

# ***Journal of Theoretical & Philosophical Criminology***

---

ISSN: 2166-8094

*Jtpcrim August/September: 70-72*

*White Privilege and Black Rights – A Review*

**Zack, N. (2015). *White privilege and black rights: The injustice of U.S. police racial profiling and homicide*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.**

Chidike I. Okeem  
Western New England University

The extrajudicial killings of black men at the hands of law enforcement officers in the United States is a topic of immense moral weight that is at the heart of contemporary criminal justice. Such a topic can be discussed in merely legal terms, but philosophical examination could also prove to be illuminating. In an intriguing book, *White Privilege and Black Rights: The Injustice of U.S. Police Racial Profiling and Homicide*, Naomi Zack adds to the literature on U.S. policing and blackness using a philosophical lens. This review explores the philosophical arguments and analyses proffered.

Zack (2015) begins by quoting the Cleveland NAACP's comments in the aftermath of the killing of Tamir Rice, which pointed out that extrajudicial killings are the result of the cultural incompetence, inappropriate selection, and insufficient training of law enforcement officers. She then discusses the way in which society post the 1964 U.S. Civil Rights Act has become captivated with the language of "white privilege" when discussing continued structural inequality in the United States. She argues that the framework of "white privilege" is replete with limitations when examining an issue as important as the violent maltreatment of black men at the hands of law enforcement.

When someone cites "privileges," the image that is conjured up is that of perks that one has that others do not have. Such language, Zack maintains, trivializes the demands that black people are making when advocating for the end of unjust policing that often results in black life being unceremoniously scotched. Moreover, such language also centers themes of blame and envy when the appropriate response ought to be action. She writes "...the discourse of white privilege, alone, does not have the gravitas or urgency of either moral principle or social, institutional, and political action." (p. 3-4).

In other language reframing, Zack highlights the problems with referring to the United States as a white supremacist society. She maintains that while the United States still patently has racial problems, it is an injudicious exaggeration to refer to the United States, presently, as a white supremacist society, given it currently lacks the overt white supremacist ideology that was once inarguably existent in previous eras. She argues that this nomenclatural mistake is not just erroneous conceptually, but politically, too. By positing this exaggeration, she maintains that such

people are presenting contemporary racial problems as being engendered by a monolithic and omnipotent force that black people are far too powerless to possibly displace. She also takes to task white intellectuals who push this exaggeration of white supremacy, accusing them of centering their project of introspection and inflating their importance in ways that are counterproductive to the main goal of securing respect for black rights. She writes, “the discourse of white privilege, as an academic discourse, is not generally structured around arguments or claims concerning human rights that extend to nonwhites, which could be enforced in concrete ways. Rather, this white privilege discourse is isolated and stalled in its lack of robust ideas of white responsibility” (p. 18).

The second chapter commences with a discussion of how black rights ought to be framed. Zack argues that there are four pillars that ought to be considered. First, there is no difference in the rights that black and white people in the United States have. Second, black people in the United States have their rights routinely infringed upon in ways that white citizens do not. Third, when black people are deprived of rights that others—namely whites—enjoy, it is an injustice. Lastly, fourth, discourse around ‘black rights’ is a useful framework to bring much-needed attention to the injustice of black people being disproportionately deprived of rights.

After this framing of black rights, Zack begins a perceptive discussion of policing in the United States. Despite police swearing to ‘uphold the Constitution,’ she points out that the phrase is both a metaphor and vague, given that there is sparse unassailable evidence to demonstrate that police policies are specifically designed with any Constitution in mind, be it at the state or U.S. levels. She also notes that it is a problem that many police officers, much like the general public, use the racial composition of the prison population as evidence of what groups are more criminal. Thus, the overrepresentation of black males in American prisons leads some police officers to believe that this is emblematic of inherent black criminality. Racially biased policing could be a consequence of this. Other scholars have pointed out how the misuse of statistics is critical to the production of anti-black outcomes in the criminal justice system (see Muhammad, 2011).

Towards the end of the text, there is a fascinating discussion around the correction of injustice, which begins with an acknowledgement that this kind of philosophizing is not the kind that is the most respected within the citadels of academe. More abstruse philosophizing that is not linked to present day injustices is what academicians cherish as the zenith of philosophical thought. Zack presents the idea of applicative justice, which “would seek to bring the legal treatment of American blacks on a par with the legal treatment of American whites” (p. 75).

Zack does a commendable job of demonstrating the abject poverty of the “white privilege” conceptual framing in dealing with an issue as morally gargantuan as the extrajudicial killings of black men at the hands of law enforcement officers, people who should be responsible for protecting *all* citizens. The proper framing for the discussion regarding the extirpation of black life in this manner should be around black rights. Black rights exist and matter, and these rights ought to be the center of conversation for the purpose of political change, as opposed to centering white privilege, which only leads to white navel-gazing and the abrogation of the moral responsibility to act. Texts that challenge conventional wisdom and common refrains with respect to race need more attention, and this text is a concise and valuable addition.

## References

Muhammad, K. G. (2011). *The condemnation of blackness: Race, crime, and the making of modern urban America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Zack, N. (2015). *White privilege and black rights: The injustice of U.S. police racial profiling and homicide*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.