**Police and African-Americans: A review essay.**

**Mike Miller. *Social Policy.* September, 2017.**

**The Context**

For the past several months I have vicariously lived in “the ghetto”—reading and re-reading: Baldwin, Coates, King, Carmichael, DuBois, Malcolm and lesser known writers… and seeing the devastatingly effective movie *Detroit* (which left me in tears, and paralyzed me for the rest of the night)*.*  Empathy takes you just so far though; it can’t take you all the way.

All that was prompted by an on-going conversation with people I’m close to about “Black-on-Black” crime, individual behavior and choice, on the one hand, and environment/structural factors, on the other; police harassment and brutality, and frightened cops most of whom want to serve and protect, and more. The context was a review—this review—I promised to Wade Rathke for *Social Policy* of James Forman’s *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America*. As I got more deeply into the material, I added other books: *Black Silent Majority*, by Michael Javen Fortner, *Ghettoside: A True Story of Murder in America*, by Jill Leovy, and *Don’t Shoot: One Man, A Street Fellowship, and The End of Violence in Inner-City America*.

The larger context is Trump-Bannon-and now, as I write, Charlottesville.

My own experience helped, but it didn’t take me all the way either. I was on the staff of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) for more than four years, directed a Saul Alinsky project in Kansas City, MO’s Black community, fought the San Francisco urban renewal program that gutted the heart of the city’s Black community, and otherwise was engaged with Black America. I sobbed at the dinner that honored Kwame Ture shortly before his death. A few years earlier, he had written me:

**Republique de GUINEE August 16, 93**

**Paysage du Fouta Djallon**

**Comrade Mike,**

**Received 28th July letter, thanks for your constant work for the oppressed. Don’t skip a beat, till the heart stops. We are here doin the same thing and we getting better. Here we stand directly before state power, which will fall into the hands of the peoples power. Be strong—no sell out—just eternal struggle – Kwame**

We disagreed as well. From an article I wrote in *Social Policy* honoring him and his life:

Black Power emerged as SNCC's slogan in 1966, but since its shift in 1962 from direct action to voter registration and community organizing, SNCC had been about Black power. I thought it was better to walk softly with a big stick than to talk loudly with almost no stick at all…

In the mid-'60s, Stokely talked about an organizing campaign to "Free DC." Home rule was to be its goal; under that umbrella racism in all its manifestations would be challenged. When he wasn't the public agitator, he was a careful organizer. He could have done something significant in DC. I wish he had taken that course; his call was to a different drummer. He left the US 30 years ago and took residence in Africa.

In May, 1988, he wrote me after attending a SNCC reunion, "(I)t was interesting to see them/us together. Many you know have already accepted their laurels and do not even pretend to see the need for further reforms. For them the '60s put everything in place and they did it. Well I still see Revolution and continue to work for it. So communicating with you at least lets me know there are still some crazy ones, even if not as crazy as I."

I responded, "As to revolution versus reform, I'm taken with a couple of new formulations: '*re****v****orm*' or '*re****f****olution*'. Both imply there needs to be a basic change in the relations of power and property, but I don't want to throw everything out. Pol Pot and Shining Path leave me cold…

For all my adult life, the issues we faced then have persisted. Their shape has taken different forms. Sometimes things looked better; other times they looked worse. In fact, when I now look back, they are essentially the same. They were summed up more than 100 years ago by W.E.B. DuBois: “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line.” In this country, that problem has a deeply complicating context that includes several factors:

* there is not sufficient Black working class and poor people power to negotiate with grassroots “white power”;
* the white power at the grassroots that now exists is captured by racist ideas and Trump-Bannon forces;
* there is little interest in an alliance either on the part of working class/poor whites or middle-class Blacks; those who are interested aren’t very powerful, and; those who call for such an alliance lack a strategy to make it happen.
* Without such an alliance, I do not think progress will be made on either economic or police justice.

