JUSTICE FOR SALE - PART 5: Rebellious Action in a Corrupt Time

This is the fifth and final article in this five part series examining the US legal system (PART1, PART2, PART3, PART 4). The series collectively argues that corporate media and political rhetoric have made Americans acquiescent toward corruption in the US legal system. This piece examines the corporate media’s coverage of citizen’s resistance to corruption and abuse in the US legal system.

“Civilization has been a continuous struggle of the individual or of groups of individuals against the State and even against ‘society,’ that is, against the majority subdued and hypnotized by the State and State worship.” — Emma Goldman

In 1786, Revolutionary war veteran Daniel Shay led hundreds of men in a march outside of a New England court-house. They successfully used the beating of drums and loud cheers to temporarily stop the court’s proceedings of a debtor’s case. Shay and his protesters were motivated by their anger at wealthy coastal residents for price gouging citizens into debt. They were irate the courts, a branch of the government, served the wealthy by incarcerating debtors. These demonstrations, sometimes violent, continued for more than two years, and were collectively known as Shay’s Rebellion. The protesters arrived from the rural areas of New England. Early US leaders tried to shut down and execute peaceful protesters with legislation such as the Riot Act. However, the protests, coupled with other events, successfully pushed US leaders to draft the US Constitution and a Bill of Rights for its citizens.¹

Despite the complexities of the 21st century, the collective nature of Shay’s Rebellion is demonstrative of the power citizens possess in the face of corruption by powerful corporations and governments. It is also emblematic of the response these peaceful and powerful expressions can garner. In fact, today both inside and outside of prisons, there is a growing opposition to the abuse and corruption of the US legal system. Inside prison facilities, inmates are mounting opposition to bureaucratic hypocrisy. While outside the prisons, citizens are marching, protesting, changing laws, exposing lies, and sometimes violently confronting police. Until a fair and equitable justice system is created, contemporary leaders of the US can expect these conflicts to continue. Undermining the creation of an equitable system is the propagandistic corporate media, which serves the interests of those in power by soiling public opinion on resistance efforts.

Resistance on The Inside

Inside the walls of Coalinga State Hospital in California (discussed in Part 4), the corruption of profiteers are being met by peaceful protests. For instance, in November of 2014, the staff at Coalinga demanded that inmates exchange their personal storage material for materials made by Sterilight. Sterilight is a private company reaping profits from the forcing of their storage materials on Coalinga inmates. However, the detainees performed a series of 300 person peaceful sit down protests aimed at keeping their equipment. In response the next morning, Coalinga staff put a lockdown in place to install Sterilight shelving.² The peaceful
protest was unsuccessful, but is expected to grow as anger increases over profiteer’s invasion of detainee’s lives.

While Coalinga offered a peaceful protest, other prisoners have protested their conditions violently. In 2012, Mississippi’s privatized Walnut Grove Youth Correctional Facility had 27 assaults per 100 offenders. This made it the most violent in the state. In May 2012 prisoners in Mississippi rioted at the Corrections Corporation of America-run Adams County Correctional Facility, killing a corrections officer. Matt Stroud of Politico explains that “Similar riots have broken out in private prisons run by CCA [Corrections Corporation of America] and other companies in Oklahoma, New Mexico, Florida and California. At least 10 deaths (one from natural causes) occurred at CCA prisons in 2013 alone.”

These private prisons save money by cutting food and staff (discussed in PART2). The purposeful diminishing of basic necessities is believed to be a catalyst to unrest and resistance inside prisons. However, the corporate media rarely cover conditions or revolts inside prisons unless there are major riots, which leads most Americans to be ignorant of these realities. Thus, US citizens are uninformed about the conditions and pretexts for resistance in prisons.

Resistance on The Outside

Outside of prisons, there exists a plethora of citizen movements angry about the abuses and corruption in the legal system. People’s frustration with red light camera’s (discussed in PART3) goes beyond costly early termination fees, farce trials, less safety, and higher ticket rates to include malfunctions. In 2014, Redflex’s Chicago cameras malfunctioned and incorrectly gave 13,000 motorists unwarranted citations. By summer 2014, the city was still sifting through the tickets to make sense of the malfunction, while the population waited to see a courtroom. The anger of citizens turned into resistance in states such as New Jersey where red light cameras have been shot with guns. Other citizens have successfully protested city red light contracts in places like South San Francisco, San Rafael, and Santa Ana, CA. In total, sixteen states have bans on installing red light cameras.

