

Global Issues

A Class Blind Spot? Anti-racism in the United States

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The deaths of civilians at the hands of police have, in recent decades, led to popular uprisings in countries around the world. In France 2005, Greece 2008 and England 2011 such deaths triggered the largest riots those countries had witnessed in living memory. In each of these cases commentators, whether they sympathised with rioters or condemned them, generally understood that incidents of police violence were only symptoms of a broader social crisis. Yet when police killings triggered riots in the United States – first in Ferguson, Missouri, in the summer and fall of 2014, then in Baltimore, Maryland, in the spring of 2015 – the reaction was remarkably different, in two respects.

First, political elites and dominant voices in the media were quick to embrace these riots as legitimate forms of protest. Within days of the outbreak of rioting in Baltimore, both the acting president and the presumptive Democratic presidential candidate had issued statements in which they strongly sympathised with the perceived grievances of the rioters, while being careful not to endorse violence.² America's major newspapers all expressed similar editorial sentiments, even as the flames of Ferguson and Baltimore were still burning. Compare this response with President Sarkozy's promise to hose the rioting "scum" from the streets of Paris, with the ramblings of Greek officials about anarchist "provocateurs" and with the media-driven manhunt for rioters in England (Endnote, 2013; Gilroy, 2013).

Second, the riots in the US tended to be understood much more narrowly as matters of "police–community relations". In Europe it was clear to most commentators that neo-liberal roll-back and weak labour markets had combined to create powder kegs in poor and immigrant neighbourhoods, with police violence acting as the ignitor. Yet in the US an arguably more severe crisis in the riot zones tended to fade into the background, and the riots came to be seen as demanding only one thing: criminal justice reform.

In this article I want to argue that the difference between US and European representations of riot is largely due to the tendency in the US to summarise a whole host of grievances under one rubric: racism. Racism was of course a major factor in the European riots, which saw a heavy participation of ethnic minorities all too familiar with racist police. Nonetheless, only in America did racism come to eclipse all the other grievances of the rioters. Since racism is a powerful taboo in elite circles, I would argue that this accounts for the surprising degree of elite acceptance in the US case. And since racism

¹ Thanks to Michelle O'Brian for her careful reading and to Adaner Usmani for his unswerving technical support.

² Obama's speech on 28 April 2015 referred to a "slow-rolling crisis" in the inner city and asked the country for some "soul searching". The next day Clinton advocated putting cameras on police officers and reducing mandatory minimum sentences.

is conventionally understood to be a matter of individual prejudice, crying “racism” can sometimes function to obscure the broader social dynamics of which police violence is symptomatic.³

Note that I am not pointing out this difference in order to suggest that the US response was either better or worse, as a framing of grievance. It may well be that European commentators underappreciate the significance of racism. Nor do I wish to criticise anyone for struggling against racism, in any of its forms, or for forging cross-class alliances to do so. While the poor have good reason to suspect the embrace of elites, in the US case it surely helped to tame the repressive response, just as the focus on police racism ensured largely positive media coverage (resonating as it did with vivid images of the civil rights movement).

My point is rather to ask: what gets elided when the struggles of the poor, against police or other oppressors, are uniquely understood through the lens of racism? The answer, I will suggest, is another structure of domination, one which both cuts across racial lines and reinforces racial inequalities.

One Bias May Conceal Another

We can begin to see what might be getting left out if we examine some of the headline statistics that greeted the riots and protest in the United States. A central preoccupation has been the disproportionate impact of police violence and incarceration by race. Thus it is often observed that while African Americans constitute only 13 per cent of the US population, they make up at least 38 per cent of those in prison and 26 per cent of those killed by police.⁴ Racism seems to be the only way to make sense of such statistics. For whether we interpret that term to mean the racial bias of police officers against African Americans, or a set of larger institutional forces that are structurally “anti-black”, it would seem that whites have been exempted from the brutality of America’s neo-carceral state, which has expanded primarily along racial lines that cut deep in American society.

