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Social Problems

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Chiraq: Victims of Systematic Oppression and Exploitation

There is a crisis in America that hovers under the radar, shielded from the eyes of the mass media. Everyday young Black men and children are killed due to gun violence and activities relating to gang activity. Many of these murders go unsolved and leave families without sons, fathers, brothers, uncles, and friends. America is currently placing its attention overseas, especially in the middle east, and now in Ukraine, actively funding billions of dollars every year to war efforts and occupation. However, there is a domestic war over racialized ideology that oppresses Black people and other people of color with a multifaceted, and sometimes deadly, approach. The cyclical nature of this war entrenches them into poverty and makes social mobility a fleeting idea, where the rich keep getting richer, while the poor are getting poorer. This is leading many Black youth to join gangs and commit crime in order to try to supplement any other income they, or their family, may have. One location in which this problem is monumental is in Chicago. Chiraq, the slang term for the city of Chicago, is a broad term used to highlight the vast amount of crime and gun related violence that occurs in the city. The term draws a comparison to Iraq and the violence that transpires in the middle east. Specifically, the term refers to the “bad” neighborhoods, or areas that produce the most crime within the Chicago metropolitan area. According to an article by WBEZ Chicago, when the murder victim is African American, the rate for it being solved was less than 22 percent. Most major cities in the United States have these types of areas in which the crime and poverty rates are higher than the surrounding areas. Crime and poverty are two concepts that are linked in these areas, and which are curated by the lack of public, government assistance, capitalistic endeavors, and the role of mass media in reproducing stereotypes.

The roots of these predicaments are race based relations and their attachment to capitalism. A Marxist critique analyzes Capitalism as an exploitative system that takes advantage of the working class in order to propel the capitalists with an upward trajectory. This relationship is defined by exploitation, which can be explained as the difference between profit and wage earned. Labor power is what workers exchange for a wage and that wage can be affected by many factors including location, competition, supply and demand, as well as cost of the labor power itself and any potential training (Marx). Racist ideals exacerbate these exploitative practices and allow for oppression of a specific class of worker. Similarly, to the inception of race as it is detailed by Barbara Fields, oppression benefits white people who do not want to be subjected to the same harmful conditions in jobs that typically hire people regardless of their background. Places like Amazon are notorious for their exploitative practices and high turnover rates. Race is created and perpetuated as an ideology to smooth over contradictions that arise from the extreme mistreatment of a certain people.

Black people are oppressed through a vicious cycle that establishes and maintains exploitation. Since means of subsistence are subject to market forces, a person’s ability to live is restrained by their ability to earn a wage. Without a wage, people are unable to maintain life and will not be able to maneuver their way out of the cycle of poverty that is plaguing the country. The constant threat of losing means to survival is an enormous source of anxiety for Black people, with the rates of mental health deficiencies constantly rising among Black youth. Lack of access to the proper healthcare also serves to perpetuate these issues. Black patients are more likely to be viewed by psychiatric care providers as psychotic rather than depressed, and Black children are more likely than White children to be diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactive disorder and disruptive disorders (Calhoun). By keeping people ill, yet still dependent on work, they are further entrenched into the cycle of constant maintenance. The jobs that are typically employing people of this demographic do not offer immediate benefits, and with a place like Amazon, do not even expect workers to last long enough to reap the benefits of the job. Harsh policies force people to care more about the job than their own well-being because every mistake ends up being life or death when the worker needs the wage to purchase the necessities of life such as food, water, and shelter.

Though the parents of youth are the ones exploited, the children are the ones who feel the brunt of the effects. Since the parents have to spend their time working long hours, barely making enough to maintain their own lives, the children have to figure out something to do in their spare time. Popular media is saturated with harmful depictions of Black people. One example, and the most prominent, is Gang culture, which has permeated Black popular culture in ways that make it seem intrinsically linked to the individuals involved. The current rap scene is filled with artists who discuss guns, drugs, and promiscuous relationships, which are all harmful to the perception of Black people in general. Since the genre is predominantly occupied by Black artists, the music is typically associated with Black people regardless of their actual similarity to the artist. The depictions of fictional media representations do not help either, such as the ones in movies like Menace II Society, or in shows like the wire. With a lack of positive role models, it is easy for the youth to fall into the same trap as other members of the community.

