

Riots: The Language of the Unheard

Video clip (Jane Eliot) If you, as a white person, would be happy to receive the same treatment that our black citizens do in this society, please stand. You didn't understand the directions. If you white folks want to be treated the way blacks are in this society, stand. Nobody's standing here. That says very plainly that you know what's happening. You know you don't want it for you. I want to know why you're so willing to accept it or to allow it to happen for others.

Ross Ajamu, really great to have you on Renegade Inc. Thanks for joining us.

Ajamu Baraka My pleasure. Thank you.

Ross It's really difficult to sit here as a white guy at a desk in a studio in London. And other than empathising with what's going on in America at the moment, it's very difficult to find a way into this interview, to find a golden question to ask that other people aren't asking to try and find the structural reasons for America blowing up as it is at the moment. What is the sort of question that I can ask - a golden question - so we can understand what's really going on?

Ajamu Baraka Well, you know, it is complicated, but yet on another level it's quite simple. Basically, the killing of George Floyd was a trigger, not just in terms of a response to the systematic brutality coming from the police forces, but the structural contradictions that are creating the conditions in the country in which African-Americans are dying to the tune of hundreds a day as a consequence of Covid-19 - unnecessarily dying because our communities have been the victims of a neo liberal regime that has closed down hospitals and allow for industrial plants to be sited in our communities resulting in all of the underlying conditions that have made our people vulnerable to Covid-19. So there is structural violence along with the violence from the police that get culminated to a point where people decided that enough was enough. And with the African-Americans going to the streets, they were joined by white allies and brown people and LGBTQ people and everybody who are frustrated at what is happening in this country.

Ross And is the unifying factor for all those people, regardless of race, religion, gender, sexuality, is the unifying factor that neo liberalism has meant that they don't, or they don't feel, that they've got a future.

Ajamu Baraka Well, I'm going to tell you, I think that is the unarticulated phenomenon in a sense that I think that that's driving the resistance. But the George Floyd situation was sort of the the trigger point, the entry point, if you will. But politically, those connections are being made because people in the U.S. have been subjected to a process of radicalisation over the last few months.

Ross What does that mean?

Ajamu Baraka It became quite clear to most people who are now part of the ruling class that their lives mean almost nothing, that basically their lives will be sacrificed in the interests of capital, of saving the economy. So people are feeling the fact that they are cogs in the

machine, that they have no control. So these kinds of links are being made in terms of a new kind of consciousness that's developing here in the US.

Ross Is it any wonder, though, the US for years has been going around the world and rent seeking? It seems to me that the rent seeking capitalist system in the US at the moment, which has riven the country, it's because the rent seekers have turned on themselves. They've turned on their own people.

Ajamu Baraka Exactly. I mean the chickens have come home to roost, that the contradictions of the neo liberal global order have intensified within the US, that the plan to reduce the US economy and work within the US economy to low wage workers without benefits and a system based on a plunder and pillage of the global south. All of these contradictions are culminating. And so, you know, they depended on a population that would be somewhat manageable but, you know, there's a trigger. This George Floyd thing was in fact the trigger along with Covid-19. Unfortunately, though, in the US left forces are very, very weak institutionally and we are excluded from the main sources of political discourse. So, you know, there's organising taking place. there is budding new consciousness that I referred to a moment ago. And that process of how that gets translated into a more effective movement remains to be seen. There's some progress, but we're also seeing that the state is moving very aggressively to try to preempt the possibility of real radicalisation. You know, you saw some of the symbols of that with the police kneeling with the protesters, walking with the protesters and, you know, that they are trying to erase the distance between the people and the state, giving the impression that it's all only about come cosmetic reforms and everything will be just fine. But people are making the right kind of connections. People are understanding that the contradictions are only going to intensify and that, as a consequence, we're not going to see people abandoning the streets anytime soon. But we do have to make a pivot away from the focus just on George Floyd to the system. And that pivot is happening slowly. But I think that it's going to occur. And if it does, then there's no telling what's going to happen over the next few months.

Ross If that is going to be, that horrific death, a meaningful inciting event for fundamental social change across America, what does the new America dream look like to you?

Ajamu Baraka Well, the new American dream would be a reality that transcends the current capitalist nightmare. The only way that we're going to be able to realise our fundamental people's central human rights is to shift power from the capitalist oligarchy to the people. We have to have a situation where there's real democracy, where the economy is organised to address the objective needs of the people. So, you know, the dream of what the U.S. can be transcends the current reality. And what the US we end up being in terms of whether that is going to be able to survive as a coherent political entity is also a question. I fully expect for the U.S. to spit out into pieces. We only saw some of that happening during Covid-19 with the collaboration of various states like in California and the Northeast and the weaknesses of the federal government. So you know what the U.S. will be in the future remains to be seen. But we do know one thing, it's not going to be the way it was two months ago.

