

WHAT WE HOLD IN COMMON: FAILED COMMUNICATIONS AND FRUSTRATED COMMUNITIES

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Approximately a century ago, John Dewey wrote that people “live in a community in virtue of the things they have in common and communication is the way they possess things in common.” (Dewey, 1916). This distilled statement in his masterpiece of political philosophy, *The Public and its Problems*, is as brief as it is powerful. More than this, it is as relevant now as it was at the time of its writing.

We live in time marked by very public problems. That is, these problems are significant partially due to their essential nature as matters of abiding concern for the public(s) directly and indirectly impacted by them. As such, Dewey’s analyses provide a pragmatic framing of our current circumstances, offering a key to unlocking our communal potential for a truly democratic form of public life with our fellows.

In what follows, I focus on a public problem that has garnered considerable attention at the midpoint of 2020. I wish to suggest that Dewey offers clarity on the failings of the current moment, even as we experience real progress towards more democratic communities.

The Killing of George Floyd

The May 25th 2020 killing of George Floyd during his encounter with a quartet of officers from the Minneapolis Police Department seems to have stimulated a worldwide call to action. This call has invigorated widespread demonstrations in response to the patterns of vulnerability to violence by state actors that has long been a feature of the Black experience in the US (and elsewhere).¹

The initial interaction was recorded by a witness on the scene

¹ See European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2018), *Being Black in the EU: Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey*, https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2019-being-black-in-the-eu-summary_en.pdf

and, as video circulated of former police officer Derek Chauvin seemingly kneeling on Floyd's neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds², outrage and horror became motivation for a public reckoning with racism in its multiple forms. It would seem that this moment has communicated the depth of the problems of racial mistreatment in our midst.

But, is it quite right to identify the *killing* as the cause of moral outrage and action? Perhaps, it is more accurate to identify the *video of the killing* as the source of mass moral motivation. Posed in this way, one might appreciate the resultant public engagement with this problem (itself a vital form of communication about the yawning space between our cloistered realities and our collective ideals) while also more critically pondering the communication that appears necessary to have initiated the current mass movement against racism.

But first, lest I presume too much in my analyses, I wish to consider two alternative candidates for having focused public attention. Perhaps they, better than the asserted video, have communicated the problem of racism in 2020?

A) *The Killing*. The killing itself seems an unlikely contender for motivating global attention to racism. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to support the argument that the fact of the killing of George Floyd has communicated a problem of racism to those who were previously unmoved. Similar killings occur with shameful regularity in the US; yet, these seem not to have mobilized a public. Is there any meaningful difference in the fact of this killing (above any of the too-many others) that might have communicated a collective problem to be addressed? Sadly, the killing was no more extreme or gruesome than very many others. Still, the set of events surrounding this killing seem to have communicated to those without first-person experience

² Later analyses clarified that this period was, in fact, roughly a minute shorter than initially publicly described.

of racism something that seems not to have been communicated by previous/other instances of racially-mediated police violence. Despite this, the fact of the killing itself seems a poor candidate for having communicated the reach of racism into the lives of Black people.

B) *The People*. If the fact of the killing itself has not communicated the grotesqueries of racism, surely, the active discussion of it by those most closely impacted and vulnerable (e.g., Black Americans, most specifically, and people of color, more generally) has been efficacious. But, again, this does not seem especially unique. Other efforts have been made to discuss the horrors of racism.

Black Americans have long attempted to communicate the extreme forms of abuse they have experienced through the mechanisms of racism. Should those instances of communication have launched broad support similar to that seen in the wake of Floyd's death? What was it about those previous attempts at communication that made them insufficient for motivating other persons in the US? It would seem that the (repeated) statement by Black Americans of the existence of racism has not heretofore successfully communicated a common problem requiring community response.

