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Social Problems

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Victims of Underrepresented and Oppressed Communities

The characterization of Black people in American media portrays itself as representing traits intrinsic to their being, camouflaging racism and prejudice under the veil of mass media. These representations naturalize stereotypes and amalgamates them into a detrimental view of all Black people in the country, dehumanizing them in a subtle, yet efficacious way. This is a multifaceted approach by the media, encompassing many different mediums, including news, literature, the music industry, television, and film. Stories of gangs and violence find themselves at the forefront of popular culture as it pertains to black people. Characters and personas are portrayed as violent and irrational, causing harm every where they go and leaving destruction in their wake, serving as the illustration of the stereotypes propagated by people in power.

Words like violent, criminal, and animal are used to define Black people as they appear in media. This othering language is widespread as means to further differentiate blackness from whiteness. Odell Beckham Jr., an African American football player, is seen as a “diva” and overly aggressive for his outburst on the sideline, while Tom Brady, a white poster child for the NFL, is seen as overly passionate and trying to invigorate his teammates for displaying the same emotion. Furthermore, it is appalling that perpetrators of mass shootings are viewed as people who had a bad day and suffer from mental illness, while George Floyd’s past was being used to vilify him and justify his homicide by the hands of the police. Issues like addiction and drug use also find themselves subjected to these polarizing views of race and subjugation. While powder cocaine and crack cocaine are essentially the same, the main difference being in the route of administration, the sentencing for the drugs vary absurdly. There is an 18:1 disparity in the threshold amount of powder cocaine and crack cocaine that triggers a mandatory minimum penalty for trafficking related offenses. Policy makers justify this sentencing disparity by claiming violent crime is more associated with crack cocaine than with powder cocaine (Sacco). It is no coincidence that powder cocaine is typically associated with upper class, white people, while crack cocaine is associated with lower economic status and the Black community.

Violence has always been something that sells. The famous news saying, “If it bleeds, it leads” and fascination with contact sports are examples of the lust for violence. News stories on violence and destruction of life gain more attention and elicit more viewers with stronger reactions. This idea is compounded with terms such as Black on Black crime, which has a phenomenally profound effect on the Black community. This type of racialized term is only used as it pertains to black people. White on white crime is non-existent, and the lack of a term to describe the idea for it only serves to highlight crime committed by minorities, allowing white people to be complacent with crime that occurs in underrepresented communities. It blinds them to the atrocities committed by people in power. Capitalism has a unique juxtaposition where it can simultaneously profit from the detriments to the Black community while furthering those detriments through policy, economy, and accessibility to help. Fear is used as a motivator in society, and capitalism takes advantage of the fears of insecurity and by allowing the ideas of fear to emanate from the racialized representation of Black people.

An example of the culmination of these ideas is how a modern-day gang member is viewed by society. They are deemed violent criminals and irreparable members of society. However, they are products of the ailments inflicted upon them by people in power, scared to death every day of their lives. Most people who join gangs do so for security and to obtain necessities that capitalism and government make increasingly difficult. They are forced to live in neighborhoods that are neglected by public assistance and where amenities and resources are far and few between. Stigmas surrounding mental health, as well as lack of access to the resources, force children to “act tough” and do things that the community is misled to believe is the way of life. A behavioral psychology perspective can explain the causes that lead to these behaviors, but not the causes of those causes. Black youth are trapped in a cycle of media representation that leads to self-hate, and corrupted ideas of identity and aspirations. This cycle serves to hide the oppressed and the oppressors from the political functions that serve to perpetuate stereotypes.

Redefining the social construction of Black lives may ameliorate the negative views of Black people by others and allow a more widespread view of the injustices they face on a daily basis, rather than using the extremes of crime as highlighted by the media environment, making voters more empathetic to Black plight and promoting social programs that are desperately needed. As it stands, the punishment Black people receive is seen as comeuppance and thus the cycle is continued. It is for these reasons that police justify their use of excessive force in these communities. When the lens of capitalism is removed, one can view the oppression enacted by the government as a terroristic force for minorities, with the police being an illustration of the terrorism, backed by the judicial system and political policies. For the betterment of all Black people, they should be represented as what they are, people deserving of equality and help who have suffered immensely at the hands of a country with its own economic values held above those of the people.

Bibliography

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