



We Still Can't Breathe: Chauvin's Conviction Maintains the Status Quo

By Alex Roberts



Sometimes even the “biggest” victories can ring hollow. That especially seems to be the case several months into 2021, and 11 odd months after George Floyd had his life snuffed out in front of a red-brick grocery store in South Minneapolis, around the corner from the “Little East Africa” neighbourhood. That Derek Chauvin, the cop who laid his blatancy in the form of a knee across Floyd’s neck in a gutter finally faced some form of consequence in the form of a guilty verdict, may, in and of itself be of little consequence in the grandest of schemes.

Yes, right now it seems as though the verdict that has come down harshly on Chauvin is a rebuke of all things heinous, nothing less than a massive moral victory for racial progress, black America and global equality.

Indeed, rainbows shall now shine through and if you listen to many pundits within the American (and for that matter, Western) broadcast media, racism against Black America has been solved once and for all — à la the presidential election of Barack Obama way back in those heady days of 2008.

Chauvin will be sentenced on June 25th of this year. Much of Black America is already lowering their expectations away from the 40-year maximum prison sentence.

Life is full of disappointments.

In itself, the Chauvin verdict is not one of them; it is just another opportunity for a larger collective sadness, another opportunity for an eventual letdown, a reminder of the global system of injustice that is, frankly, far as hell from ever being permanently resolved.

I haven't been in Minneapolis since the end of May 2020, the Saturday following the Floyd killing, when the very landscape and fabric of the "Twin Cities" of Minnesota and Saint Paul were irrevocably changed. [Walking around that day](#), the sense of despair was palpable. All of Lake Street — all seven kilometers of it — seemed to have been hit by varying degrees of madness. Some buildings were completely burnt out, husks of their former selves; others had smashed windows or had "BLACK OWNED BUSINESS: DON'T BURN!" scrawled in graffiti across the boarded-up doors. Thousands of people trudged around with shovels, cleaning up debris ahead of the inevitable next night of chaos.

In the weeks that followed, the protests spread across the United States, and even took root on a global scale, spreading as far as Nairobi, London, Kampala, Rome and dozens of other cities. In Minneapolis, all the tension of a tense superpower seemingly dying of its own hubris during the chaotic early months of the COVID-19 pandemic descended on an idyllic neighbourhood. By the day I arrived, May 30th, the United States National Guard was being deployed to put down any form of violence with their own forms of violence. But the damage had been done and the rest of the country was experiencing its own varying levels of chaos. At least two people were killed in Minneapolis alone (and at least 19 across the rest of the US, though this number seems to be low). Dozens of people were injured in Minneapolis alone (although the exact numbers are hard to confirm; personally I talked to at least three people who had sustained non-lethal injuries during the protests, so the real number could be much higher).

Thousands were injured across the US, with hundreds more incidents of police brutality filmed and shared widely. In Minneapolis there was approximately KSh 53 billion worth of damage related to the unrest. Bob Kroll, the president of the Police Officers Federation of Minneapolis who allegedly had white supremacist ties retired at the beginning of 2021. The Minneapolis Police Department was defunded following the reckoning that fell upon the Twin Cities in those warm early summer weeks.

Among pundit across America, talk of alliance and "listening" rapidly became the norm. Many leading neo-liberals put out statements, Republicans and Democrats alike. Trump ordered the beating up of peaceful protesters in front the White House and goodhearted liberals were shocked and appalled. Everyone said it was a "sea change" in American race-relations.

Less than three months after the George Floyd protests kicked off there was a "monumental change" — Jacob Blake was shot in the back by police in the city of Kenosha, in my home state of Wisconsin. The NBA boycotted games, more conversations were had and the world kept right on turning, same as it ever has.

When it comes down to issues of inequality, racism and oppression the status quo is always maintained, especially in America. Two steps forward and three steps back seems to be the pattern, one that is only reinforced by the pattern of police getting away with the murder of Black Americans — whether on tape or merely under "suspicious" circumstances in which "the officer felt their life was threatened and required a response of lethal force".

Perhaps it is this constant pattern of impunity that has caused the most damage, a pattern that in the US can be traced to well before the 1992 Rodney King riots in Los Angeles, California. The riots were sparked off by the acquittal of cops who had been caught on film beating and kicking King senseless on the shoulder of a freeway.

It's the same as it ever was.

Over the years since, especially in this age of social media ubiquity, incidents police violence against Black men, women and children have been caught on camera with horrifying regularity.

Horrifying, but not at all surprising. Everyone within the Black community in the US has long known the score. "Officers under threat" deaths, cases failing to be investigated, rumours of pistols being planted, delays in emergency responder times, ties to white supremacy, "warrior cops" getting more military equipment, stop-and-frisk policies, higher incarceration rates among Blacks, continual harassment, talking to children about keeping hands visible when dealing with police, media bias, fetishisation of police, the "Blue Lives Matter" movement — the list of systemic issues within US police forces could fill the remainder of this article.

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The American judicial system itself is inherently flawed. The narrative among much of the "upstanding" upper middle-class elements of society is that somehow race relations were, if not solved outright, repaired with a sustained "upward" trajectory somewhere around the funeral of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. after his assassination in 1968.