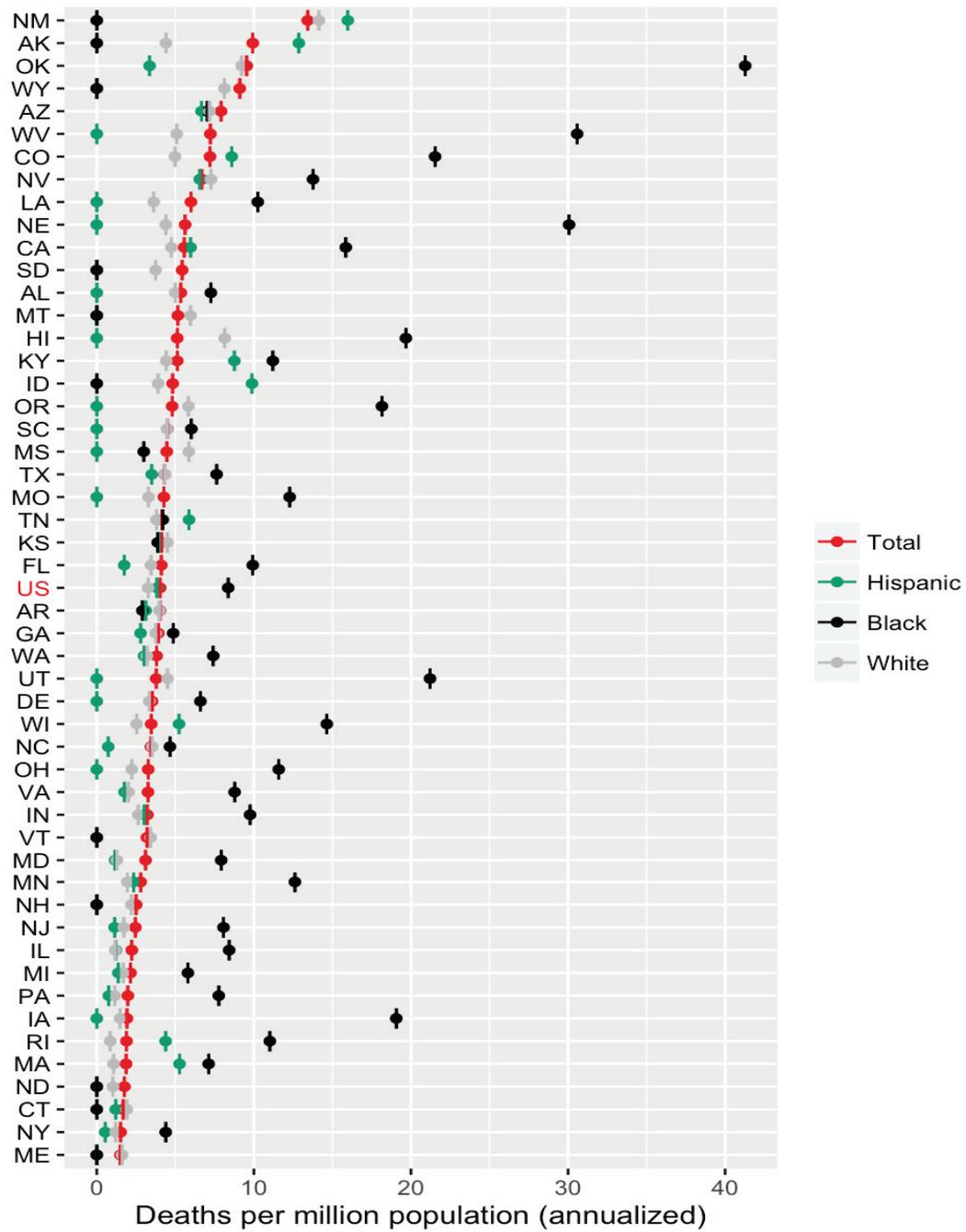
Yet there are reasons to doubt such a conclusion. It’s true that white Americans on average are less affected. Relative to their incidence in the population, they are 6 times less likely to be incarcerated and 2.5 times less likely to be shot than African Americans. However, these aggregates conceal large comparative contrasts, of both regional variation and international scale, that tell a quite different story. Moreover, there are other disproportions in the distribution of American punishment – disproportions which may exceed those of race.