**Police-Community Relations**

The cops present a sub-set of the complications. How do we wrap our minds around, and come up with a strategy in relation to, these contradictory views:

* The police are an invading army whose function is to keep the lid on the Black community.
* Police harassment and brutality are widespread, and are supported by most cops—even including cops “of color” who suffer from self-hatred.
* Large numbers, if not a majority, of people living in African-American inner-city (and suburban for that matter) communities want increased police presence and enforcement of the law.
* The Black community is out of control. It is the responsibility of Black leadership to bring it under control. The charge of “racism”, while in some instances true, is used to rationalize unacceptable behavior.
* Black inner-city youth are in inadequate schools, have few if any job prospects, live in slum condition housing, are themselves in fear for their lives, often lack adequate food for a healthy diet, and are constantly harassed and often brutalized by the cops.
* Most cops want to “protect and serve”, and they want to do this for *all people*. In most police departments, only a small percent (some studies say two percent) of the cops are racists and engage in disrespectful, harassing or brutalizing activity in minority neighborhoods.
* To blame anti-social behavior on “external forces” is to deny individual responsibility and choice. Those Black youth who are in gangs, sell drugs, steal, engage in violence, and are otherwise breaking the law choose to do so, are responsible for their acts, and should be held accountable for them.
* Random assassinations and killings of cops by Blacks have made cops afraid of Black people.
* Condemning the “thin blue line” fails to understand a necessary element of police culture: cops rely on each other for their lives. They won’t “rat” on fellow officers for the same reason that Communists, during the days of the Soviet Union, wouldn’t publicly criticize Stalin; that Catholics, during the Inquisition, wouldn’t stand up for fellow believers who were excommunicated and burned at the stake; that Americans remain deliberately ignorant of the machinations of the CIA to topple democratically elected governments throughout the world.

**The Contradictions**

In the Harlem of the 1960s and 1970s described by Michael Javen Fortner, and the Washington, D.C. described by James Forman, Jr, it is African-American middle- and working-class crime victims and their friends, families, fellow congregants and neighbors who demand police protection and incarceration of drug users and dealers—who they believe are responsible for the crime. These concerns are expressed by Black community leaders and translated into policy by Black politicians who support tougher crime laws.

In the South-Central Los Angeles described by Jill Loevy, there is no law enforcement, leaving Black youth who are in gangs captured in a culture of tit-for-tat in which violence from one side requires retribution from the other. Gangs provide meaning and membership, making them attractive propositions for young men looking for these things. Alternatives to them are limited-to-nonexistent.

Fortner describes a mostly-white liberal/social work/health professionals world that wants education, prevention, treatment and education-recreation-employment alternatives to tough enforcement and incarceration. He doesn’t give enough weight to Black community sentiment that supports this approach, but the result is the same: the alliance of these professionals with the Black community falls apart when its program is defeated. The professionals don’t have to live with the consequences, so they persist in their approach. But fearful community residents support tough law enforcement because the quality of their lives, and even life itself, is at stake.

Forman captures the dilemma: “…African Americans wanted more law enforcement, but they didn’t want *only* law enforcement. Many adopted what we might think of as an all-of-the-above strategy…[Because they] are a minority nationally, they needed help to win national action against poverty, joblessness, segregation, and other root causes of crime. The help never arrived. [All they got was] tough-on-crime laws.”

Here’s Forman’s view of the problem: “Racism shaped the political, economic and legal context in which the Black community and its elected representatives made their choices. From felon disenfranchisement laws that suppress Black votes, to exploitative housing practices that strip Black wealth, to schools that refuse to educate Black children, to win-at-all-costs prosecutors who strike Blacks from jury pools, to craven politicians who earn votes by preying on racial anxieties, to the unconscious and implicit biases that infect us all, it is impossible to understand American crime policy without appreciating racism’s enduring role.”

He’s right. But I found no politically feasible solution to the crime problem in his deeply moving book. Despair seemed to be the only realistic option: there wasn’t the power to transform society; in its absence the Black community faced the horrible dilemma of criminals on the street versus a *criminal* criminal justice system.

**A Program That Actually Seems To Work: There are interim victories possible.**

Then I read David M. Kennedy’s *Don’t Shoot: One Man, A Street Fellowship, and The End of Violence in Inner-City America*. It describes his program—“*Ceasefire*”. (Unfortunately, there were two “Ceasefire” programs—this is the Boston one that has spread across the country.)

Here’s how Kennedy sees things: there’s a relatively small number of gang members who are responsible for the majority of ghetto violence, and *they are known by the cops.* Given a way to back off from violence, they will. They are rational people, contrary to their image as irrational purveyors of violence. But the way out has to be real, not simply rhetorical. It has to offer opportunities for jobs, education, training and whatever else might improve the quality of life for these young men. When the opportunities are present, they provide a carrot. But the carrot has to be accompanied by a stick—the threat of imprisonment.

