



Casting the George Floyd Story in a Broader Context

By Gerson Uaripi Tjihenuna | Opinion

Abstract

On 9 June 2020, viewers around the globe were glued to international TV networks to watch the live coverage of the funeral of George Floyd, an African-American man who was killed by the police during an arrest in Minneapolis on May 25 2020. Police brutality against African-Americans is not something new and this is what led to the slogan 'Black Lives Matter' that has been the lodestar of the recent waves of protest. The American Police Force is embedded with systemic racism which seems to have been reinforced by Donald Trump's presidency.

However, the brutal killing of Floyd should be understood in a broader context. The Black race has gone through many dehumanising experiences, including the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonialism, and all manner of discrimination. This, in turn, has led to an inferiority complex because, for the most part, we have been defined by others – and not in the most positive of terms to say the least. There is a need for a conscious paradigm shift to transcend from a negative self-image to a positive one on the part of Black people all over the world. It is high time we stood up to define ourselves.

Introduction

On 9 June 2020, viewers around the globe were glued to international TV networks to watch the live coverage of the funeral of George Floyd, an African-American man who was killed by the police during an arrest in Minneapolis on May 25 2020.

On that fateful day, four police officers pinned Floyd to the ground and literally choked him to death while he helplessly pleaded for his life. One speaker at the memorial service could not have stated it better when he said: ‘...the only crime that George Floyd has committed was that he was born Black.’ Protests in response to his death, and more broadly to police violence against Black people, quickly spread across the US and internationally.

The question is: what does George Floyd’s murder have to do with most of us here on the Afrikan continent and in other parts of the world? To answer that question, we need a brief reflection on Pan Afrikanism.

Pan Afrikanism and Self-Definition

A few years back, before I started to pay serious attention to the Pan Afrikan cause, I used to think that Pan Afrikanism was just a pastime, a form of intellectual romanticism. However, when I started to seriously reflect on it, I came to the sobering realisation that Pan Afrikanism is about who we are as a people, based on our lived experiences. Pan Afrikanism is about defining ourselves based on our common struggles and experiences, so that we can stand tall and relate to others on an equal footing!

The Black race has gone through many dehumanising experiences: the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonialism, neo-colonialism, and all manner of discrimination and degradation. This, in turn, has led to an inferiority complex and a negative self-image because, for the most part, we have been defined by others – and not in the most positive of terms, to say the least. That definition has mainly been in the shadows of others, where we are defined as ‘other’ or as ‘outsiders’ who are ‘not good enough’ according to Eurocentric standards.

Given the current historical and socio-economic international order, Western knowledge and

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cultural structures dominate the world. In other words, the ‘international imagery representation’ is mainly Eurocentric and extra-African. As a result, Eurocentric values and opinions have come to be accepted as ‘universal’ standards. As Edward Said would say, we are out-numbered and out-organised by the prevailing Western consensus that regards the Black race as a culturally inferior people. For too long, our story has been told by others. Pan Afrikanism deals with the reconstruction of distorted images about Afrika and the Black race in general. Pan Afrikanism is a call for the democratisation of the asymmetric global knowledge system with the view of creating epistemological equity. It is a discourse about self-definition and self-affirmation. As the saying goes, ‘as long as the antelope does not tell its own story, hunting will continue to be told from the hunter’s perspective.’

When I visited Johannesburg for the first time after apartheid was dismantled, I made it a point to visit Soweto and when I went to New York City in 2005, I also made it a point to visit Harlem. Someone who does not share in the common collective experience of Black people may ask, what is the big deal about that? My answer is that both Soweto and Harlem represent a collective cultural frame of reference for Black history, Black resistance, and Black identity in more ways than one.

As Black people, our imagery representation has, for the most part, been negative. We have not only been subjected to all manner of oppression and dehumanisation, but who we are has been defined by others. Sadly, most of our people have come to accept this ‘definition’. The problem with mental slavery or

a race-based inferiority complex is that, for the most part, the victim does not seem to be aware that he/she is a victim. It is like being in a prison, without being aware that you are a prisoner. In his seminal book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire states that: ‘...under these circumstances the oppressed cannot consider the oppressor outside themselves sufficiently clearly to objectivize him – to discover him outside themselves because their perception of themselves as oppressed is impaired by their submersion in the reality of oppression’ (1993: 27).

In other words, there is a need for a conscious paradigm shift to transcend from a negative self-image to a positive one. Again, to paraphrase Freire, the oppressed person needs to transcend from being an object to becoming a Subject. According to Freire, the term Subjects denotes ‘those who know and act, in contrast to objects, which are known and acted upon’ (1993: 18). To put it differently, as Georg Hegel said (cited in Freire), the oppressed needs to ‘...attain the status of an independent self-consciousness...’ (1993: 18). That is why we have chosen to speak up on the brutal killing of George Floyd.