Let’s begin by breaking down the rates of police killing by state. Figure 1 displays the total and race-specific rates for each state. At first sight they confirm the standard interpretation, since the rates for black people are so much higher than for whites, but they also reveal a lot of variation. In fact, the variation in the likelihood of being killed by police is about the same between states as it is between races. This leads to results that we might not expect based on the headline statistics. For instance, in four states (New Mexico, Oklahoma, Wyoming and Hawaii) white people are killed by police at rates equal to or higher than black people in the US as a whole. And while rates of black death exceed that of whites by a very large margin in many states, in at least nine states the reverse holds – whites are

³ There are two other dimensions to this worth pointing out. First, the American media finds it easy to package the anti-racist narrative by drawing on the rose-tinted version of civil rights history that every American schoolchild learns. Second, the focus on police racism helps confirm elite stereotypes about the racism of the white working class, who form the majority of police recruits.

⁴ 2014 prison numbers from BJS. 2015 police killing numbers from the *Guardian*.

killed at higher rates.⁵



Source: *Guardian* (2015)

Figure 1. Rates of police killings in the United States, by race and state

⁵The number of states in which whites are killed at higher rates than blacks varies depending on the data sources: *Guardian* 2015-16, fifteen states; *Washington Post*, 2015-16, fourteen states; *Fatal Encounters and Mapping Police Violence* 2013-16, nine states. In many of these states there were no black deaths, presumably in part because the black population is very small, they include Connecticut, Arkansas and Mississippi, where black people are, respectively, 10, 16 and 37 per cent of the population.



Sources: <http://mappingpoliceviolence.org>; <http://www.fatalencounters.org>; *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings>.

Figure 2. Total deaths by police and black population percentage, various sources

One could perhaps interpret high rates of white death at the hands of police as a spill-over effect, due to white racial fears and the social violence they help generate. But in that case we'd expect white deaths to be concentrated in states with larger black populations that elicit such fears. This phenomenon is known in the sociological literature as "racial threat", and we do indeed observe something like this in the prison data. However, we see more or less the opposite pattern in the shooting data. As Figure 2 shows, the states with the highest overall rates of death at the hands of police are mostly in the Southwest, where almost all victims are white or Latino. In three out of the

four main datasets, the relationship between the black population share and the overall rate of police killings is actually negative.⁶

No matter how we interpret these patterns, it is clear that whites in America experience a much more brutal and punitive form of justice than people in other developed countries. They are incarcerated at a rate of roughly 400 per 100 000 – four times the average rate of Europeans and Canadians, five times the rate of Germans and six times the rate of Scandinavians. We know less about police killings on an international level, but the disparity appears to be even greater. The rate of death at the hands of police for white Americans in 2015 was 2.93 per million – 7.5 times the recorded rate for Canadians in 2013 and 30 times the rate for Germans in 2012.⁷

Yet what is true of race may not be true of class. Rich Americans, of whatever race, may be closer to Europeans and Canadians than they are to less well-off Americans. On the basis of Zaid Jilani's (2015) admittedly limited data on the location in which the police shootings took place, I estimate that the chances of someone being killed by police in a top 20 per cent income neighbourhood in the US in 2015 was 0.76 per million, a quarter of the average risk faced by white Americans generally for that year, and closer to the Canadian rate of 0.39 for 2012.⁸

This is a back-of-the-envelope calculation that should be taken as an invitation to further research. The fact is we know very little about class disparities among the victims of the carceral state, which may itself be a symptom of the blind spot I'm describing. The little we do know about prisons, however, suggests that class disparities may be larger than racial ones. Surveys of prison populations taken intermittently in the past decades show that while African Americans were over-represented in the prison population by a factor of three, high school dropouts were over-represented by a factor of five, and the unemployed were over-represented by a factor of six.⁹

Of course, to anyone paying attention to American history there should be nothing surprising or contradictory about these dual disproportions. The poor have always been the primary target of prisons and police, and African Americans, despite the emergence of a black middle class in recent decades, have always tended to be poor. In 2014, 22 per cent of the households in the bottom income quintile were black, and 32 per cent of black households were located in that bottom quintile. In 2008 (the most recent data) black households made up 25 per cent of the bottom wealth quintile, and 37

⁶ We might think this is an anomaly driven by the fact that states are large heterogeneous units, but we can observe a similar pattern of extreme variation at the level of police departments. In the twelve police departments examined by the Centre for Policing Equity, the average rate of shootings per arrest was slightly lower for blacks than for whites, but as Rajiv Sethi (2016) points out, this is most likely driven by the fact that the maximum rate of deaths for whites is twenty times the median and three times the maximum rate for blacks. The twelve departments in the study are anonymous.