Ross You had a tweet that went viral. You said: 'The U.S. government is deploying the army [that is what the national guard is] against its own citizens. Isn't that now when someone calls for regime change if that was happening in another nation? There is really a massive bit of

hypocrisy, isn't there? Because if this - the scenes that we're seeing in the US - if that was happening anywhere else, you can bet your bottom dollar that the US would be intervening as quickly as possible and trying to help the so-called people who are looking for liberation and freedom.

Ajamu Baraka Exactly. And that's why the Black Alliance for Peace call for United Nations scrutiny and intervention. After Donald Trump tweeted that 'once the looting starts, the shooting starts', it became quite clear that the authorities were quite ready to use lethal force against their own citizens and residents. And yes, in other situations, the U.S. would be out front, especially if it was a state that was in the crosshairs of the US destabilisation programme, they'd be out front raising the issue of human rights. Well, we say if there's going to be human rights standards, there should be the same standards for all nations. So let's bring in the international community to scrutinise what is happening in the U.S. We say that it is an ongoing human rights crisis in this country, not only impacting African-Americans, but also impacting other colonized people in this country and the white working class. So we have a real problem here. So, yes, one good thing is going to come out of all of this in terms of the human rights question. No one in their right mind will be able to take seriously any U.S. official ever standing up in front of a camera and talking about their concerns about human rights.

Ross Right. It's very difficult, isn't it, when you're the self-appointed policeman of the world to look at home when policemen, your own, are killing your own people?

Ajamu Baraka Exactly. But it's been like that always. And some of us who are part of the human rights or the radical human rights community, have been pointing that out for years that it's sheer hypocrisy for the US to pretend to be the protectors of human rights or it to be the power, 'the indispensable power', as Barack Obama referred to the U.S. globally, when many of us see, and I think international public opinion has borne this out, people see the US as a number one threat to international peace, now we say the number one rogue state on the planet. So, yes, all of these contradictions are coming home to bear and is making for a very, very interesting and dangerous environment. Unfortunately, I suspect that things are going to get worse before they get better. We are entering a sort of a pre revolutionary period. But it's not just the U.S.. You can't understand what's unfolding in the US and you can't decontextualise that from what's unfolding their in Europe also. The global capitalist system is in fundamental crisis. You know, global supply chains have been disrupted, the global commodity market has almost collapsed. You look at what's happening with oil - billions of people who are living in abject poverty as a consequence of being incorporated into this world system. So it's quite clear that neo liberal capitalism, globalisation as we refer to this process, is unable to address the objective human rights needs of global humanity. So no one is coming out of this unscathed.

Ross Out of all the media analysis and all the headlines and all the newspapers, what is the one thing that you haven't heard from the media, from an analysis point of view, about what is happening and what has happened in the US?

Ajamu Baraka I think that what we are seeing and hearing is that people around the world and in the U.S. are starting to see themselves differently, that they are starting to recognise that they are, in fact, part of a common humanity. And that understanding triggered by

George Floyd is being connected to, and understanding of, the inhumanity of economic sanctions, of opposition to subversion and regime change, opposed to the waste of the people's resources for militarism and war. And so those connections are being made. But the corporate media, they are not raising those questions and they're not helping people to understand that people around the world are making those connections. And that's what I'm seeing that's going to bring us out of this to a new day.

Ross Welcome back to Renegade Inc. Before we go back to the US to talk with the author and editor of Black Agenda Report. Margaret Kimberley, about the failing state of America, let's have a look at what you've been tweeting about in this week's Renegade Inc. index. First up from Saeed Jones: 'What if America loved black people as much as they loved black culture? Next from T.J: 'I lost my aunt today. She's not dead, just racist'. Finally, we have a tweet from Mark D McCoy: 'George Floyd and I were both arrested for allegedly spending a counterfeit 20 dollar bill. For George Floyd, a man my age with two kids, it was a death sentence. For me, it's a story I sometimes tell at dinner parties. That, my friends, is white privilege'.

Video clip (Margaret Kimberley) Obama used to say this, it made me crazy, he used to say this all the time. America is exceptional, America's indispensable, which meant the rest of the world was dispensable. It's propaganda that starts from the time we're little. It's what we're taught in school. We are always good and Americans love to think of themselves as good, even if they're killing people somewhere. Even if you're invading a country, it's for somebody who's good, it's to help them out. You know, we're better than that. That's why you have to demonise people. And Saddam Hussein or Assad or somebody is evil and worse. So even as our armies kill people or we get a proxy to kill people, it's because we are being good. You know, it is kind of laughable, but it's also very dangerous. So you have a country full of uninformed people who think they're good and even in their aggression in their countries aggression.

