Is Derek Chauvin a Racist Murderer or Just a Murderer?

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I suspect the latter: the data just don't support that cops murder out of racism. Few will attend to that - but maybe progress can happen regardless.

I am neither a criminologist nor pathologist nor coroner nor police officer. However, from what it would seem to me, Derek Chauvin should spend a good deal of the rest of his life in prison for the murder of George Floyd. However much fentanyl or meth Floyd had in him that night, no one will seriously argue that Floyd was about to keel over that night on his own.

Furthermore I hope Chauvin serves as a harbinger of change. It is gruesome that a person can end up at the mercy of a police officer and be killed in a flash, by someone who almost always walks away innocent, let off according to legal niceties that allow that cops may do hideous things under pressure but that's just the way it goes.

However, the good-thinking consensus here is that I am leaving something out.

I am supposed to be deeply aggrieved that George Floyd died because he was black. Chauvin, I am supposed to think, murdered Floyd at least partly out a disregard for black lives – or, to use the term of art these days, bodies. This is supposed to be about race.

It is perhaps the most heretical belief I hold these days that I don't think so. However, I use the term *heretical* with some irony.

The cops kill hundreds and hundreds of people every year. Of them, white people are the majority by a good margin. For every incident we hear of where cops kill a black person, there are *multiple* others where cops killed a white person and we did not hear about it.

Black people, however, are killed more than what our proportion of the population would predict in itself. Specifically, black people are killed at a rate two and a half times our representation in the population.

The good word is that this "proves" that racism is behind the killings of black people. Presumably racist bias, even subconscious, makes cops pull the trigger in tense situations.

This is an understandable approach, but not truth incarnate, and it leaves something out. Poverty makes you more likely to encounter the cops, partly because cops are sent more to poor communities and partly because poverty can force you or even nudge you into dangerous choices. And just as black people are two and a half times more likely to be killed by cops, black people are also *two and a half times more likely to be poor*.

That is not fair. But – it also explains the disproportion. That is: both things are true. It is wrong that more black people are poor, but that fact also explains why black people are two and a half times more likely to die at the hands of the cops.

That this almost uncanny statistical match-up is no accident is further supported by studies showing that while cops are more likely to <u>rough up</u> and <u>verbally abuse</u> black people, they are *not* more likely to kill them.

These facts lead to a conclusion that makes many very uncomfortable: that George Floyd did not die because he was black.

Many just cannot swallow that. It seems inconceivable that a white cop would snuff out the life of a white guy in the same way. What Chauvin did seems to recapitulate so much about how white people and black people have always interacted in this country.

But our sense here is impressionistic, and the impressionistic is no more valuable here than it is in whites' impressions that a black person is "suspicious" or underqualified or angry or is less susceptible to pain.

And the simple truth is that a white guy named Tony Timpa died under very similar conditions at the hands of the cops a few years before Floyd did.

In my experience, a great many think that to be a good person one simply cannot accept these facts, that they absolutely must be waved away at all costs. However, the same people didn't feel that way about a situation that came out statistically in a similar way.

Back in the day, when someone implied that welfare was all about black people, the drawing-room reply was to note that there were numerically more whites on welfare than blacks. You sipped your cocktail and then added that while there was indeed a greater proportion of black people on welfare in terms of their representation in the population, this was because of the tragedy that a greater proportion of black people lived in poverty. I actually watched this kind of exchange when I was kid – twice.

The same math applies to today's situation with the cops. But this time we are not to listen. Instead, we are to go with our gut.

But that gut impression is based on what the news tells us about these things, and without trying to imply some grisly "MSM" conspiracy to infect the populace with leftist cant, we must admit that the media focus rather rabidly on black people getting killed by cops rather than whites. The black cases spread rapidly from the city where they occur and become national news for weeks or months. The white cases are briefly aired in local news cycles and then forgotten. It's true – these are the over 60% of cop killings that are of white people. It's hundreds and hundreds, year after year, about which we hear nothing.

For almost every well-aired case of a black person killed by cops, there is a white equivalent and often several. John Crawford killed for waving a BB gun at a Walmart? Look up Daniel Shaver, killed for the same thing out a motel window. Walter Scott was shot in the back and killed running from a cop; so was white Andrew Thomas. Sam DuBose was killed trying to drive away; white Michael Parker suffered the same fate. Philando Castile was shot dead reaching under his waistband; white Dylan Noble was killed in the same way. Alton Sterling was shot dead in front of a convenience store while being detained for unruly conduct – as was Brandon

Stanley, white, except he was in the store. There are white equivalents to the Breonna Taylor tragedy as well.

Then, as to the disproportion in how many black people are killed, there is something to remember: almost no one who is appalled at cop killings of black people is thinking about that statistical matter. To most people, it simply seems that the cops kill black people who they would just discipline if the person was white. The reason they think this is that they never see the white people being killed on television and on line. They have no reason to know that such things ever happen, much less that they happen to white people much, much more.

In my experience, however, the idea that to be black is to live under threat from state-sponsored racist murder by the cops runs so deep, is held so fiercely, and elicits such unreachable contempt when denied, that more than a few are simply impervious to hearing anything else.

It doesn't help to note that there is indeed evidence that cops are racist in other ways, such as in deciding who to pull over on drug searches. To propose that this racism does not lead to casual murder is to depart from qualification for interaction with polite society. I learned when I started writing about race 20 years ago that the cops are *the* reason so many think of racism as the foundational experience of blackness in America. The issue does not lend itself to statistics, what-ifs, and standing at a distance, and it won't for a long time.

I consider just allowing that history proceeds in messy ways. I am thinking about this recently as I finish *War and Peace* (unfortunately in Pevear and Volkhonsky's utterly execrable translation – another hoax our republic lives under is that they are master translators, but I'll leave that aside for now!).

Tolstoy muses on the difference between how humans process history and how it really happens. Say Chauvin gets what he deserves, and it is part of a gradual reform of the cops' getting away with the murder of just people, as opposed to black people. If it took a misperception of cop murders as racist to make that happen, then maybe that's how making an omelette requires cracking some eggs.

We may leave it to the historians of the future to see that the idea that people like Floyd died because of their skin color doesn't hold up, but that it was the catalyst for something more important than whether we people down here on the ground were processing things with complete accuracy.

But I know – in the meantime I just look like I am in some kind of denial. Of *course* George Floyd died because he was black. Because, well, Chauvin looks like such a cold-hearted son of a bitch; just look at him. Because, well, look at the video … (but look also at the Timpa video). Because, well … because under our current sociopolitical assumptions, our paramount ethical job is to identify racism's role in society, and think of black people's essence as suffering under its degradations. To stray from this is to Not Do the Work.

I get it. But to me, the tragedy of George Floyd may be redeemed by pointing us past a problem with the cops' murdering too many *human beings*. If what puts the wind beneath our society's wings on that point is thinking of the cops as blithely dedicated to shattering black bodies, then I may just have to go along for the ride.