

George Floyd and the Madness of Crowds

Blithering Genius

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Contents

1 Background on the Death of George Floyd	1
2 Facts On Police Brutality	2
3 Video	3
4 Social and Mass Media Propagation	3
5 The Black Victimhood Narrative	4
6 The Myth of Systemic Racism	4
7 Virtue-Signaling	5
8 Conformity	5
9 Establishment Support	6
10 Conclusion	7

1 Background on the Death of George Floyd

A single death is a tragedy. A million deaths is a statistic.

– Josef Stalin, paraphrase

Over the last week there have been mass protests and riots in the United States and around the world. Buildings and cars have been burned. Stores have been looted. People have been injured and killed. The reason? A mass delusion. This was not, by any stretch of the imagination, a rational response to real injustice or real social issues. It was a crowd mania.

The spark that ignited this insanity was the death of George Floyd, a black man who died in police custody, while bystanders filmed his arrest. He was resisting arrest, and he was placed on the ground and pinned down by three officers while a fourth officer kept bystanders away. One officer had a knee on the back of George Floyd's neck. They kept him pinned down for 8 minutes, even after he had become unresponsive. He appears to have died while pinned down, although not from direct asphyxiation.

The death of George Floyd might look like a case of police brutality, but things are not always what they appear to be.

A knee on the back of the neck will not normally kill someone. It does not prevent breathing, nor does it block the blood supply to the brain. It's not entirely clear why George Floyd died. It is possible that his death was caused by other circumstances in addition to the restraint, such as a heart condition or a drug overdose. His autopsy showed both heart disease and drugs in his system, including fentanyl. He also tested positive for COVID-19, although apparently he wasn't symptomatic at the time of his arrest.

We should also keep in mind that George Floyd did commit a crime and did resist arrest. He was a big man, and so it required multiple officers to restrain him. They did not place him in a hold that would normally be fatal or particularly harmful. In my opinion, they were negligent. They should have checked on him once he stopped responding. But was it murder? I don't think so.

After watching all the videos of his arrest, I would guess that he put drugs in his mouth and was trying to find a way to discreetly dispose of them. He was resisting arrest, but not in an aggressive way. Instead, he was pleading with the officers, and seemed to be trying to buy time to dispose of the drugs. He asked to lie down on the ground (so he could spit out the drugs?). Based on what I have seen, I think George Floyd died of a drug overdose due to his own actions.

Although George Floyd's death came to symbolize racism, there is no evidence that racism had anything to do with it. Of the four officers involved, two were white and two were non-white. The interpretation of the event as an example of both police brutality and racism was (somewhat ironically) almost entirely based on prejudice. And that prejudice was almost entirely based on a false narrative.

2 Facts On Police Brutality

Police brutality exists, but it is not a major social problem. According to the Washington Post (a left-leaning newspaper) there were 56 unarmed people shot by the police in 2019. That number only includes shootings, but most deaths by the police involve shooting. Of those deaths, 25 were white, 15 were black, 11 were Hispanic, and 5 were "other". The population of the United States is roughly 330 million. You can get an idea of the scale of the problem from those statistics.

Civilization depends on the rule of law, and the police should not be above the law. However, civilization also requires that the police have the power to enforce the law. They must have the power to use violence against citizens. It is inevitable that some police officers will abuse that power. Police officers are human. We can't expect the police to act correctly in every case. A single incident of police brutality, in a huge society like the US, does not indicate a major social problem. It doesn't indicate anything. It is an anomaly.

Racism also exists, in various forms, but is systemic racism a real problem in the US? I don't think so. Blacks are disproportionately killed by police, but they also disproportionately commit violent crime, including violence against the police. As I argue in *It's Probably Mostly Genetic*, the various racial disparities in modern societies are probably due to genetic differences, not racism.

So why did George Floyd's death start a virtue-signaling cascade that produced mass demonstrations all over the world? Why did one incident of apparent police brutality cause rioting and looting in dozens of US cities? There are multiple reasons. I will describe some of them.

3 Video

Video is a powerful medium. People respond to it emotionally and intuitively. Seeing is believing, so to speak.

A person viewing the George Floyd death video would naturally empathize with the dying black man who appeared to be begging for his life. They would naturally see him as a victim, and the man kneeling on his neck as an oppressor. The man kneeling on his neck was white, and he acted in a way that seemed cruel or indifferent. It was easy to interpret the event as an instance of “racist police brutality”, especially since (1) the video only showed the end of the encounter, and (2) people have been conditioned to believe the myth that blacks are unfairly targeted by racist police.