Ross Margaret, great to have you back on Renegade Inc.

Margaret Kimberley Thank you so much.

Ross When we talk about American exceptionalism, the images that are beamed round the world at the moment, not very much exceptionalism their. Why is the rhetoric that comes out of America, why does it not match the reality on the ground?

Margaret Kimberley Well, America is exceptional, but not in any good way. Exceptionally violent around the world with military bases all over the world, interventions, invasions, coups against other nations, violent against its own people, exceptionally violent, more people in prison than any other country, the police killing three people on average every day - a thousand people killed by the police. George Floyd is just one of a thousand people who will be killed by the police this year. So the exceptionalism is not anything positive.

Ross And why is it that you have such a military presence globally but you can't actually manage affairs internally?

Margaret Kimberley Well, I think the two are connected. And the fact that the US has this empire is an indication that it's not democratic at home either. You can't have injustice abroad, but have justice at home. The two are linked. When you have a country that sees itself as having the right to do whatever it wants to anyone, then that ethos is repeated here.

Ross We talk a lot on this programme about empires and the end of empires. Empires are often said that, you know that there's barbarians at the gates. But realistically, in reality, empires fall from within. It looks to me that the American empire is falling from within. And therefore, you'll lose the moral superiority that you beam around the world. If you can't look after these internal affairs, how can you possibly go and tell anyone else what to do?

Margaret Kimberley Well, you can't unless you lie. So the government lies. Every president lies to us about foreign countries. The media assists presidents - every single one - even Trump. Even so-called liberal media like The New York Times or The Washington Post when it comes to foreign affairs, they back him up. So, no, they should not be able to say. Also, the people are kept ignorant. You have to be aware of programmes like yours. If you depend on corporate media, you don't know what's going on in the world. So there's a lot of lying going on by people at the top and it keeps the population compliant. And people don't even know what questions to ask.

Ross There is a huge call now to get rid of Trump. Now, if you've got half a brain, you can see his shortcomings and deficiencies. If you get rid of him, what then happens?

Margaret Kimberley I happen to think the odds are he's going to win again. So I think all this talk is wishful thinking on the part of many people. The Democrats rigged their primary again. Joe Biden is the most right wing of Democrats. I think he is less electable than Bernie Sanders would have been, but that's why they rigged it against him. They didn't want anyone to be their standard bearer who would actually be asking questions of them. So there's no getting rid of Trump. You have to have an election. But that would mean having an honest election and letting the people decide who they preferred. But instead, again, the Democratic Party are a little too clever for their own good. But actually, in this case, I have to say, I don't think they really care if Trump wins. I think this is like professional wrestling and there is pretend opposition. You know, Nancy Pelosi will rip up his speech. But Democrats give him everything he asks for. He's supposed to be stupid, a maniac, a crazy man. But if he asks for eight hundred billion dollars in defence spending, he gets it. If he asked for a space force, he gets it. I think they really are ready to sit this one out. Their first priority was making sure Bernie Sanders was not the nominee and they're willing to give up this election.

Ross So you're saying that the American political class is basically equivalent to WWF?

Margaret Kimberley Yes, it is. It certainly is. It's all show.

Ross When it comes down to it, the horrific murder of George Floyd and the associated police brutality that we see naked now across the US, these things are symptoms of a wider malaise aren't they? The George Floyd killing is certainly the trigger. But the tinderbox was always going to go up. Why is that tinderbox so volatile and always on the edge?

Margaret Kimberley Well, I think we had, there was just revulsion at about this man's murder. But these cases become public, Often together the media begin to pay attention. There is a man, Ahmed Aubrey, who was killed not by the police, but by racist vigilantes, and that was caught on video. But we have a lot of suffering in this country. It's something that is not acknowledged. A lot of people are struggling. This quarantine in the wake of Covid-19, the quarantines, the shutting down of businesses, there are 30 million newly unemployed people. And the response from the wrestling tag team was to give people a maximum one time payment of twelve hundred dollars. And we see what a failed state we're in. A lot of these people can't even access their unemployment benefits. And so people are struggling. And I think a lot of people are in the streets because they're angry about many things.