Intersectionality plays a prominent role in the effects of oppression. A black woman is one of the most oppressed demographics in the world. With about 33% of families in Chicago being headed by a single mother, with the rates being higher among Black families, one can see how this can create generational problems amongst the youth and exacerbate the issue of poverty (Smartest Dollar). Another explanation for the number of single mothers can be the incarceration rate of black men. 1 in 9 black men ages 20-34 are incarcerated (One in 100). Without father figures around, mothers have to take on more than they can carry. This is why they are expected to be so strong, which perpetuates the previously mentioned mental health problems. A doctor may subconsciously assume that they can handle more and thus not diagnose them properly. That can lead to a trickledown effect and impact the children. Barbara Foley discusses how these intersections of identity service inequality and compound to create more polar inequality.

“It is to propose, however, that the ways in which productive human activity is organized — and, in class-based society, compels the mass of the population to be divided up into various categories in order to ensure that the many will labor for the benefit of the few — this class-based organization constitutes the principal issue requiring investigation if we wish to understand the roots of social inequality.”

This perpetuates cycles of poverty as people are unable to retain any savings and can only live check to check. The new category of social class becomes just another way to oppress the group. The subsequent reaction to these deficiencies is to find a new means to make money, which in impoverished communities is typically selling drugs or getting involved with local gangs. O-Block, or the parkway garden projects, is a project apartment complex that feels the exponential effects of the curation of gang culture.

Artists and celebrities like King Von and Lil Durk have had a large effect on the culture of the environment. They are both seasoned criminals, with King Von being a murderer who has gotten off on multiple cases. Tragically, King Von was unable to escape the mentality of the streets and lost his life at the end of 2020. What many people fail to realize is that there is an immense amount of profit to be made by curating gang culture. Record labels can capitalize on the experiences of Black youth by commodifying their experience and pain. People are pouring their hearts out on songs, detailing the trials and tribulations they have been through, only for it to miss their intended audience and fall flat on the ears of white kids who glorify the violence and destruction of the Black community that is mentioned so rampantly. There is constant tension between the social relevancy and commercial viability of promoting certain ideologies, and record labels abuse the ideological balancing act. However, with gang violence, the two ideas are interlinked and inseparable as profit is only considered for white people and capitalists.

The negative impacts on the Black community due to this are actually beneficial to white people in the short term. Violence is an integral part of American culture and the polarity of the depictions as they relate back to race. Television characters like Tony Soprano or Walter White are praised while someone like James St. Patrick is demonized. Social media serves a crucial role in this perpetuation of inequality in the communities and the subsequent representations that result from the popularized idols that make it out of these communities. Nancy Baym details seven key concepts of social media. These are interactivity, temporal structure, reach, replicability, mobility, storage, and social cues. Each of these concepts serve to perpetuate the depictions that are present in the mass media and give a more personal connection to the battleground over ideology. Content can be shared across multiple apps to countless people with the click of a button. This means any of the stereotypical representations can be viewed by an innumerable amount of people, whether they originate on social media or through traditional media sources.

Mass media and news outlets have a vested financial interest in the perpetuation of these stereotypes. Since they are so closely linked to government and regulations, they must abide by whatever ideals the funding politicians hold. The private funders can also dictate the tones and ideas of many of these topics. If it bleeds, it leads, is a common saying amongst journalist and media personalities. This refers to the idea that violence or death will attract the most viewers and should be put at the front of the broadcast in order to evoke a physiological response from viewers, making them more inclined to continue viewing. Noam Chomsky identifies the function of mass media as to amuse, entertain, and inform, and inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society (Herman). When that larger society perpetuates and curates racism, it is easy to view mass media as another tool for capitalism and their approach to exploitation and oppression.

In conclusion, the gang problem in Chicago is curated by the cycle of poverty. Instead of funding social programs, the government would rather fund police departments and the institutions that continually oppress black people. Media representations reproduce stereotypes and glorify gang violence, leading kids to look up to serial killers such as King Von. Since they have money, and money is the key to subsistence, young men think they must follow the same path. Lack of parental guidance and leaders in the community exacerbates the issue when the kids have no where to turn but to older gang members who present a glamorized façade of what gang life is like. When they are too young to work, they must make money to support themselves somehow. Seeing as one in nine black men aged 20-34 will be incarcerated, they view the odds as impossibly stacked against them. The media and the government work hand in hand to create a vicious cycle that traps black youth and convinces them they are hopeless and deserving of pain.

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