However, the largest protests of resistance in the contemporary US focus on police violence. Following the verdicts absolving police of blame in the Eric Garner and Michael Brown deaths (discussed in PART1), citizens protested peacefully and violently throughout the world. It likely impacted the decision for Officer Darren Wilson to quit his job without a severance package (though other groups raised significant money on his behalf). Some protests resulted in violent clashes with police. After police assaulted protesters in Ferguson, protester Barry Perkins began throwing rocks at police because it “feels good…I want to do what they did to me.” At least, two other police officers met gunfire during that protest. In Oakland, California, where anger still permeates over police assaulting Occupy protesters, protests over police abuse in the wake of Brown’s death resulted in violent clashes with police. At one point, 250 protesters charged Oakland Police resulting in 13 arrests. Other times, undercover officers randomly pulled guns on protesters. This is further demonstrative that the public has lost faith in the system’s ability to hold officers accountable for misdeeds. Thus, citizens are taking the law into their own hands. In fact, less than 24 hours after a Missouri Police man shot a teen pumping gas in December 2014, violent protests erupted.
In fact some citizens have taken the law into their own hands via the Internet. In November 2011, University of California, Davis Police Lieutenant John Pike pepper-sprayed 21 Occupy UC Davis students as they sat peacefully on a campus walkway. Predictably, the corporate press sided with Pike, even though he encroached on students’ First Amendment right to peaceably assemble. FOX News contributor Megyn Kelly argued that the spraying was no big deal because the spray is “like a derivative of real pepper. It’s a food product essentially.”

In response to Pike’s behavior, the hacktivist group Anonymous reportedly released Pike’s email and home address as well as his cellphone number. Pike received 17,000 angry and threatening emails, 10,000 similar text messages, and hundreds of letters. This reportedly led to him being so depressed that he had to quit his job with full retirement benefits and a $38,000 worker’s compensation package for stress. Meanwhile, each student sprayed received a $30,000 settlement. Anonymous continues to leak names, information, police recordings, and files of those involved in executing or protecting the perpetrators of police violence.

The Press

Many Americans remain thunderstruck by the protests against police violence. For example, US citizens were outraged when protesters shut down freeways in California, Missouri, Tennessee, District of Columbia, Texas, and other states to force a national debate on police abuse. The response of some citizens was to complain that their commute was hindered by the protests. Citizen’s complained that shutting down transportation will not solve anything. However, such tactics have proven successful in the past, such as Rosa Parks, the great activist, who hindered the commute for many citizens to successfully force national action on segregation. Such large-scale protests historically have occurred across Europe, Central, and South America with significant results oft in favor of the public interest. It is citizen’s acquiescence to the growing police state and support for “tough on crime politicians” that has allowed this climate of chaos to emerge. The system’s inability to operate equitably has left contemporary protesters with the choice of being abused by the system or stifling it until an equitable one replaces it. Absent large-scale disruptions, the current oppressive system will likely not be replaced.