Ross Cornel West recently said black faces in high places hasn't worked. He was referring, obviously, to Barack Obama. Barack Obama bailed out Wall Street, not Main Street. I see that he's come out and given one of his great pieces of oratory of late. That action, bailing out Wall Street, not Main Street, how much responsibility does Barack Obama have for what's going on in the US today?

Margaret Kimberley Well, he has a lot of responsibility. He, you know, he was the better face for the ruling classes. George W. Bush was unpopular, the Republicans were unpopular, so they needed a Democrat. They needed someone they could market as allegedly bringing change, hope and change. So he was perfect for them. Yes, he bears a lot of the blame. The Democrats didn't even bother early in his administration. The Democrats controlled Congress, had the White House. They could have done anything. They could have raised the minimum wage. So they could have done many things on behalf of the people.

Ross How now, with America so divided on racial lines, how now do you begin, does somebody begin, to heal and unite this country?

Margaret Kimberley The healing has to come with action. There has to be a recognition that people are struggling and the government has to help them. There has to be a public means of helping people who are in very deep trouble. I think that will go a long way. Of course, as far as the police are concerned, monitoring the police behaviour has to be a federal government responsibility. These local prosecutors hardly ever charge them. If they are charged, they're rarely convicted. You know, the cop who had his knee on George Floyd's neck had no reason to believe he would ever face any consequences. There has to be some grass roots leadership. It can happen. I think the police practising more brutality here in New York. We've had the police driving their vehicles into crowds, beating up an old man, they knocked him to the ground. He's bleeding from his head. I think all of these things are serving to wake people up. And I think if Trump wins again, I think that will be a wake up call for progressive Democrats that they must leave their party. They must do something different.

Ross Turns out that massive credit bubble and the bailing out of Wall Street has created a huge complacency. People in your country thought that other people were looking after it. Turns out they weren't.

Margaret Kimberley No, they weren't. And, you know, prior to the Covid pandemic, the economy was not doing well.

Ross Right.

Margaret Kimberley That's something nobody talks about. The press doesn't talk about. Politicians don't talk about it. People have their lived experience, but those experiences are rarely acknowledged. But I think now all bets are off. I hope that people stop accepting this inaction or action that is actually against our interests.

Ross After 40 years of it, these are the last days of neo liberalism because the rest of the world is looking on thinking, you know what, we haven't got the kind of problems the US has got?.

Margaret Kimberley Well, I hope so. But it's you know, I think the United States, the empire is coming apart. But we don't need an empire. People often speak of that like it's a bad thing. We don't need an empire. We need to have a country that meets its people's needs. But there has to be a countervailing force. We can't just let it fall apart on its own because the end result could be even worse. You know, people like to call Trump a fascist. And what they really mean is that he's obnoxious and they don't like him. But we could have a truly fascistic system if this falls apart and there's no effort from the bottom to remake the country.

Ross So it falls a little bit to the rest of the world to try and talk you down because, you know, a solid, powerful America is in everyone's interest. At the moment it looks like the sort of a drunk guy at the party?

Margaret Kimberley Yes, he is. But nobody tells him to go home or takes his keys away. So even when foreign leaders, they allegedly don't like him. Justin Trudeau was giving a speech and you know, I can tell he doesn't like Trump. He was talking about events happening here, but Canada does everything the United States tells it to do.

Ross Right.

Margaret Kimberley And that goes for the rest of America's allies. They are vassal states. And as long as they let the drunk guy stay at the party or let him drive his car home, nothing's going to change. It's funny, the countries that we are told not to like are the ones who stand up to the U.S. That's why we're told not to like them.

Ross Right.

Margaret Kimberley So everybody's supposed to hate China now. And they're Covid as their rationale for hating China because it's the economic superpower around the world. And they're always mad at Russia because for the past 20 years, Russia has said, you're not telling us what to do. The days of kleptocracy. You know, they talk about Russian oligarchs, they were fine with the US as long as they let the U.S. do whatever they want them to do. So when countries go their own way, that's when the hammer drops, that there are sanctions on Iran or sanctions on Venezuela. But Iran delivered oil to Venezuela in defiance of the US. And that's what we need. And people need to be more aware so that they know when they're told not to like a country, they should stop and think about what that really means.

Ross So the multipolar world is here to stay?

Margaret Kimberley I hope so. And that is all to the good. It benefits everyone.

Ross Margaret, always great to have you. Thank you very much for your time.

Margaret Kimberley Thank you.

Ross That's it from Renegade Inc. this week. You can drop the team a mail. We'd love to hear from you, studio@renegadeinc.com or you can tweet us at Renegade Inc. Join us next week for more insight from those people who are thinking differently. But until then, stay curious.