

## **Covid 19 and the Killing of George Floyd: Three Things We Can Do**

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The covid crisis has exposed the ugly underbelly of systemic inequality in the four regions in which PID operates. The US African American community presents no exception. Low income and historically marginalized populations with less access to social services and salubrious environments suffer greater co-morbidity factors and succumb to the virus at disproportionately higher rates. Moreover, these populations often enjoy neither the economic luxury of “sheltering in place” nor the bureaucratic status with logistical capacity to access public relief packages. These raw realities have created public awareness within PID’s four regions of the need to address gross inequity and systemic injustice within their social, economic, and political institutions. Without appealing to concepts of compassion and justice, which should have motivated decades ago such remedial action, basic rationality now informs advantaged groups that the simmering vulnerabilities of any marginalized sector of their fellow citizens can threaten the viability of their whole society through disease or social unrest.

Accordingly, a public dialogue is now emerging within these four regions between parliamentarians, economic elites, and popular movements to address systemic causes of poverty and gross inequality. In the US, the recent police killing of George Floyd has accelerated the demand, which the covid experience had already precipitated, for such public dialogue and concrete action. As MLK insisted, racial discrimination in the criminal justice system—of which police brutality serves as merely one example—represents only a surface layer of systemic racism. The fundamental injustice roots in historical institutions of economic oppression and inequity and in the dominant cultural narratives that justify the arrangement by rendering it

invisible. But covid-like events or Floyd incidents quickly undermine such narratives. When they present simultaneously, they deliver a devastating blow to the national apologetic.

As members of PID, standing in solidarity with our African American brothers and sisters in the Mississippi Delta and through out the US, what can we do to be part of the solution? And here we remember the words of a famous black activist of the 1960s regarding systemic racism: “ We are either part of the solution or part of the problem.” I will write more about this in the upcoming summer issue of the *PID Journal of History and Social Justice*, but for now I offer three points of initial engagement:

(1) As your health or logistical situations allow, raise a public voice of solidarity. If you are not comfortable joining a citizen march or public demonstration, in addition to social media declarations, you could post an appropriate bumper sticker or design your own lawn sign with a simple statement such as, “Racial Justice Now.” And of course, if you do participate in a public event, maintain healthy protocols and stay safe.

(2) Take time to write letters to all four of your state and US representatives and senators.

You can also sign petitions or make phone calls if you wish. But research indicates the superior effectiveness of personal letters sent through the post, composed in unpolished, but heartfelt, prose by local citizens. Legislators weigh such personal entreaties with the equivalency of several hundred signatures on a mass petition. Include two concepts in your writing. You want an immediate reform of whatever it is that makes too many police officers continue to murder young black men and think they can get away with it. And you want compensating or corrective policies for whatever residual elements in our economic institutions and public policy continue to reinforce the effects of four hundred

years of oppression and economic marginalization of large sectors of the African American community and produce the lethal disparities exposed by the current pandemic.

(3) You can serve as a conversational advocate. You will encounter those within your social circles who unintentionally blame the victim by concentrating on any excesses in demonstrators' conduct or by bewailing their general disruptive effect on the nation. Regarding the former, you can remind people that the vast majority of demonstrators eschew such tactics and frequently redirect or admonish those who participate in them. Moreover, some purveyors of these unfortunate actions represent groups with racist agendas for discrediting the popular movement. Yet, it is important here not to overplay this apologetic, albeit with good motive. Before all this is over, we may acknowledge a few cases of property damage, physical confrontation with police, and undisciplined behavior from within communities of local protesters themselves. When this happens, we support the vast majority of demonstrators, within the African American community and their allies, in redirecting it. Yet, we also remind the armchair critics, with whom we are conversing, of the sociological law of the conservation of violence. Namely, insert enough violence into a system and you are going to get it back in some form. Thus, MLK described violent protest as the voice of the voiceless—those who have lost hope in their society's capacity to hear, in any other form, their cries of injustice. Of course, we must contain the violence, but more importantly, we listen to the cries and respond with public policy actions that say, "I hear you."

And regarding the latter—people who worry about the social disruption, even if all protests proceeded peacefully-- you can provide a different interpretive frame in your conversational advocacy. Namely, to see this many Americans, including so many young

people—the future of this country—people of different backgrounds, different ethnicities, risking their personal safety during a pandemic to stand in solidarity with a historically oppressed group of their fellow citizens and demand justice indicates a great health in this country that morally defies the physical illness stalking the land. Such mass popular action proclaims to the world that Americans get it: We can be only as great as we are good.