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The Contributions of Hip Hop to the Struggle against Police Brutality, Mass Incarceration and Underlying Problems of Racism in America

James R Ochwa-Echel

Associate Professor for Secondary Education and Coordinator Africana Studies, Eastern Illinois University, USA

Abstract:

Hip hop has been described as the "a voice for the voiceless." And hip hop artists have often shown their social consciousness by addressing issues facing the African American community in America. The term hip hop as used in this paper refers to one of its elements namely rap music. It is thus used interchangeably in the paper. This paper will explore the contribution of selected hip hop (rappers) artist in the struggle against police brutality, mass incarceration and underlying problems of racism.

Keywords: Race, racism, hip-hop, white supremacist

1. Introduction

According to Harrison (1995), the concept of race has its origins in the notion that different and distinct gene pools exist among humans world-wide with whites being at the top of the hierarchy. European colonialist/expansionist promoted the notion as they colonized various parts of the world such as Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and the Americas, where they extracted land and labor from the indigenous populations who occupied those lands. In the Americas, according to Foner and Fredrickson "the concept of race entered American history in the Seventeenth century, when the colonialist began to identify themselves as 'white' in distinction from the Indians (native Americans) whose land they were appropriating and the blacks they were enslaving" p.3.

The discussion on race issues in America occurred during various historical periods but it started with colonization. By the 1900s the construction of knowledge about race in America consisted of conflicting and oppositional paradigms, however, due to the nature of this paper only the paradigm that is relevant to the discussion will be assessed. One such viewpoint was the nativist paradigm which was promoted by those who argued that immigrants who were coming to America during that time period from southern, central and eastern Europe differed from the original immigrants who were from northern and western Europe i.e., Anglo Saxons (nativism is a nineteenth century movement by native born Americans to protect their interests and curb immigration). Proponents of the paradigm such as Grant (1923), Stoddard (1920) and Gould (1996) argued that immigrants from southern, central and eastern Europe had smaller skulls than those of northern and western Europe and were there for genetically inferior. They also regarded Jews and blacks as inferior to northern and western Europeans.

The nativist thought gave rise to the nativist "Know Nothing" movement which aimed to get rid of foreign influences in the United States. The emergence of the movement led to the creation of the Dillingham commission in 1907, a congressional committee with a task to investigate immigration into the United States. The commission issued a report in 1911 that validated and reinforced the nativist view point. It also legitimized the position of the Anglo Saxons as the most powerful dominant white group both politically and culturally. After a few generations, most immigrants from southern, central and eastern Europe were assimilated into the dominant Anglo Saxon group through inter marriages. These immigrants also surrendered their ethnic cultures, traditions and languages and adopted Anglo Saxon traditions, cultures and the English language in order to gain full inclusion into the American society (Lee & Bean, 2010).

Nonetheless the full inclusion into American society was only possible to white European immigrants but not for people of color i.e.; Native Americans, Mexican Americans and African Americans. The denial of these groups from fully participating in the American society through structural exclusion is still true today. Although some opportunities are open to African Americans and other groups of color mentioned, and they enjoy material benefits like their white fellow citizens, they nevertheless still encounter racism in all aspects of life in the United States (Feagin and Sikes, 1994; Wilson, 1978).

The persistence of racism and discrimination that these groups encounter cannot be reconciled with the celebrated vision of American democracy, namely: a belief in the equal treatment of each individual citizen and a guarantee of basic

fairness in jobs, education, housing, consumer market places; and the promise that if one works hard one can have a promising future. Or the egalitarianism that is supposed to characterize the American society. What the persistence of racism, discrimination and inequality shows is that the American society is comprised of institutions and economic interests of whites rather than of minority groups. For instance, institutions, laws, and processes that have the appearance of equal access, benefit and protection are often enforced in highly discriminatory ways that favor whites. These pattern of practices are a reflection of how resources of economic, political power, cultural and social dominance by white groups are built into the American political – economic system (Page & Jacobs, 2009).

The election of Donald Trump who has espoused discriminatory and racist policies towards African Americans and other peoples of color; and has openly embraced Alt-Right white supremacist groups means that the lives of African American and other people of color will continue to be in jeopardized. African Americans and other people of color therefore need to be vigilant and develop strategies to counteract such acts of racism and discrimination. Since hip hop artists have a socio-political conscious history of using hip hop as a tool for illuminating problems of poverty, police brutality, incarceration, racial discrimination, racial profiling, inequality and prejudices etc., they can contribute towards that effort. This paper will thus explore the contribution of selected hip hop (rappers) artist in the struggle against police brutality, mass incarceration and underlying problems of racism that African Americans face in America.