Perhaps, one might offer, the shortcoming rests in the quality of the *attempts* that Black Americans have made at this communication? On this view, these efforts simply have not yet been as captivating or compelling as is required for large-scale social and moral motivation. But, an inventory of the academic, the popular, the non-fictional, the artistic writing of Black Americans suggests that an incredibly wide range of attempts have been made. It seems hard to conclude that all were lacking in the necessary qualities. Further still, it is odd to imagine that the private conversations and the public demonstrations (e.g., marching, kneeling, sitting, laying down, raising hands, chanting, singing, wailing, etc.) all fell short of the standards for democracy-enhancing communication.

An accurate listing of the varied categories of attempted communication seem boundless; it simply presses credulity to assume that all were insufficient. Far more likely, it would seem, is that *audiences* have been unwilling (or, perhaps, one might claim, unable) to listen to these repeated pleas. Social inertia more readily explains why some communication (or, more precisely put, some communication *from* some particularly situated communicators) has been disregarded in the democratic processes. In short, the credibility of a people has been overlooked. Black voices have been poorly received as candidates for communicating the problems of racism.

C) *The Video*. Between the fact of the killing and the conversations about it rests the recording. The video seems to have engaged interlocutors who were unresponsive to the communication of their neighbors. The video has captured a sharp truth that many sought to soften in previous moments. Black Americans have attempted to communicate their experiences, but audiences could be suspicious of these voices. The video defies such skepticism. It asserts a fact; it succeeds in communication. It has rallied a public to address a long-standing problem.

Unfortunately, the bittersweet message received by Black Americans is that, while there is now growing, explicitly-stated, recognition that their lives matter, the patterned and predictable empirical evidence of their mistreatment and their varied forms of previously offered testimony have been insufficient catalysts for such activity. Black lives matter; Black voices, in the democratic activity of describing a public problem of racism, are less relevant.

How Can We Communicate as Equals if We are Not So Regarded?

In this way, the current moment asks: How can a society form a democratic community if some empirical facts (e.g., the rate of state

sanctioned violence against Black people and other people of color) are overlooked? How can a society form a democratic community if some members are not trusted and/or permitted to communicate as equals with their peers? How can publics form in response to common problems, if the very communication needed for this process is governed by norms of bias and power? The presumed objectivity of the recording of George Floyd's killing, that voyeuristic confirmation of the facts of the matter, seem to have eclipsed the intersubjective experiences of citizens, of persons, alongside us in our social world. Even as publics are now forming in response to racism, we would be wise to observe the ways in which racism has shaded the very process of these advances. As we respond to the video of George Floyd's killing, we might ask ourselves what this moment signals about the practical limits of our very ability to communicate with one another about that which we might hold in common.

Conclusion

Though the questions posed above focus on race in 2020, I do not wish to imply that this is exclusively a racial matter. At its core, we might use Dewey's analysis of the centrality of communication in the essential activity of community to recognize that the far-reaching problem identified in this short essay is our recurrent failure to communicate with one another about important matters held in common. This problem persists across multiple contexts. Indeed, one need only consider the other issue discussed within these pages to weigh the truth of that claim.

The US's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has featured distrust of both basic scientific facts and the attempted communication of epidemiology experts. Public health matters that have been dutifully assessed and engaged in other countries, have been initially ignored

and only belatedly considered by the public in the US.³ Whose voices have been elevated in the structures of these communications? How has this delayed the formation of a public community attuned to the commonly held problems of our time? Again, one might wonder: How have these failures stymied attempts at truly democratic forms of life? Who is disproportionately affected by these structural failures?

In short, it seems that we would do well to attend to questions of how we listen to one another. As Dewey suggests, a public needs to communicate about what it holds in common; this establishes community. Still unstated is a fulsome analysis of how some voices are prioritized or ignored within this process. Perhaps, most importantly: what standards ought to exist for communication about the commonly held problems that bind us to one another in community? The questions posed in this short set of reflection have no simple answers. Perhaps 2020 is as good a time as ever to recommit ourselves to answering them in thoughtful and considered ways.

³Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center, *Global Tracking*, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data>