And Then Came Sharpton: Helping Keep Blacks in Their Place

by Paul Street

This article previously appeared on ZNet [4].

“They sent in Sharpton to lecture Black Ferguson residents on proper decorum in the wake of racist police shootings.”

The Black residents of Ferguson, Missouri, a predominantly Black St. Louis suburb, were injured and insulted in at least eight key ways this summer.

First there was the execution-style murder of Michael Brown, gunned down with his hands in the air by a white Ferguson police officer.

Second, the Ferguson police left Brown’s body lying in the street in a pool of blood for hours.

Third, there was the initial police story that Brown had been shot after fighting with a white officer and “reaching for his gun” – a narrative that did not match what eyewitnesses saw.

Fourth, there was the para-militarized, Israeli-style government response to the initial protests [5]. Ferguson and St. Louis County cops donned helmets, shields, flak vests, gas masks, and shields, using armored vehicles as they dispersed crowds with tear gas and rubber bullets. SWAT team members brandished high-powered assault rifles, aiming military-issue weapons at unarmed civilians. Numerous protesters were injured and arrested.

Fifth, there was the long mysterious delay in releasing the name of Michael Brown’s killer, Darren Wilson.

Sixth, there was the Ferguson police department’s inflammatory decision to release a video of Brown stealing a snack from a local convenience store (in what the police called a “strong arm robbery”) on the day he was killed. The release was obviously intended to change the media narrative in favor of the police – as if petty theft merited summary execution. The video’s distribution to media was doubly provocative since it came while Officer Wilson’s name
was still shrouded in official secrecy. A murderer’s identity was protected while his victim’s minor crime was broadcast across the nation!

Seventh, Ferguson endured the stammering, authoritarian lectures from the state’s ridiculous Governor Jay Nixon, followed by curfew directives and deployment of the National Guard.

“How We Gonna Police”

Eighth, there was the sending in of the fake Civil Rights leader, Democratic Party shill, White House stooge, and MSNBC talk show host Rev. Al Sharpton to lecture Black Ferguson residents on proper decorum in the wake of racist police shootings. The former paid FBI Mafia informant [6] played his system-serving role with aplomb. Listen to the following passage from the fifth and sixth paragraphs of Sharpton’s much-ballyhooed oration at Mike Brown’s funeral:

[7] “I got a call from the grandfather, Reverend Tomb. Called me and said there’s a man, Mr. McSpadden on the phone. Said his grandson was killed in Ferguson, Missouri. I said, ‘Where is Ferguson, Missouri?’ He says, Right outside of St. Louis. ….. I told his grandfather, I don’t care what happened, but whatever we can do I’ll be there to do it….That night, violence started. We were here Tuesday. And we went in front of that old courthouse with big Mike and the mother, and they had to break their mourning to ask folks to stop looting and rioting. Can you imagine their heartbroken? Their son taken, discarded and marginalized? And they have to stop mourning to get you to control your anger, like you’re more angry than they are? Like you don’t understand that Michael Brown does not want to be remembered for a riot. He wants to be remembered as the one that made American deal with how we gonna police in the United States…. This is not about you!” (emphasis added)

What They Police

Forget for a moment that the charlatan’s opening comments were all about him (“I got a call….I don’t care what happened….I’ll be there”). Never mind that Reverend Al has no idea how Michael Brown would have liked to “be remembered.” And disregard the fact that many Black Ferguson residents had their own stories to tell about mistreatment at the hands of “their” town’s nearly all-white police force.
The worst thing in the Sharpton passage just quoted is the shame the onetime mob snitch tried to foist on those who rose up in rebellion (what Sharpton wrote off as selfish “looting and rioting”) against the racist structures and practices that remain prevalent across the United States in the supposedly post-racial Age of Obama. The Ferguson Uprising was about more than individual selfishness. It was about more than Michael Brown, another one of the Black Americans who is killed on average every 28 hours [8] by a police officer, security guard, or self-appointed vigilante.

And it wasn’t just about “how we gonna police in the United States.” It was also about what government authorities (“we”?) police in the US. What they police is, among other things, persistent harsh racial segregation [9] and intimately related racial inequality [10] so steep that the median wealth of white US households is 22 times higher than the median wealth of black US households [11]. The Black joblessness rate remains more than double that of whites [12] – as usual. The Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) reports [13] that an astonishing 40 percent of the nation’s Black children are growing up beneath the federal government’s notoriously inadequate poverty level. Roughly 1 in 5 Black and 1 in 7 Hispanic children live in “extreme poverty” – at less than half the poverty measure – compared to just more than 1 in 18 White, non-Hispanic children. This radical race disparity both reflects and feeds a four decades long campaign of racially disparate hyper-incarceration and criminal marking [14]. More than 40 percent [15] of the nation’s 2.4 million prisoners [16] are Black. One in three black adult males carries the crippling lifelong stigma (what law Professor Michelle Alexander has famously termed “the New Jim Crow”) of a felony record.