Black Lives Matter and the Trump Presidency

Police brutality against African-Americans is not something new and this is what led to the slogan ‘Black Lives Matter’ that has been the lodestar of the recent waves of protest. The American Police Force is embedded with systemic racism which seems to have been reinforced by Donald Trump’s presidency. As one TV commentator put it, Trump failed to ‘speak to the moment’ regarding the brutal killing of George Floyd and the subsequent street protests. The few moments when Trump spoke publicly on the issue, he was very combative and belligerent. Instead of telling the protestors that ‘I hear you and I will address your grievances,’ Trump instead chose to come across as the Law and Order President who was out to ‘put the protestors in their place’. He even threatened to send in the army to quell the protests. In any democratic country, the military is deployed to deal with external aggression and I do not think the American military is an exception to this rule. However, we were faced with a situation where the President of the most powerful country in the world, the epitome of democratic governance, was threatening to use the army against peaceful demonstrators.

Since his election in 2016, Trump basically reversed America’s political life ninety degrees back to the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) days, both domestically and at the international level, where he pursued a hawkish foreign policy. The phrase WASP refers to an informal, but closed social group of high-status and influential white Americans of English Protestant ancestry (Wikipedia, 2021). This is the group that has dominated the political and social life of the US for many years. It is interesting to note that out of the 46 Presidents who have ruled America over the years, only John F. Kennedy and Barack Obama were not from this group. Kennedy was a Roman Catholic and Obama is an African-American. It is also worth noting that the WASP’s unwritten ideology is exclusive to the point that even the Irish and Italian Americans (two groups that happen to be predominantly Catholic) were for many years not considered as ‘members’ of mainstream ‘white America’. That theme is, for example, captured in Patrick McKenna’s book *When the Irish Became White*.

The WASP ideology – although it was never formally written – was, to a certain extent, informed by the 20th Century German Sociologist Max Weber’s book *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. The central thread of the book is that although economic production for gain had existed in other civilizations like India or China, it was only in the West where capitalism, for the first time, gained momentum and took off. This, according to Weber, is due to the notion of the ‘calling.’ This notion of the ‘calling’ did not exist either in Antiquity or in Catholic theology; it was introduced by the Reformation, Weber argues. In other words, the highest form of moral obligation of the individual is to fulfil his/her duty in worldly affairs. This is particularly so for those who are called out or chosen, who then need to demonstrate a solid work ethic and iron discipline. The surety of being chosen is to be demonstrated through the performance of ‘good works’ in worldly activities (Wikipedia, 2021). Weber further argues that it was this Protestant ethic that paved the way for the introduction of the formal factory system and thus the creation of a ‘free’ mass of wage-labourers whose livelihood depends upon the sale of labour power in the market. According to this theory, for the first time in history, there were ‘free’ labourers who were neither slaves nor mere household unit producers.

Max Weber's theory is based on the doctrine of predestination, as advocated by John Calvin. According to this doctrine, only some human beings are chosen to be saved from damnation and that choice is predetermined by God. This was the doctrine that was used to undergird and justify apartheid.

Trump represents a new social phenomenon: right-wing white nationalism, a movement that has a strong international dimension. In the era of perceived or real danger of international terrorism, refugee crises, and international migration, this right-wing movement has been on the rise in a number of Western countries. Britain's decision to exit the European Union should, for example, be understood within that context. The leader of the far-right National Front in France, Marine Le Pen, also came out singing praise songs to Donald Trump after the latter was elected to office in 2016. In an article published in *The New York Times* on 1 November 2016, Amanda Taub argued that: '...whiteness is more than just skin colour. You could define it as a membership in the ethno-national majority. What it really means is the privilege of not being defined as other.'

Trump's political tone and vocabulary find resonance with supra-racist groups like the Ku-Klux-Klan and other right-wing white elements. To paraphrase Taub in the article referred to above, the supra-racist elements in the US feel that they were in a long line leading uphill where they were hoping to get hold of the American dream, but alas the line had slowed down or even stopped because immigrants, African-Americans, and other 'outsiders' seemed to be cutting the line. That is the heart of Trump's tone and it does not matter how much his spin-doctors may want to sugar-coat it: it is heavily loaded with racism! Taub further argues that: '...for decades the language of white identity has only existed in the context of white supremacy. When that became taboo, it left white identity politics without a vocabulary' (2016). It is that white identity vocabulary vacuum that Trump is trying to fill. For Trump and his supporters, the grand American narrative is white. In other words, for them, what constitutes 'political community' in the US is the 'silent' assumption that it is 'the white ethnic majority'. The others are 'outsiders' and thus just a footnote, if not a nuisance to that grand narrative. It is this narrative that racist elements in the US (including some police officers) feed into.

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