Video is an important type of evidence, but unfortunately it can be very misleading. You experience video as if you are experiencing the event yourself. Watching videos creates a false impression of direct knowledge, and that impression is subconscious. You *feel* that you know something by direct experience, when in fact you have acquired fake knowledge from fake experience.

The problems with video are amplified by mass media and social media. For a video to be propagated, it must engage our emotions. Our brains evolved to learn abstract general knowledge from the information of direct experience. Our brains did not evolve to process information from videos that have been cherry-picked to generate emotional reactions.

Direct experience is a good source of information about reality, or at least about the aspects of reality that you interact with. Fake experience is not a good source of information about reality. If we feed fake experience into our brains, we will acquire fake knowledge.

As a medium, video almost always gives us a biased sample of specific events. If you wanted to get an accurate view of police interactions with black people, you would have to watch an unbiased sample of videos of such interactions. If you watch 10,000 randomly selected videos of police interactions with black people, then you will have accurate knowledge about such interactions. If you only watch a few videos of such interactions, and those videos were cherry-picked to support a narrative, then you will have false knowledge, but you will feel very confident in that false knowledge.

For most things, including police interactions, it isn't practical to watch 10,000 randomly selected videos, or even 100. Luckily, there is a better way to develop an accurate understanding of reality: statistics. If you look at statistics on police interactions, you can acquire accurate knowledge about them (as long as the statistics are accurate).

Unfortunately, most people aren't very good at abstract thought. Many don't even understand averages and percentages. They will care more about a single death captured on video than a million deaths in the abstract.

4 Social and Mass Media Propagation

The memetic properties of the George Floyd incident guaranteed that it would get attention. It propagated well on social media because it was a short, emotionally charged video. People could use it to signal their virtue to others. It appeared to fit a familiar moral narrative, and so it was easily interpreted.

The George Floyd incident was also pushed by mass media, and was interpreted by them through

the narrative of white oppressor and black victim. The mainstream media love incidents that fit certain moral narratives. The killing of whites by black criminals barely makes the news, and the killing of blacks by black criminals is even less newsworthy. But any incident that seems to fit the moral narrative of “racism” is promoted, and framed by that moral narrative.

Journalists have been trained to favor certain narratives over others, not to deliver information impartially. And journalists are overwhelmingly left-wing politically and ideologically. Thus, most mass media outlets not only amplified the event out of proportion to its real (basically nil) significance, they also presented it within the moral narrative of “racism”.

Both mass media and social media acted as amplifiers. They took an insignificant event and turned it into a major national and even international issue.

5 The Black Victimhood Narrative

The George Floyd incident was interpreted through a moral narrative: the narrative of the black victim and the white oppressor. That narrative provided a moral justification for virtue-signaling and civil unrest.

A moral narrative is a story of good versus evil. Most of our entertainment consists of moral narratives, and so people have been trained since childhood to interpret events in terms of moral narratives. In a moral narrative, problems are caused by bad people, and problems are solved by good people fighting against bad people. Moral narratives thus condition people to think of the world as a struggle between good people and bad people, and to align themselves with the good team.

See The Lion King Moral Narrative.

Moral narratives are not accurate descriptions of reality. Reality is not packaged into moral narratives in the way that entertainment typically is. There is no good or evil in reality, just power struggles of various kinds, in which both sides view themselves as good and the other side as evil.

In the modern US, people have been trained by entertainment, news and education to interpret race relations through the narrative of white oppressor and black (or non-white) victim. Ironically, such interpretations are based on prejudice. They are based on quick pattern-matching, rather than careful observation and thought.

6 The Myth of Systemic Racism

The myth of systemic racism is the belief that whites are privileged and non-whites are oppressed in the modern West. This oppression supposedly exists even though there are no laws that favor whites, while anti-white policies and propaganda are pervasive.

There is real racism in the US, but it is anti-white, and it is explicit. Anti-white racism is promoted in the media and enforced by the government. The believers in systemic racism claim that this explicit anti-white racism is necessary to counter systemic white privilege and racism against non-whites.

The myth of systemic racism is analogous to “patriarchy theory”, the feminist belief that women are oppressed by men, even though women have more legal rights and institutional advantages

than men. It claims the existence of an invisible form of oppression that is supposedly built into the structure of society and culture.

Systemic racism is a deeply entrenched myth in the modern West. Anyone questioning it is dismissed as “evil” and “racist”. It is maintained by indoctrination and censorship, which are justified (via circular reasoning) as necessary to fight systemic racism.

