



## AUGUST, 1619: 401 YEARS OF REPRESSION

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When someone asks me about violence, I just find it incredible, because what it means is that the person who's asking that question has absolutely no idea what black people have gone through, what black people has experienced in this country since the time the first black person was kidnapped from the shores of Africa.

This extract is taken from an interview from jail in 1972 with Angela Davis, a renowned activist for the rights of Black citizens and women during the Civil Rights Movement (Angela Davis in DuVernay 2016). Probably, someone foreign to the history and reality of the United States would think that Davis' words are exaggerated, taking into account that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination based on race, colour, religion or sex. Yet, the reality of the African American community is, still up to this day, very different to the dictates of the rule of law. This daily oppression against the Black community has culminated nowadays into the Black Lives Matter movement, and has also given way to a great number of projects, documentaries, miniseries and films portraying this repression. Yet, for the historical purpose of this post, I consider the 1619 New York Times' project as one of the best sources anyone can access in order to gain knowledge on the history of slavery and repression of the African American community in the United States.

As its name states, the 1619 Project revolves around August, 1619, the historical moment in which a ship appeared on the horizon of Point Comfort in the English colony of Virginia, carrying between 20 and 30 enslaved Africans, taken from what is now Angola, that would later be sold to the colonists. These few enslaved African were the first among the 400,000 Africans that were kidnapped from their lands and brought across the Atlantic Ocean before the abolishment of international slave trade by the Congress in 1807 (Hannah-Jones 2019). Yet, far from terminating trading on slaves, the Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves put new emphasis on the domestic slave trade, which was based on the purchase and selling of enslaved black people already present in the country (Elliot and Hughes 2019). It is estimated by historian Michael Tadman that from 1760 up to 1860, 1.2 million enslaved men, women, and



children were sold just in the United States interior slave market. (Tadman in Bailey 2019)

From the very first years of the implementation of slavery within the American economic system, there was a huge and powerful system of propaganda trying to justify the atrocities that were to be committed over the enslaved, whom even personalities such as Thomas Jefferson considered as an inferior race. Over centuries, medical journals presented Black people as individuals with small skulls—and therefore less intelligence—higher tolerance to heat and immunity to some illnesses, impervious to pain and provided with weak lungs that could be strengthened through hard work. Other alleged experts, such as physician and professor of “diseases of the Negro” Samuel Cartwright, went as far as to affirm that Black people suffered from drapetomania, a conjectural disease of the mind that caused the enslaved to run away from their enslavers. Such mental illness supposedly emerged when their enslavers treated them as equals, being the best preventive measure for this ailment to whip “the devil out of them” (Villarosa 2019).

Since their arrival in 1619 up to the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, the majority of the African Americans in the United States were seen just as commodities, and therefore private property. According to this, from the very first years of slavery the authorities made whatever they could to safeguard the rights of the enslavers to their possessions. For example, in 1662 Virginia enacted a law dictating all children born in the country should be free or bond just according to the condition of the mother (Elliot and Hughes 2019). Two years after, the General Assembly of Maryland decreed that all “negroes” within its boundaries should serve their masters for their entire life. To avoid mutinies, by 1729 Maryland law authorized punishments of enslaved people including “to have the right hand cut off (...) the head severed from the body, the body divided into four quarters, and head and quarters set up in the most public places of the county” (Stevenson 2019). Also, to avoid insurrections, South Carolina passed the Negro Act of 1740, which criminalized assembly, education and moving abroad among the enslaved (Elliot and Hughes 2019).

Yet, not all state laws were determined to undermine the rights and liberty of the Black community. After the end of the American Revolution in 1783, many enslaved benefitted from the emancipation acts enacted by Northern States like Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York. In the latter, for example, all children born after July 4, 1799 would be legally free at the age of 25, if woman, or 28, if man. (Elliot and Hughes 2019). Yet, slavery continued to be legal in the Southern States up to the Emancipation Proclamation of January, 1863, by Abraham Lincoln, which proclaimed that “all persons held as slaves” within the rebellious states “are, and henceforward shall be free” (“The Emancipation Proclamation”).



Did this mean that slavery was put to an end in the United States? The answer is no. The 13th Amendment stipulated that citizens were free, but this did not apply to prisoners and population in detention. What happened then? After 1865, Black people would no longer be seen as slaves, but as criminals. The solution for those who wanted to maintain the slavery institution was to replace the laws governing the enslaved with Black Codes around Black people. As a result, Anglo policymakers made up new specific offenses in order to criminalize the Black community: vagrancy, loitering, grouping after dark, etc. (Stevenson 2019).

This way of purposefully legislating against Black people continued up to the 20th century. For example, as well-detailed in the 2016 Netflix documentary *13<sup>th</sup>* by Ava DuVernay, Richard Nixon's "War on Crime" was nothing else than a term used in order to fight Black movements—Black Power, Black Panthers, etc.—originated from the Civil Rights movement. On the same line, Nixon and Reagan's "War on Drugs", according to a Nixon's former advisor, "had two enemies: the anti-war left and black people (...) we knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but getting the public to associate the hippies with Marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities" (John Ehrlichman in DuVernay 2016). Yet, at some other times, Black people didn't even have to commit any offense in order to be incarcerated. One of the best examples of this was the imprisonment of five Black kids—aged between 14 and 16—accused of raping a runner in Central Park in 1989. Pressure on the New York Police Department for the increasing number of crimes in the city led to the unfair incarceration of the kids, who were forced to make up a confession of the crime even if they had nothing to do with it. This event has been portrayed by Netflix in the 2019 miniseries *When They See Us*, by Ava DuVernay.

The consequences of all these White policies on Black communities are still very visible these days. As presented by *13<sup>th</sup>* and Bryan Stevenson essay on the American criminal-justice system within the 1619 project, almost one fourth of the total world incarcerated population is located within the United States. Out of the 2.2 million prisoners actually imprisoned in US facilities, the statistics show that, per 100,000 residents, 592 were African Americans, while 187 were White (Duffin 2020). In addition to this, we have to bear in mind that African Americans only compose around 15% of US total population.

The history of the Black community in the United States is the history of the soldier behind the enemy line. The legacy of repression that began with those 20-30 African Americans arriving to Virginia on August, 1619, still continues deep-rooted in the daily-life of many Black communities, who still continue nowadays seeking to claim their rights as American citizens through movements such as Black Lives Matter. However, many in the United States continue to look away to this problem. As sociologist Mathew Desmond once stated regarding the history of slavery: "Given



the choice between modernity and barbarism, prosperity and poverty, lawfulness and cruelty, democracy and totalitarianism, America chose all of the above” (2019).

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