1.1. Hip – Hop

Hip hop is a term used to describe the collective experience, modes of thinking and knowledge of urban youth. It developed as a cultural and artistic phenomenon affecting youth culture around the world. And it reflects the social, political, economic and cultural realities and conditions of their lives translated in a language and manner which they understand. Hip hop culture consists of at least four elements: Disc jockeying (Djing), break dancing, and graffiti art and rapping (emceeing) (Tricia & Black, 1994).

Hip hop is an international phenomenon which has a multiplicity of origins, histories and births (see Mbaye, 2011; Osumane, 2012; Penny cook & Mitchell, 2009). Nonetheless, this paper will focus primarily on Hip hops's origins and how it has contributed to the struggle against police brutality, mass incarceration and underlying problems of racism in America.

Hip hop in America emerged in the South Bronx in the early and mid-1970 as a social and political voice for African Americans and people of color; and their experiences with racism and classism in the American society (Brown, 1999; Lynn, 2002). These communities bore the brunt of massive joblessness, urban blight, declining schools and youth programs; the growth of the prison industrial complex; the epidemic of drugs, guns and violence (Hoch, 2006). The consequence of this condition resulted in Hip hop becoming the political voice of African Americans and people of color. The people relied on hip hop because the artists used language that was rooted in the long history of black freedom struggle and the quest for self-determination. Most community leaders considered hip hop to be politically conscious and sharing common ideas and ideology with the civil rights power movement and the larger black freedom struggle. Hip hop thus embodied a new type of activism that emerged since the enactment of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. The hip hop generation have experience the erosion of the gains made as a result of the civil rights movement, hence as off springs of the civil rights and black nationalist movement they had to act to rectify the situation (Bynoe, 2004; Kitwana, 2002). Kitwana (2002) observed:

We've [the Hip Hop generation] developed a different sense of urgency rooted in what we've lost in a mere generation – what some critics have deemed the reversal of the civil rights gains, such as welfare reform and the decline of affirmative action as well as in new attacks targeting black youth like police brutality, anti-youth legislation, and the incarceration of hundreds of thousands of Hip hop generationers (p.47).

2. Resistance to Social Injustice

Not all forms of hip hop are emancipatory, revolutionary or even resistive. However because of its history of socio – political consciousness drawn from experiences of African Americans and people of color, hip hop has become a tool for illuminating problems such as racism, police brutality, racial profiling, poverty, incarceration and racial discrimination among other issues that confront African Americans. No one understood this role better than Freire (2007) when in talking about freedom he noted:

- Who suffers the effect of oppression more than the oppressed? Who can better understand the necessity for liberation? They will not gain the liberation by chance but through the praxis of their quest for it, through their recognition of the necessity to fight for it. (p.45).

Hip hop artists understood the problems facing African Americans and people of color and were ready to fight for it. For instance, on the issue of race, rapper Goodie Mob (1995) in the rap song Fighting criticized the social injustice perpetuated against African Americans and proposed a collective responsibility in the fight against all forms of oppression. Singer D-Nice also in the song Self Destruction provides a critique of racist social systems and offered guidance to urban youth regarding productive ways to "beat street ways":

It's true to stand together in a unity cause if not then we're soon to be self-destroyed, unemployed.....down the road that we call eternity where knowledge is formed and you'll learn to be self-sufficient independent to teach each other is what rap intended. But society wants to invade. So do not walk this part they laid (Stop the Violence All Stars, 1989).

On the issue of police brutality and unnecessary use of force against African Americans and people of color, Jaeah Lee of Mother Jones Journal collected data from the FBI which showed that between 2003 and 2009 African Americans were more than four times as likely to be killed by police as whites. It is important to note that white people make up 61.3 percent of American population while African Americans make up 13.3 percent. The percentage of African American killed according to this data therefore demonstrates a massive disproportion since there are five times as many white people as there African Americans and yet African Americans are four times more likely to be killed by police (Lee, 2014).

The level of police brutality and violence against African Americans continues, prominent cases that came up in the last 5 years include the killing of Brown in Ferguson, Eric Garner in New York, Tamir Rice in Cleveland and Freddie Gray in Baltimore. In addition a recent report titled "Police Killed More Than 1, 100 People this Year and a Quarter of them Were Black" published in Newsweek shows that police brutality is far from over (Saul, 2017). Clearly this is an issue that endangers African American lives frequently.

Hip hop has spoken loudly about police brutality as well. After the killing of Laquan McDonald, rapper Vic Mensa released a song titled "16 Shots" in honor of McDonald who was shot sixteen times by the police while walking away from them. Also following the shootings of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling, rapper Jay-Z released "Spiritual" in which he raps, "Got my hands in the air. In despair don't shoot. I just wanna do good" (Carter, 2016). Police brutality and unnecessary use of force affects even prominent members of the African American community. For instance, J. Cole's home in a white suburb of Raleigh, North Carolina was raided by members of a police SWAT team on the allegation that the home owner was selling drugs. He rapped, "I can't sleep because I'm paranoid. Black in a white territory. Cops burst in with army guns. No evidence of the harm done. Just a couple of neighbors that assume we slang" (Cole, 2016).