The myth of systemic racism frames the moral narrative of black victimhood. It provides a pseudo-scientific justification for the victimhood narrative. It excludes conflicting views and information from consideration, such as genetic explanations of race differences, the oppression of whites by actual systemic racism, and the high violent crime rate of blacks.

The myth of systemic racism was the high-level frame in which the George Floyd incident was interpreted as an example of a much bigger social issue. It provided a pseudo-intellectual justification for a mass delusion and moral panic.

7 Virtue-Signaling

Within a group, people compete for attention, approval and status. Moral status, aka “virtue” or “goodness”, is an important kind of status. In the past, people competed for moral status by doing good deeds. Today, the competition for moral status has shifted to the virtual world, and to communication acts rather than physical acts. People signal their virtue by professing certain beliefs and feelings in public.

For example, suppose that a woman posts a video of George Floyd’s death to Facebook, with the comment “I can’t watch, this is terrible”. The poster might actually empathize with George, but she is posting those feelings to signal her virtue to others. It is a selfish act that is presented as altruism. She pretends to be “fighting for justice”, when in fact she is competing for attention and status with her peers.

Virtue-signaling is a competition because there is only so much attention and status to go around. The competition for status and attention tends to increase the “loudness” of the signal over time. That creates what is known as a “purity spiral”. If everyone is saying “this is bad” then to get attention and status you must say something stronger. Social feedback can turn a mild expression of anger into people marching in the streets and throwing stones at the police.

As a virtue-signal spreads through a population, people start conforming to it, and that validates the belief. It goes from being a way to compete for status to an obligatory belief. Instead of professing it to gain an advantage over others, you profess it to avoid being cast out of the tribe. That is how religious and moral myths emerge and are maintained.

Virtue-signaling created the modern myth of systemic racism, which is now perpetuated by conformity. It also generated the crowd mania response to George Floyd’s death.

8 Conformity

Thinking is difficult and time-consuming, and so most people rely very heavily on heuristics to constrain thought. Conformity is one such heuristic. It is socially safe and cognitively cheap. Instead of thinking for yourself, you can simply adopt the beliefs of others. Conformity is not

necessarily bad. For ordinary things, popular opinion is usually correct. However, conformity can support mass delusions.

Conformity is circular. If a belief is based on conformity, then most people believe it only because most people believe it. This circularity can perpetuate mass delusions.

Such beliefs appear completely crazy to those outside the feedback loop, while they are taken for granted as “obvious” to those inside the loop. Religious beliefs are an example. People have religious beliefs because those around them have religious beliefs, not because they met God one day when they were out for a walk. Many “secular” beliefs have the same circular inductive basis as religious beliefs. People believe them because people believe them. The myth of systemic racism is one such belief.

Conformity doesn’t generate delusions by itself. Conformity is a social feedback loop, but it is damping feedback. It creates inertia. To generate a new delusion, there has to be an amplifying feedback loop that spreads it through a population. Virtue-signaling can act as an amplifying feedback loop that spreads a new belief. Once the belief is established, conformity can perpetuate it.

Conformity played an important role in establishing the myth of systemic racism, the black victimhood narrative, and the George Floyd narrative. These falsehoods are now socially accepted as true, and questioning them is heresy.

9 Establishment Support

The myth of systemic racism is part of the establishment ideology in the modern West. It is professed by governments, the academy, the media and big corporations. These institutions promote this myth and the accompanying moral narrative of the evil white man oppressing the noble black man.

In this case, the media provided a moral justification for protests, and made excuses for rioting. When things escalated, instead of enforcing the law, local governments in many places told police to stand down or use a light touch with rioters/protesters. (At some point, there is no useful distinction between protesters and rioters, because the situation created by the former enables the latter.)

Media and local governments supported the protests because they were more aligned with the protesters than with the police, ideologically and morally. They were also caught up in the crowd mania. Politicians, bureaucrats and journalists are highly social, and thus highly prone to virtue-signaling and conformity. They crave attention, status and approval. Inane celebrities and major corporations also joined the virtue-signaling orgy, thus giving moral support to the mob. It was a cascade of stupidity.

Authorities could have used their influence to stop the purity spiral, by morally condemning it and promising to use force to restore law and order. But most failed to do so. Instead, they bought into the moral narrative and fed the growing insanity.

So, the moral support of the establishment encouraged more looting and rioting.

10 Conclusion

There were other contributing factors, such as:

- Trump Derangement Syndrome.
- Alienation from reality due to modern technology. (See Alienation and Art.)
- Frustration due to COVID-19 lockdowns.

But this is already very long, so I'll wrap it up.

The factors listed above, plus some others, generated an episode of mass insanity. This event was a tragic example of collective irrationality.