*Ceasefire* systematically lines up the criminal justice system: cops, district attorney, probation/parole system, judges, et al; when they buy in, it lines up the service providers: counselors, treatment centers (for drug use), school and training program representatives, jobs programs and others. With them on board, parole officers pick up some of their parolees. “You’re not in trouble. We want you to bring a message back to your gang.” The parolees are taken to a meeting where they encounter “the system”. “Here’s the message to take back to your friends: we can lock you up for a long time—we’re talking about years in prison, not months in jail. And here’s the evidence we have to do it”: (The cops present accumulated documentation of criminal violations that can be used to put the gang members in state prison; they’ve been gathering the data for this very meeting.) “Or, you can take advantage of the opportunities that are available here to take a different path with your life: (The training/education/welfare/et al system presents the alternatives it has to offer.)

At the full meeting, “the community” is also present: mothers cry as they say, “We don’t want any more of our sons killed or wounded”. “The community”—ministers, teachers, community organizations, NAACP representatives and others—is there as well. They say they want the youth to take advantage of the carrots. And, they say, if you don’t, we support the stick.

*Don’t Shoot* describes a program that radically—in some places Kennedy says 80%, and in most others more than 50%--reduces violent crime in the ghetto. I looked high and low for radical critics who might argue otherwise. I scoured google, and called a left-wing criminologist acquaintance to see if the book was, at best, an exaggeration, and, at worst, a lie. I couldn’t find anything.

Here’s what Kennedy says to his critics (pp. 271-272):

Not everybody gets it, and not everybody who gets it likes it. One problem is that it’s *too* simple, seems too good to be true. It’s too far away from how we think about these issues, the old conviction that they’re huge, massive, tectonic, need huge, massive responses. It strains credulity that one-hour meetings can cut homicide in the worst places in Chicago, that five years after the meeting it’s still changing the lives of gun criminals…It doesn’t change anything else—or so it seems—doesn’t fix the economy or the criminal justice system. The facts help here. There are too many data points now, too many evaluations, all the cities where it’s worked, the drug markets that aren’t any longer. It’s getting harder to say, on principle, *That can’t work.* The evolving logic helps, too, our growing understanding of what’s driving the violence, what needs to be changed, what the work *does* change. It’s true that the Chicago meetings don’t change the economy. It’s also true that the crisis of legitimacy [cops viewed as the enemy] is as much behind the violence as anything else and that the Chicago meetings are designed to change *that*. Resetting community standards, undoing toxic norms and narratives, fixing legitimacy, is real, very real, change. The more that understanding spreads, the more the work makes sense.

It’s still not welcome in some quarters. It’s too soft for some, too hard for others. This is a variation on the theme of enforcement vs. social services, but with philosophical roots. There’s the *camp* that believes in individual accountability, thinks crime is about bad character and bad choices, society has to take a stand about right and wrong. There’s that in what we do—*We’ll stop you if you make us—*but it’s not just that. It means that it doesn’t work to say, any longer, *Those are terrible people, hold them accountable, lock them up.* There’s the camp that believes in social accountability, thinks crime is about history and neglect and oppression, society has to take a stand about what it has done to troubled communities. There’s that in what we do—*We’ll help you if you let us—*but it’s not just that. It means it doesn’t work to say, any longer, *Those people are victims, they’re not responsible, they need programs, support.*

The old duality is simple, and it may be comforting, but it’s wrong. We need to find a new, more complicated logic, and we have. It’s a logic that says no amount of law enforcement will ever work, that law enforcement as we’ve been practicing it is part of the problem. It’s a logic that says no amount of traditional social investment will ever work, that the programs don’t help very much, that treating people doing terrible things as “clients” is part of the problem. It’s a logic that says, someone can be doing terrible things and still be a victim; someone can have done wrong and still deserve help; someone can have been the victim of history and neglect and it’s still right to demand that they stop hurting people. Not even remotely radical ideas: a good parent says, all the time, *You’ve broken the rules, and I’m going to do something about it, and I love you and of course I will continue to care for you and hold you close.* But radical when it comes to talking about crime, where commitment to accountability seems to crowd out room for caring, and commitment to caring seems to crowd out room for accountability.

*Ceasefire* is a fragile program. If a new police chief comes to town and wants “his program”, not that of his predecessor, *Ceasefire* may go--whether it is working or not. (That happened in Chicago.) Ditto for other system representatives. There are many spokes required in this wheel to keep it rolling.