Another issue that disproportionately affects African Americans is mass incarceration. Mass incarceration affects Americans of all colors and American prisons house more than 2.3 million people, but it affects African Americans disproportionately because they make up 13.3 percent of American population and yet constitute 40 percent of the prison population. Whites on the other hand make up 61.3 percent and yet constitute only 39 percent of the prison population. Apart from being arrested more frequently, African Americans face more severe/cruel sentences than whites for similar crimes. For instance, an investigation of the sentencing disparities in Florida exposed the fact that African American defendants get more times behind bars, sometimes twice the prison terms of white defendants with identical criminal histories when they commit the same crime under identical circumstances. This happens because of the biases of judges who issue the sentences. Although there are sentencing guidelines which judges are supposed to use, they often disregard it. Sentencing for African Americans defendants had longer prison terms in 60 percent of felony charges, 68 percent of serious first degree crimes, 45 percent of burglaries and 20 percent more prison time than whites for third degree felony cases. African Americans convicted of felony drug possession also faced twice as long sentences than their white counterparts (Wagner, 2017).

The issue of mass incarceration affects African American individuals, families and communities in a very profound way because once one is labeled a felon then she or he is subjected to all kinds of discrimination such as: employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits and exclusion from jury services. The worst thing is that all these types of discrimination is legal once you are a felon. Alexander (2010) summed it up "as a criminal you have hardly more rights and arguably less respect, than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow" p.2.

Hip hop has been vocal about this issue as well, Rapper Public Enemy in his song "*Black Steel in the Hour of chaos*" captured a jail break in action, serving as a release of pent-up frustrations about the over-policing of African American communities. Singer Emcee performed in 1999 to oppose California's proposition 21, an initiative that increased punishment for crimes committed by young people, often charging them as adults (Pearce, 2017). Rapper Killer in his song "*Reagan*" rapped:

They boots was on our head, the dogs was on our crotches, and they would beat us up if we had diamonds on our watches. And they would take our drugs and money, as they pick our pockets, I guess that's the privilege of policing for some profit. But thanks Reaganomics, prison turned to profits because free labor is in the cornerstone of US economics. Cause slavery is abolished, unless you are in prison. You think I am bullshitting, read the 13th amendment. Involuntary servitude and slavery it prohibits. That's why they giving drug offender's time in double digits (Render, 2012).

Cole also addresses the issue of mass incarceration in his song "4 Your Eyez Only" when he rapped "I dedicate these words to you and all the children affected by the mass incarceration in this nation that sent your pops to prison when he needed education" He also called for overhauling California's bail system and ensuring protection for juveniles in detention facilities (Cole, 2016).

Apart from the music, hip hop artists have been lobbying criminal justice reform. For instance singer Pusha T has been pushing for reform and rehabilitation in the criminal justice system. He supported California's proposition 64, a bill which called for the legalization of recreational marijuana use, by arguing that such a measure would help lower incarceration rates and solve the problem of repeat offenders. Singer Hov also took a shot at America's classist bail system by arguing that on any given day, over 400,000 people convicted of no crime are held in jail because they cannot afford to buy their freedom, he stated: we can't fix our broken criminal justice system until we take on the exploitative bail industry." (Render, 2012).

Singer Jay – Z has been pushing for prison reform for years, for instance during a hip hop tour in 2014 in Pasadena, he supported California proposition 47, a measure to reduce penalty for some non-violent crimes from felonies to misdemeanors and to shorten sentences. In 2016 working in collaboration with the New York Times, he released a short film about the history of unjust drug sentencing, calling the war on drugs “epic fail”. In 2017, he produced a documentary titled The Kalief Browder Story which profiles one Bronx teen’s unlawful incarceration and his eventual suicide. The documentary showed how the American criminal justice system railroad African American men and women, and breaks many of them (Calvario, 2017). The Browder case reached the heights of American government, with the Supreme Court citing it in decisions regarding the use of solitary confinement. It has also ignited discussions about reforms in the criminal justice system. The hope is that the case will help change the system that affect so many and lead to reform and change.

3. Conclusion

As discussed in this paper, police brutality, mass incarceration and underlying problems of racism among others are still prevalent in American and affects African Americans disproportionately when compared to their white fellow citizens. Hip hop as “a voice of the voiceless will continue to be among the actors in the resistance to a system that oppresses African Americans with a goal to change the status quo. Rapper Mos Def remarked on Hip Hop’s role when he stated “We are the senators and the congressmen of our communities. We come from communities that do not have anybody to speak for them. That’s why they love us” (Pryce, 1999, p.27).

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