⁷ These comparisons should be assessed on their orders of magnitude rather than their precise levels, since we know little about the quality of the data outside the US (Baird, 2015; Hirschfield, 2016).

⁸ Note that this estimate should probably be considered an upper bound, since it would seem more likely that poor people would get killed in rich neighbourhoods than vice versa.

⁹ Proxies for the class status of prisoners come from irregular surveys of the prison population taken by the BJS. In 1991, 53 per cent of state prisoners reported incomes beneath \$10 000 prior to their arrests, while 15 per cent of the adult US population made less than that amount. In 1997, 75 per cent of state prisoners had entered prison with no high school education, while high-school dropouts made up 15 per cent of the country's adult population. In 2004, 28 per cent of state and federal prisoners reported having been unemployed in the month before their arrest. The national unemployment rate at the time was 5.5 per cent.

per cent of black households were in that group.¹⁰ Clearly in the United States, racial disadvantage *is* class disadvantage, even while it is other things besides. But if race, to quote Stuart Hall (1980), is “the modality through which class is lived”, to overlook class is to risk mistaking the form for the content.

Take for example the furore over Roland Fryer’s (2016) study on police incident reports from Houston, Texas, which revealed that the chances of being shot by police, conditional on having been arrested, were roughly the same for blacks and whites.¹¹ Conservatives celebrated the notion that the police had been cleared of the charge of racial bias, while liberals refused to accept the results, pointing out – correctly – that there could still have been bias in so far as police tended to arrest African Americans who were “less objectively threatening”. Yet what all commentators ignored is just how trigger-happy the Houston police had revealed themselves to be. Between 2000 and 2015 they admitted to firing guns or tasers in 5 011 separate incidents – almost once a day. They discharged firearms in 507 incidents – ten times the number for police in the United Kingdom, a country with a population thirty times the size of Houston. In a staggering comment to the *New York Times* not included in the original article, Fryer states that roughly one-third of these shooting incidents were fatal (Bui and Cox, 2016; Cox, 2016). To an international observer the question of whether the Houston police are equal-opportunity killers would take second place to outrage at the sheer scale of the body count: 169. But while American journalists focussed on the ratio of black to white bodies, what has received far less attention is the fact that most of these dead were poor and marginalised – victims of a growing tendency among states to contain the impact of neo-liberal policy through violence.

Racism, Racial Inequality and Capitalism

However, it’s not just that a large swath of victims are left out when we apply only the lens of racism. We also risk ignoring the specific contribution that racism makes to a broader structure of class domination latent within capitalist social relations. One that, I will argue, is largely responsible for the reproduction of racial inequality today.

In sociological theory racial inequality is typically explained as the result of two forms of racism: present-day racial discrimination and racial discrimination in the past. Examples of present-day discrimination include employers who ignore job applications from people with “black-sounding names” and police who stop and search black people without cause while letting others walk by. Academics debate whether these forms of discrimination are due to conscious racist beliefs on the part of police officers and employers, unconscious racial bias due to distorted stereotypes, or so-called “statistical discrimination” rooted in reported correlations between average levels of education, wealth and criminality. Of course, for victims of such discrimination it doesn’t really matter what the reasons are, and there is no question that these forms of discrimination exist and contribute to racial inequality.

However, although racial discrimination undoubtedly exists today, many scholars argue that its contribution to overall racial inequality is dwarfed by that of baked-in material inequalities established over many generations, the result of much more stringent forms of racism in the past (Sharkey, 2013). Quantifying these two effects is very difficult, especially given the long timeframes over which they

¹⁰ Wealth data was kindly shared by the Census’ [Survey of Income and Program Participation](#).