Why Place Matters

Among other things, contemporary US policing is about keeping Blacks in their place in more ways than one. The St. Louis region is the seventh most segregated metropolitan region in the US. It has a residential “segregation indice” of 72.3, meaning that nearly three-fourths of the region’s Blacks would have to move to be geographically distributed exactly like whites. Such extreme residential segregation is relevant because place of dwelling is strongly connected to social and economic status and opportunity. As sociologists Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton noted in their important 1998 book American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass [17], “housing markets…distribute much more than a place to live; they also distribute any good or resource that is correlated with where one lives. Housing markets don’t just distribute dwellings, they also distribute education, employment, safety, insurance rates, services, and wealth in the form of home equity; they also determine the level of exposure to crime and drugs, and the peer
groups that one’s children experience.” By concentrating poor and working
class Black people in a certain restricted number of geographical places you
reinforce Blacks’ persistently disproportionate presence in the lowest
socioeconomic places[1].

None of this has changed to any significant degree because a small number
of Black Americans have moved into highly visible high places.

Blame the “Self-Pitying” Victim

But back to Reverend Al’s funeral oration. After putting the “rioters and
looters” in their supposedly selfish and irresponsible place, Sharpton ripped
on Black Americans for “our disrespect for each other…Our killing and
shooting and running around gun-toting each other…..Now we get to the 21st
century, we get to where we got some positions of power,” Sharpton added,
“and you decide it ain’t black no more to be successful. Now you wanna be a
nigga and call your woman a ho, you lost where you come from…..Nobody
gonna help us if we don’t help ourselves,”

“Sitting around feeling sorry for ourselves,” Sharpton added for good measure,
“won’t solve our problems. Sitting around having ghetto pity parties rather than
organizing and strategizing and putting our differences aside.”

As if the emergence of some Black Faces in High Places – Obama in the
White House, Sharpton pontificating on MSDNC, Clarence Thomas handing
down right-wing opinions (written for him by Anton Scalia) from the Supreme
Court, Colin Powell and Condi Rice helping George W. Bush invade Iraq,
Susan Rice helping Obama bomb Libya and Iraq and Syria – changes
anything in Black working and lower class experience under persistent US
racial apartheid and inequality.

As if rich and middle class whites got where they got purely through heroic
self-help and tough love, with no assistance from government, no benefits of
class and race privilege – and with no transfer of wealth and income from people of
color [18].

As if millions of Black Americans wouldn’t welcome serious opportunities for
middle-class “success.” As if white folks wouldn’t be struggling with white-on-
white violence and endemic crime and poverty if they were penned up in
jobless, opportunity-bereft, and police-occupied white ghettos and prisons
after 300 plus years of white chattel slavery and reverse white Jim Crow.
As if engaging in days and nights of street battle with the forces of white supremacist order and marching in the street under the banner “No Justice, No Peace” is “sitting around feeling sorry for ourselves.”

Testament of Hope

There’s nothing wrong and much good and necessary about organizing and strategizing and community self-help. But advocating such things in the absence of serious criticism of contemporary racism, capitalism and militarism – what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., called “the triple evils that are interrelated” – will not solve Black America’s problems. “The black revolution,” the actual Civil Rights and social justice leader Dr. King wrote in a posthumously published 1969 essay titled “A Testament of Hope” – embracing a very different sort of hope than that purveyed by Obama in 2008 – “is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws – racism, poverty, militarism, and materialism. It is exposing evils that are rooted deeply in the whole structure of our society. It reveals systemic rather than superficial flaws and suggests that radical reconstruction of society itself is the real issue to be faced.”

Those words – words you never hear via “mainstream” media during annual King Day celebrations – ring as true and urgent as ever today. You’ll never hear them from Reverend Al or from Barack Obama, the ultimate example of how, according to Sharpton, “we got some positions of power.”

Symbolic and nominal power, that is. The United States remains a white supremacist state at home and abroad. It is a nation where paths to celebrity and riches are open to a certain small number of “good Blacks” like Obama and Oprah, who make lucrative careers out of pleasing rich and powerful whites and not offending broader white sentiments and sensibilities. Meanwhile, racism – deeply and institutionally understood – lives on, with terrible consequences that endure all too invisibly beneath celebrated examples of Black ascendency into the elite. Sharpton’s rise is qualified by the requirement that he recurrently wade back into ghetto trenches to quell the flames of rebellion and inflict the bourgeois gospel on racialized US capitalism’s “homeland” victims.

Paul Street’s latest book, just released, is They Rule: The 1% v. Democracy.

Endnote

1. The misery inflicted on many millions of poor and working class Blacks by this persistent “American apartheid” is commonly identified with classic ghetto swaths in big cities like Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, St. Louis,
Cincinnati, Milwaukee, and Detroit. In reality, however, concentrated Black poverty, joblessness, and related racial apartheid is pervasive in numerous smaller US jurisdictions. If you want to talk to heavily segregated and deeply poor, criminally marked, and police-abused Black Americans, you don’t have to go major metropolises. You can visit smaller cities and towns like East St. Louis, Illinois, Benton Harbor, Michigan (containing astounding hyper-segregated Black misery in close proximity to lush Lake Michigan resorts and the sprawling modern headquarters of the Whirlpool Corporation), Flint, Michigan, Michigan City, Indiana, Gary, Indiana, Inkster, Michigan, Rock Island, Illinois, and Camden, New Jersey. You can also travel to predominantly Black suburbs adjacent to big cities like Maywood and Bellwood, Illinois (extensions of Chicago’s vast West Side ghetto), numerous suburbs south of Chicago, and Ferguson (north of St. Louis, whose main black ghetto is on its North Side).