They paint a rosy picture of race-relations in the US in which all segregationist judges were replaced with forward thinking progressives, where all cops with KKK ties were unceremoniously fired, where the ghosts of "Jim Crow" laws (designed to suppress, segregate and subjugate post-slavery Black America) simply faded into the distant memories of a bygone era. The result was a sort of racial Cold War, where proxy wars were fought through the war on drugs, mass incarceration, neoliberalism and police impunity.

"At least segregation is illegal now", says White America when pressed, as if cities, schools, hospitals and police actions were not still segregated *sans* overt painted signs.

Such sentiments bled into the politics of the US's two major parties, Republicans spearheading the "War on Drugs" under the Reagan presidency of the 1980s and the Clinton administration cutting social programmes and accelerating mass incarceration during the 90s under the all-American ideal of "pulling oneself up by your bootstraps". Such proponents of America's neo-liberal ethos cared little whether there were any boots to begin with.

Slowly the technology caught up with the reality, and the anger felt across the marginalised communities in America had a focal point on which to pour out their frustrations. The images were there on film, little snippets sent into cyberspace by countless onlookers. The anger was in the bloody and lifeless body of Michael Brown lying for hours in a Missouri street. It was in Eric Garner pleading that he couldn't breathe while being choked to death by cops in New York City. It was in Philando Castille being shot and killed in his car seconds after telling the officer who had pulled him over that he had a licensed gun in the car and reached for his wallet. (This shooting also happened in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota.) It was in Breonna Taylor being shot dead on a no-knock warrant in Louisville, Kentucky only for the officers to be charged with "wanton endangerment" for firing bullets into a neighbouring apartment.

None of the officers in the above incidents were convicted. Some were never even brought into a courtroom.

On April 11th 2021, Daunte Wright was shot and killed by a cop during a traffic stop in a suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota. Details and footage of the incident are scant. The officer involved has been charged with second-degree manslaughter (a lesser charge than homicide in the US court system). Protests have sprung up around the US, youth wearing surgical masks — the hallmark of the smoldering COVID-19 pandemic — clashing with police and facing arrest, and “non-lethal weapons being deployed by officers to quell pockets of unrest”. This killing occurred at the epicentre of the “defund the police” movement — Minneapolis.

The cycle continues same as ever, two steps forward and three steps back in Black America’s quest for equitable treatment.

The police are just the visible agents of the systemic suppression of Black people that stretches far beyond the shores of the US.

If COVID-19 has shown up anything, it is the brutality of police worldwide. Most times their actions go on with impunity. Cops in Kenya beat up people without mercy and enforce curfew by leaving motorists stranded on highways. In Uganda cops extort commuters under threat of jail. In Rwanda the stranglehold on the nation continues to tighten under threat of harsh penalties.

There is no equality when it comes to the Global South, particularly for much of Africa whose suffering at the hands of the police echoes the oppression faced by the Black community in the US.

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Through this lens of warranted cynicism, the “guilty” verdict handed down to Derek Chauvin by a jury in Minnesota is not a massive turning point. The very pundits stating that the verdict is such a monumental moment of change inherently prove that it is nothing remotely close to such a trend. There will be other failed indictments, other cops walking away, more cases of mysteriously “lost” body-cam footage. More will die, protests will spring up and be quelled with extreme prejudice.

Chauvin, the smirking killer that he is, did prove one thing and one thing only: where the “line” truly is, where the grey areas that the police hide behind blur over into black and white, from a “justified act of lethal self-defense from a frightened officer” into outright murder. His actions were so unquestionably heinous that they had to be dealt with. What Chauvin did derives directly from an ugly history; he lynched that man and at the time thought he would get away with it, hands in pockets, cocky half-smile on his face while his bodyweight cut off George Floyd’s air supply in that street gutter. Bystanders begged him to stop as the other officers watched in idle complicity. Paramedics were not allowed to give medical aid and Chauvin continued to apply pressure for minutes after Floyd had become non-responsive.

The systems, after all, stay much as they are in America. Profit margins must be maintained and “order” by way of the status quo must be upheld. The Twin Cities, of which Minneapolis is the more visible twin, would have simply exploded if the verdict had come back anything less than guilty. After a year of protests, COVID-19 lockdowns, electoral strangeness, Trumpian policies, political divisions, economic challenges and continued incidents of police violence, the tinderbox that was Minneapolis could not have handled Chauvin walking free out of the courthouse to appear on Fox News to “thank God”.

If that had happened the resulting violence would have dwarfed any incidents of unrest in America’s past. It is likely that weeks later clashes with police would be continuing on a nightly basis in dozens

of cities across America. Minneapolis, where major corporates are headquartered, would have been engulfed in flames so huge the smoke would have been seen in the neighbouring state of Wisconsin.

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Chauvin’s true legacy is that of an outlier, the ultimate talking-head example that “things are different now”, that something has truly been accomplished on a systemic level when it comes to police treatment of Black America.

In reality, Chauvin is simply a cop who committed an action so ugly that he had to be made an example of so that America could “get back to normal”.

For Black America in 2021 however, normal life is chockful of disappointments.

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