Here are my nagging doubts about *Ceasefire*:

* The welfare establishment can’t find enough jobs, training slots, education programs, counselors, beds for addicts and other services to meet the need. Too many programs have been under- or de-funded. Further, the jobs don’t pay very much, and they are generally of low-status.
* “Services” don’t deliver meaning, voice, status and membership. The gang offers those. A meaningful social movement or community organization can offer them as well. The Black Panthers, at their best, offered that but the offer was wrapped up in an organization that had a suicide instinct, and was, itself, corrupted by drugs and violence. Ceasefire makes the gang members clients, not members of something they create and control.
* The individual responsibility/tough on crime people who demand accountability are partially right: “treating people doing terrible things as ‘clients’ is part of the problem”, but their lock them up and throw away the key solution is wrong. The missing piece is remedied only by organizing, by creating alternative ways for young people to have membership, meaning and effective voice directed toward a positive program rather than toward turf wars with peers in other gangs.

**Richmond, California**

Here’s what happened in Richmond, California where newly-hired police chief Chris Magnus implemented many *Ceasefire* principles and practices*.*  The story is told by Robert Rogers, September, 2014, in the *East Bay Times*; I quote here at some length:

…In Richmond, historically one of the most violent cities in the Bay Area, the Police Department has averaged fewer than one officer-involved shooting per year since 2008…no one has been killed by a cop since 2007…[and] the four people shot by Richmond police since 2008 were hit with a total of five bullets, and all survived.

…Many observers and police officials attribute Richmond’s relatively low rate of deadly force to reforms initiated under Chief Chris Magnus, who… implemented a variety of programs to reduce the use of lethal force, including special training courses, improved staffing deployments to crisis situations, thorough reviews of all uses of force and equipping officers with nonlethal weapons such as Tasers and pepper spray.

“Our officers are used to dealing with individuals who are dangerous and, often, armed,” Magnus said. “It’s not an aberration — the scary and challenging is routine — and I think that gives them the familiarity to know what level of force to apply.”

[Law enforcement expert Tom Nolan attributes the change to] “the culture within a department. If a chief has sent a clear message that instances of deadly force will be scrutinized, you can expect more officers to think twice before firing a weapon, or employ less-lethal means when apprehending a suspect…The chief is key in setting policy and tone,”...

…The difference in Richmond includes the rigor of training, the emphasis on communication with armed suspects, the thorough review of all force used and the philosophy that force must only be a last resort.

Richmond officers undergo firearm training monthly and role-playing scenarios for disarming suspects four times a year, a higher average than many other departments… The role-playing exercises, in which officers bark commands while holding their guns and make split-second decisions when confronted by armed residents, began in 2008, the same time that officer-involved shootings in the department plummeted.

[Chief Magnus]: “We use a case study approach to different incidents that happen in different places. When there is a questionable use-of-force incident somewhere else, we study it and have a lot of dialogue…It’s a model that is used in a range of other professions, but in some police circles, it’s seen as judging in hindsight and frowned on. In my mind, that attitude is counterproductive.”…

Richmond police Lt. Shawn Pickett says Magnus changed the department from one that focused on “impact teams” of officers who roamed rough neighborhoods looking to make arrests to one that required all officers to adopt a “community policing” model, which emphasizes relationship building.

“We had generations of families raised to hate and fear the Richmond police, and a lot of that was the result of our style of policing in the past,” Pickett said. “It took us a long time to turn that around, and we’re seeing the fruits of that now. There is a mutual respect now, and some mutual compassion.”

The political climate in Richmond is now set by the Richmond Progressive Alliance (RPA). It is a local expression of the strategy missing in most places. That strategy should include direct negotiations, and where required confrontation, with police departments to get them to adopt *Ceasefire* and implement it with integrity. It should also include youth—including street youth—organizing. Fortunately, there are in Richmond both a County-wide faith-based community organization affiliated with PICO (one of the national “Alinsky-tradition” organizing networks), and ACCE, heir to ACORN, another community organization with Alinsky-tradition roots. The combination of them and RPA is a fortunate one.

**National Implications**

Alliances like these are needed in every city. They should include majority constituency, multi-issue, community organizing—in Richmond, PICO and ACCE, in other cities other formations—and the creation of local equivalents to RPA. If broad-based multi-issue organizations don’t exist, ad hoc coalitions on issues can be formed. The point is: breadth and depth of people power are required to change institutions like police departments.

With thousands of RPA equivalents in local communities across the country (there are more than half a million local elected officials in the United States), a meaningful national convention could take place to decide whether to take over one of the major political parties, to form a new one, to run candidates in both parties (see the story of the Non-Partisan League), or to be a partisan-nonpartisan force that makes its issues decisive in electoral contestation but doesn’t itself endorse candidates.

[This article has been slightly modified post-publication.]

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