¹¹ The July 2016 Center of Policing Equity report on twelve police departments also found no difference in the use of lethal force conditional upon arrest. These findings are consistent with national data indicating that blacks make up a similar percentage of arrests and police killings (25–30 per cent). Both Fryer and the Center of Police Equity found that black arrestees were more likely to be subject to non-lethal force.

play out, but it should be clear that the cumulative effects of past discrimination were massive. In the antebellum South, almost all black people were denied freedom, wealth and education for two hundred years, and they were denied civil rights for almost another hundred. In the post-war period, black people were denied access to private housing wealth throughout the US. As a result, a massively disproportionate share of the black population today is born into neighbourhoods of concentrated poverty where the risk of ending up poor, unemployed and incarcerated would be extremely high even if police and employers were blind to race, which of course they are not.

While many scholars and activists would concede that historical racism is the main cause of present-day racial inequality, the mechanism linking cause and effect is rarely specified. Concepts like “institutional racism” and “white supremacy” tend, at best, to obscure this mechanism by offering a description in lieu of an explanation. At worst they imply that the only thing that could connect past racism to present racial inequality is an illicit perpetuation of Jim Crow institutions. In fact, the main thing that connects past racism to present racial inequality is the normal functioning of capitalism.

Generally speaking, markets in capitalism allocate resources not to those who need or deserve them, but to those who have them already. As a result, those who are born to poor parents tend themselves be poor. They can expect to have a worse education, be less healthy and to have less advantageous social connections. These factors are exacerbated by the concentration of poverty in the neighbourhoods where most black people live. Since under capitalism poverty is a heritable condition, even if racial discrimination were completely eradicated, racial inequality would persist. The common notion that existing inequalities (due to racism) would be wiped out in the absence of active discrimination is simply false. For the last forty years, inequality in America has been rising and inter-class mobility has been falling. Under these conditions it is plausible to assume the opposite – that initial inequalities will be exacerbated over time.

Of course, even if biological theories of racial inferiority are rarer than in the past, racial discrimination is still ubiquitous. But it is possible that the causal relationship between racial inequality and racism may today be reversed. Whereas in the past it was racism – embodied in state policy and informal codes (reflecting an explicit need for enslaved or subordinated labour) – that drove racial inequality, it may now be that racial inequality is itself one of the primary drivers of racism. That is, racism today may in large part be a *post hoc* justification for observed racial inequalities, and one that has the potential to reinforce them (McCarthy, 2016).

Americans have long been enthralled by the myth of class mobility, what Du Bois (1935: 585) called “the American assumption of equal economic opportunity for all, which persisted in the face of facts”. Given the widespread belief that anyone can pull themselves up by their bootstraps, they may be particularly prone to pathologising groups who are disproportionately poor. In the past they reached for biological explanations for this failure, although now it is more common to assume a cultural aversion to work and saving, or a lack of family values. Such pathologising, when done by people in positions of power (like police officers or employers), can easily reinforce the very patterns of inequality to which it is reacting.

While this feedback effect between racial inequality and present-day racial discrimination no doubt exists, its incremental contribution is most likely small when compared to the sheer weight of inherited disadvantage. Thus while anti-discrimination and affirmative action policies may have some effect on overall disparities, and come with other benefits such as reducing the additional psychic stigma associated with race, it is unlikely that the underlying disadvantage could be substantially reversed merely through policies aimed at removing or reversing discrimination. The existing wealth

disparities, in a context where intergenerational wealth transfers dominate all other drivers of inequality, are simply too great. Inherited black disadvantage could only be overcome by challenging the basic workings of capitalist markets, which systematically allocate wealth to the wealthy.

Reproducing the Blind Spot

In the 1960s and 1970s arguments such as the above would have been familiar to most black radicals. Their anti-racism went hand in hand with a critique of capitalism. In some cases, they sought to temper the power of markets through a programme of massive redistribution – the “Marshall Plan for the ghetto” that was briefly on the table in the 1960s. In other cases, they hoped to overthrow capitalism with a socialist or communist revolution. Yet today, when capitalism plays an even greater role in reproducing racial inequality, the most visible activists in Black Lives Matter rarely adopt an explicitly anti-capitalist stance.¹² Even social democratic redistribution, of the universalist kind proposed by Bernie Sanders, is sometimes criticised as a distraction from the crucial task of “changing hearts and minds” about racial bias. Why is this?