However, it will be tough to make citizens aware of the problems and solutions regarding the justice system if they are left uninformed by the corporate media. The corporate press relies on manipulation of facts and language to shift public opinion against victims. The outlets FOX News and The New York Times (NYT) degraded Michael Brown with phrases such as “bad guy” and “no angel.” Similarly, FOX News demonized the behavior of peaceful protesters by referring to them as “a mob.” Meanwhile, the NYT justifies police abuse with tempered language such as calling the police shooting of an unarmed girl a “collision.” Stories are fabricated to justify police violence such as FOX News falsely claiming that Black Panthers called for violence against police. The nature of protests are exaggerated and the role police play in escalating violence is falsified by outlets such as CNN to justify a violent police response. Reports from people on the ground via Twitter are wrongfully deemed false by outlets such as the NYT. Before evidence is even available, media outlets side with police. For example, weeks after the Michael Brown shooting the NYT asked citizens to give police the benefit of the doubt. Lastly, and predictably, outlets manipulate the nature of protests for political gain, such as Sean Hannity of FOX News who blamed the protests on President Obama.
After the shooting of two police officers in New York City (discussed in PART1), the corporate press demonstrated its hypocritical allegiance to police. In late 2014, FOX News verbally attacked the St. Louis Rams players for silently protesting police violence as they entered the football field. Fox News Host, Bill O’Reilly claimed the players were not “smart enough to know what they’re doing” However, O’Reilly lauded police for turning their backs in protest on Mayor Bill de Blasio at a funeral for their fellow officers. The officers were angry that de Blasio voiced concern for youths such as his black son, Dante, “not just from some of the painful realities of crime and violence” but “from the very people they want to have faith in as their protectors.” O’Reilly argued that de Blasio needed to be removed from power. In fact, O’Reilly and former New York City Mayor and FOX News contributor Rudolph Giuliani argued that police were the victims. The hypocrisy of the police and corporate media who referred to the Rams symbolism as “tasteless,” but laud New York City Police for using a funeral to make a political statement is alarming. Worse, police in New York City are performing a work stoppage with a 66% drop in arrests. These police supported by the corporate media are undermining the democratic process which voted for the mayor and legislated the responsibilities of police. In fact, citizens are not supportive of the police behavior. Polls show that over half of New Yorkers disapprove of the recent behavior by police in New York City.

Time and time again the abuses by politicians and private industry in the name of justice have proven to be costly and unjust for Americans. Yet, many Americans somehow think that the injustices bequeathed upon the innocent can only happen to “other people.” What they fail to accept is that if atrocities are allowed to anyone, they can happen to everyone. Thus, American citizen’s passivity may lead to a spouse being locked up for life, a child being experimented with death-row drugs, a youth being shot by police, a traffic violation causing insurance to be unaffordable, or a friend sterilized in prison. These atrocities do happen, such as the six women sexually assaulted by police officer Daniel Holtzclaw, the Georgia toddler who was hit by S.W.A.T. team grenade, the teacher who was pepper-sprayed by police for using his cell-phone, and 51 year old Marlene Pinnock whose beating by a California Highway Patrol was caught on video.

By late 2014, more Americans appeared to be recognizing that the justice system was costly and unjust. In California, voters approved prop 47 which downgraded a list of non-violent felonies to misdemeanors including shoplifting, minor check fraud, and minor drug possession. Maryland commuted all remaining death sentences for prisoners to life without parole. In fact, by 2015, 23 states, Guam, and the District of Columbia, had either legalized, decriminalized, or allowed for the medical use of Marijuana. The US Attorney General, Eric Holder came out in opposition to the death penalty. He argued that there is evidence that not everyone on death row is guilty. He also called for the US to halt all death penalty legislation until the Supreme Court rules on the legality of lethal injection drugs for execution. While these discussions and court cases have not produced results, they do demonstrate a shift in national discourse toward recognizing problems with the so-called justice system.

While it is an inspiring start toward equitable justice, Americans will need to move beyond minor legislation, protests, and clashes with police to attain justice. Americans need to retune their thinking about justice and separate themselves from the post-9/11 rhetoric of good and evil. There is a much more complex world where the innocent end up in jail, those
administering the law break it, jails serve the interest of shareholders not the public, and court rooms serve to extort hard working citizens’ money not protect it. Until Americans, examine these issues with a critical lens where they are open to interpretations alternative to those offered by the political elite and corporate press, they put themselves and every other American at risk of becoming a victim of the prison-industrial complex. America cannot live up to ideals of freedom and democracy when it does not have an equitable legal system.

“The earth is the mother of all people, and all people should have equal rights upon it.” – Chief Joseph

SPECIAL THANKS: This series was made possible from consultation and editing by Andy Lee Roth, Peter Phillips, and Mickey Huff. Much of the vital material necessary for the series was collected by my research assistants Crystal Bedford and Emilee Mann. I thank all of them. I also want to thank those who frequent social media and blogging sites, without their posts acting as a constant reminder of the ignorance and hate that influence interpretations of justice, this series would not have been possible.

1 Howard Zinn. *A People’s History of the United States: Vol. 1, Abridged Teaching 2nd Edition*
2 11/13/14 Phone conversation with Joel Oakes at 1030am


“The Cop Who Pepper Sprayed Peaceful Students Will Receive $38,056 for Emotional Suffering.”


Jackson.


35 Ibid.


