3-5). Outside the master’s area of influence, all-white “slave patrols,” known for being “some of the first police forces in America,” enforced “slave codes” to maintain surveillance over the masters’ ‘property’ while conducting “corporeal punishment” upon any slave that came their way (Abdelfatah and Arablouei). This inclusion of non-slave owning white men into the sphere of the slave owning class only served as the initial form of white unification and “social insurance” to both fuel sentiments of white superiority and to maintain the subjugation of black slaves (Abdelfatah and Arablouei). This violence persists after the abolition of slavery with white men retiring their roles as slave masters and gaining membership again within a general white force policing black life under “black codes” that mirrored the very laws that criminalized any activity not serving the white citizenry during their forced servitude (Abdelfatah and Arablouei). This demonstrates a continued association of blackness with criminality and the need for a white overseer into the post-Civil War era and an association of whiteness to law and order. Policing and incarceration for African Americans allowed the white citizenry to not lose, but instead evolve their roles of supremacy by empowering and deputizing them as police forces. Even as such events forced African Americans to flee to northern cities during the Great Migration, African Americans could not escape the direct violence due to the white perception of blackness. Their lives within the North were characterized by race riots that both injured and killed many of these people, the protection of white mobs by northern police, and the subsequent arrest and incarceration of these black victims. In slavery and in freedom, they were stripped of basic human regard by others, stripped of their innocence and stripped of their dignity from the country they were birthed and which their labor built in the name of their blackness.

Natal alienation extends farther than African American's connection to their African heritage being severed upon enslavement. In the post-Civil War era and the time that followed, it is evident that while free, African Americans, specifically the generations born within the United States, experienced an alienation from the 'American' identity afforded to those of European-descent and without their civil liberties and individual rights. As the livelihoods of black people became dire within the South, many saw the internal movement to northern cities (this event titled the Great Migration) as a way to flee the extreme oppression of the white supremacist regime. However, they were only met the similar reaction to their blackness. Before the arrival of a large population of African Americans, European immigrants, often of "Irish," "Polish," or "German" descent, were relegated to a similar role of African Americans in that they were "expected to build the infrastructure of these modern cities just like enslaved people" and experienced a type of racialization that led for these communities to be policed by the personal forces of corrupt political machines (Abdelfatah and Arablouei). However, in the eyes of both white Americans and European immigrants, the Great Migration was an evasion. African Americans were not migrants; they were competition, parasites, and a group that needed policing. As white immigrants began "organizing as labor activists and are challenging the inequality of the Gilded Age" and veterans returned after World War I, African Americans were threats to their foreseeable prosperity (Abdelfatah and Arablouei). Simultaneously, such efforts for economic equality for white laborers were becoming recognized and the "professionalization" of the police force came to include "first and second-generation formerly foreign-born whites" of the working class (Abdelfatah and Arablouei). This symbolizes the second consolidation of white solidarity as European immigrants became recognized in the same manner as white Americans and subsequently, held similar aggression and violence towards their black counterparts, gaining protection from any conviction of assault by the police as a unified

white force. Just as non-slave owning white men were deputized into vigilantes of law and order, this inclusion of white Americans descended from immigrants symbolizes the bestowment of white privilege and power to police black people. They, in part, join the ranks of citizens in support of policing programs masked with false intentions of crime prevention and community betterment when the incarceration of African Americans is the main prerogative. This is where the extension of natal alienation is presented. African Americans cannot experience a similar social mobilization towards attaining the American identity like the generations descended from European immigrants, even though they were born within the United States. Because of their blackness and the whiteness that proceeds them in social importance, they can't claim cultural pride connected to being American because being American is built upon the freedoms white Americans illustrated for themselves. In the way that a first-generation Italian American can both have pride in his nationality and his Italian culture that proceeds him, a first-generation freedman, an African American, is "denied...all such claims and obligation on his...ancestors," his African culture and his American citizenship or patriotism (Patterson, pg. 5). They are not seen as an important aspect of the American population, and so they experience policing for the sake of their alienation. Where one can find the consolidation of white unification and nationalism, one will be exposed to the denigration of blackness and the general dishonor that comes with being labelled as a black criminal.

Criminalization by white society and the police system that backs it garners African Americans with general dishonor while white police forces gain further empowerment and professionalization from the general public. Patterson states that general dishonor is the concept in which "the honoring of the master and the dishonoring of the slave were the outward product of their interaction" between whiteness and blackness (11). This relationship is translated into the era of Prohibition and public expression of police corruption. Because of the public failure that

was the police system and its cooperation in illegal activities such as bootlegging, the creation of the “first centralized police record system,” the motorization of police forces, and the professionalization through “higher education of police officers” by August Vollmer provided the police system with greater power and widespread respectability by the white majority (Abdelfatah and Arablouei). However, African Americans experienced a growing criminality stigmatization that justified the work of these ‘dutiful’ police forces. Firstly, the violence African Americans suffered at the hands of police officers were completely disregarded in every study of criminal justice conducted by white Americans. African Americans begin to study their own case of unjust police brutality, and with these findings, “the National Urban League [and] other civil rights organizations” conclude that black people were being disproportionately arrested with arbitrary charges that didn’t constitute any real crime (Abdelfatah and Arablouei). Secondly, “police science begins to draw on crime statistics and sociological research about the innate or cultural tendencies of black people to criminality” to gain some sort of moral high ground and justification emboldened by racialized crime statistics formed under the confirmation bias of white people (Abdelfatah and Arablouei). The general dishonor became legitimized and cemented the association of crime and punishment with blackness and law and order with whiteness. This regulates the position of white visibility as a policing entity and the position of black presence of warranting criminal suspicion.

Policing has definite roots in the institution of slavery and symbolizes a persisting manifestation of it. It not only shows the evolution of blackness and its association of criminality, but also the evolution of white supremacy and white unification. Police officers, their visibility, and the over-policing of black communities parallels to that of the white watchmen, the slave patrols, the vigilantes, the mobs, and the deputized citizens on horseback,

on foot, and in every conceivable space of public existence, who watch and wait for African Americans to prove their criminality, their inferiority, and their "blackness."

Work Cited

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