First, one of the main drivers of racism today – the myth of class mobility and the pathologisation of the poor that results from it – may make it hard to see that capitalism reproduces racial inequality all by itself. The standard American assumption is that the normal functioning of markets rewards the industrious. Since educated Americans generally consider themselves anti-racist, they assume that qualities like industriousness are not disproportionately possessed by one race rather than another. They thus conclude that if it were not for racial discrimination, racial inequality would disappear. Since this thinking involves an implicit assumption that the intergenerational reproduction of class status is a peculiar condition of racialised minorities, we might call it “the myth of white mobility”.

There is some historical justification for this myth. Contemporary anti-racist thinking emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, at the tail end of a period when white mobility was quite high. New Deal redistribution, the hegemony of US manufacturing, and the successive Korean and Vietnam war booms all conspired to allow a large percentage of white Americans to accumulate the housing wealth that blacks were denied due to redlining. Average black incomes also began to rise towards the end of this period, but the social elevator was shut down in the 1970s, just after blacks had successfully fought to get on board. Yet in retrospect, as Thomas Piketty (2013) has shown, it is the post-war mobility of white Americans that appears exceptional; the capitalist norm has been for class position to be inherited.

A second reason for overlooking capitalism may be more strategic: focusing on racial discrimination allows for an alliance between poor, middle-class and wealthy blacks, whereas focusing on the inheritance of class position threatens to divide them. To put it crudely, while wealthy people tend to want less income mobility because they are afraid that they or their children will fall down, the poorest people always want more because the only way is up. Glossing over such contradictions may be a necessary precondition for effective cross-class alliances along racial lines.

This is evident even in an astute observer of the interlocking dynamics of race and class like Ta-Nehisi Coates (2013, 2016). When he laments, for example, the inability of wealthy blacks to preserve their class status across generations, he ignores the fact that it is precisely the broader tendency towards

¹² This is not to say that there aren't many groups associated with the movement with anti-capitalist politics. Two prominent ones are BYP100 and Project South. However, these groups have tended to receive less media attention.

preservation of wealth that ensures most black people stay poor in the long run. Coates seems to recognise that the principle driver of black disadvantage today is the inheritance of past racism, yet in focusing on the historical origins of racial inequality – something that can't be changed – he passes over something which can: the market mediations that reproduce it. By restricting his critique to those forms of inherited poverty that can be traced to past racism, and by advocating inheritance of wealth for the black elite, Coates appears to tacitly accept the broader market forces that condemn the children of the poor to a miserable fate.

To point this out is not to criticise anyone in Ferguson or Baltimore for making alliances with middle-class activists. Such alliances have always been key to the struggle for black freedom in the US, and they will probably remain so going forward, despite a growing wealth gap among African Americans. Moreover, it's not as if they had much of a choice. No mass working movement appears to be waiting in the wings, ready to offer class-based solidarity to black victims of police violence. On the contrary, the riots took place in the context of a widespread revival of overtly racist politics, first in the form of the Tea Party, then in Trump's successful run for the Republican nomination, one which appears to have made inroads in some poor white communities.

Such developments, while no doubt drawing on the long and brutal history of racism in the United States, are to some extent generic to capitalist societies undergoing secular stagnation. Workers in the US have experienced steady declines in their conditions and bargaining power since the late 1990s. One would expect, in this context, competition among workers to intensify. Those who find themselves (for quite arbitrary historical reasons) with any leverage may, if they cannot win against employers, use it to shift the burden of the downturn onto other, less fortunate groups. A theory of capitalism which imagined that workers have a spontaneous class solidarity would be deeply mistaken.

And yet I think it is precisely in such a context that an adequate theory of capitalist social relations is required. Such a theory allows us to identify the cruel resilience of racism without demonising racists or romanticising their victims. It can help explain the traps in which people are caught without ascribing to the trap an autonomous, inexplicable power. A theory of capitalism, finally, can situate the struggle to free ourselves from the trap in a coherent global context, in which the insurgent poor of Paris, London, Athens and Ferguson, no matter how numerous their differences, can be said to face the same enemy.

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