

Panel Discussion: Race, Racism, and Policing: A Long History

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A tidal wave of social and political unrest during 2020 culminated in widespread demands for change. Protests in response to the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor inspired debates and movements that drew attention to the long struggle to end police brutality. Systemic racism in America is in not just a contemporary issue as the title of this panel affirmed. Professor Frances Tanzer invited three scholars to address the historical issues that thread through current conversations about race and policing.

Ousmane Power-Greene (Clark University) described law enforcement's failure to acknowledge the long history of anti-Black violence and policing. Turning to the 19th century, he addressed the false dichotomy between the free-north and slave-south. He explained that the police and white civilians constantly surveilled freed blacks in the north and mid-west, despite the shaping of whites in these areas as abolitionists. Freed African Americans experienced profound insecurity due to state-sanctioned anti-Black violence and the deputization of men searching for fugitive slaves above the Mason-Dixon Line. Power-Greene asserted that "if southern free blacks felt like they were living in a literal police state in the nineteenth century, northern free blacks felt they could be arrested and jailed at any moment." Highlighting how the history of policing has shaped contemporary injustices, Power-Greene declared that recognizing early examples of state and collective violence is crucial for repairing the ongoing damage inflicted on Black communities.

Carl Suddler (Emory University) began by underscoring that Breonna Taylor had still not received justice. As a carceral historian, he asserted that "this was not a failure of the justice system; this was the justice system doing exactly what it was designed to do." Over the past century, conversation and action have failed to advance reform. Suddler's research seeks to develop a better understanding of racial inequities, including housing, schooling, and the legal system. Drawing on a chapter from his recently published book, *Presumed Criminal: Black Youth and the Justice System in Postwar New York*, he discussed the "Harlem Six," a group of boys convicted for the death of a white female shopkeeper in 1964. Their experiences reveal the construction of criminality as a racial problem by the 1960s. Attempts to create a fair and just legal system instead fostered systemic and institutionalized racism. Two laws established at the time, no-knock and stop-and-frisk, continue to excessively impact African Americans, including Breonna Taylor, a victim of the no-knock law. Suddler, questioned whether the history of policing in this country demonstrates that "we have run out of options in terms of reform...so what now?"

Anne Gray Fischer (University of Texas, Dallas) began with a serious observation. "I am deeply moved that this event is sponsored by a Center dedicated to interrogating genocide: because we can't talk about the history of policing in this country without talking about the history of a systematic regime of targeted hate and violence against people of African descent. The history of policing in the U.S. is one strand in a global and interconnected history of genocidal state violence." An urban historian researching the intersection of gender, race, and law enforcement, Fischer studies Black women and their experiences with racist policing, laying bare the underlying practices and justification. She described the relationship between policing and urban

capital, centered around the criminalization of minorities and the use of police as “frontline enforcers” of gentrification. Taylor’s family made this exact claim in Louisville, exposing a direct correlation between her murder and the push to remove her apartment building to develop a large real-estate project. Linking policing with business interests in urban areas, Fischer described the protocols for controlling and banishing sex workers from city centers. These efforts, which became a model for policing alleged gang members, drug dealers, and the homeless, continue today and disproportionately target poor Black women. Fischer reasoned that “gentrified cities reflect at once the proof and the erasure of state violence against women.”

The panelists illuminated the tangled history of racism and policing in the U.S. as they raised vital questions about future law enforcement. Tanzer noted in conclusion that the dominant narratives of this history omit the voices of minorities and marginalized people while accepting the acts of violence against them. Discussions such as this panel represent steps in the right direction.

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