

## Racial Violence in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era

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Since the historic uprisings sparked by the murder of George Floyd, growing calls to defund the police have upended mainstream political discourse around criminal justice reform in the United States. Amidst outrage at rampant police brutality and an entrenched culture of impunity that persist unabated even in the era of Black Lives Matter, what were until recently dismissed as radical demands have moved to the very center of public debate. This dramatic shift has, among other things, made space for discussion of the history of policing more broadly. Police abolitionists have prompted examination of the deep roots of our contemporary situation, moving from an account that stresses the origins of modern-day policing in organized slave patrols and White vigilantism.<sup>1</sup> It was not so long ago that this same debate was organized on different terms, emphasizing instead the histories of the “War on Crime,” the “War on Drugs,” and the ramifications of an era described by Michelle Alexander as the “New Jim Crow.”<sup>2</sup> Such an intervention reflects a paradigm shift in popular understandings of the history of the criminal justice system.

In view of the long and complex history of policing, state violence and racialized social control that presently animates our politics, this “micro-syllabus” traces connections between those historical foundations and the more recent transformations of the American carceral state. It gathers a set of texts that viewed together can illuminate the red thread of racial violence that runs throughout U.S. history. As educators consider adjustments to their course designs in response to the events of the last few months, this “micro-syllabus” is envisioned as a resource that can spark further thinking for students grappling with the ways that acts of racial violence implicate state power. It should guide critical inquiry into the role the state plays in the historical production of racial formations through deciding who is worthy of protection from violence as a condition of citizenship and who violence can be enacted upon.

To think expansively in terms of a history of racial violence is to recognize that the police are not the only institution to perpetuate extraordinary violence against Black people, and that the historical experiences of other racialized subjects reflect important parallels. While maintaining a specific focus on the historical relationship between the policing and anti-Black violence in U.S. history, this micro-syllabus positions that relationship within a wider frame that brings in a range of histories usually taken separately. Adopting racial violence as a guiding framework illustrate connections where the exercise of state power is deeply entangled with processes of racialization, whether in the Jim Crow South, the urban North, Western wars of settler colonial conquest and displacement, or overseas imperial expansion.

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Mariame Kaba in a *The New York Times* op-ed: “There is not a single era in United States history in which the police were not a force of violence against black people. Policing in the South emerged from the slave patrols in the 1700 and 1800s that caught and returned runaway slaves. In the North, the first municipal police departments in the mid-1800s helped quash strikes and riots against the rich. Everywhere, they have suppressed marginalized populations to protect the status quo.” “Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police,” *New York Times*, June 12, 2020, [www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/opinion/sunday/floyd-abolish-defund-police.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/opinion/sunday/floyd-abolish-defund-police.html).

<sup>2</sup>Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2012).

Students will return to class this upcoming semester—so far as it goes—having witnessed a great deal over the summer months. They will bring with them an urgency to explain and understand the roots of the profound upheaval they see around them. In this historic moment, pushing them toward better and deeper questions, more grounded in a long history of struggle and resistance, is a worthy goal.

### **Law, enforcement and the racial state**

Shabnam Piryaei, “State of Perpetual Emergency: Law, Militarization and State Preservation in the United States,” *Journal of American Studies* 52.4 (Nov. 2018): 1025–42, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002187581700130X>.

Christopher Waldrep, “Law and Society: Structuring Legal Revolutions, 1870-1920,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 5.4 (Oct. 2006): 309–23, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781400003200>.

### **Solidarity and self-defense and the "Red" 1919**

Jonathan S. Coit, “‘Our Changed Attitude’: Armed Defense and the New Negro in the 1919 Chicago Race Riot,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 11.2 (Apr. 2012): 225–56, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781412000035>

Adam J. Hodges, “Understanding A National and Global Red Scare/Red Summer Through the Local Invention of Solidarities,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 18.1 (Jan. 2019): 81–98, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781418000610>.

### **Frontiers of racial difference in the history and imaginary of US empire**

Boyd Cothran, “Enduring Legacy: U.S.-Indigenous Violence and the Making of American Innocence in the Gilded Age,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 14.4 (Oct. 2015): 562–73, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781415000377>.

Julie Greene, “Movable Empire: Labor, Migration, and U.S. Global Power During the Gilded Age and Progressive Era,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 15.1 (Jan. 2016): 4–20, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781415000572>.

**About the author:** Aaron Jacobs is a PhD candidate in the Department of History at Brown University. His dissertation examines the memorialization of Reconstruction-era violence and its relationship to the performance of race and citizenship in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.