

# Race, Class & Crime in the U.S.

## The Goetz case

### Fifth Estate Collective

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Before the Bernhard Goetz subway shooting recedes completely from social memory, perhaps a few words can be said about what it suggests regarding race, class and crime in this country.

Goetz, as it will be remembered, was acquitted in mid-June of attempting to murder four black youths he shot who had confronted him, asking for money, on a New York City subway. Although never directly threatened by the four, Goetz testified: "My intention was to murder them, hurt them, to make them suffer as much as possible." He saw the four ghetto youths as intent on robbing him, an experience he had traumatically suffered once before. Four of the bullets he fired hit the young men, leaving one permanently paralyzed and brain damaged.

For his act on the subway car Goetz was applauded or, at the very least, excused by great numbers of Americans. After bringing in a verdict of "Not Guilty," an obviously sympathetic jury (several had themselves been victims of muggings) flashed the "V" for victory sign as they exited the courthouse into a tumultuous scene. But why was this seen as victory and not, at best, simply vindication for the right of self-defense?

The jubilation which greeted the Goetz verdict makes it clear that the lone subway gunman had tapped into a strong undercurrent of fear and resentment millions of Americans—black and white—feel about urban crime. The undisguised glee at the acquittal demonstrated the level of mass frustration and anger that exist and come from a feeling that the prototype of lawless, dangerous, black urban youth had received a swift, direct and justifiable response from an endangered citizen.

It is inadequate to simply label Goetz a racist killer as liberals and leftists charge or to claim the situation was only a matter of the right to self-defense against attack, though in a manner, both assessments hold some truth. Goetz shot the youths not because he was in immediate danger of attack, but because he accurately perceived them as representative social types which prey, in part, on people like him. However, if the youths are a prototype, Goetz himself is no less so—white, middle-class, adequately waged, educated, polished and possessing possibilities in a world which is designed for people like him. The youths represent the opposite—dirt poor, semi-literate, vicious, with nothing ahead but low-wage, dead-end jobs, or unemployment, the army, prison, drug addiction, gang violence and early death.

So, confronting one another across the subway car stood the elements of social war—a classic formulation of haves and have-nots. In the larger sense, Goetz' shots were fired in defense of class privilege regardless of his personal or immediate motives. The Goetzes of the world desire the maintenance of class stratification without consequence. This is a hopeless dream since poverty always creates crime in its wake.

As author Lenni Brenner puts it: "Poor people have poor habits." And so it is. The scythe of capitalist austerity has hit the entire working class and poor hard, so in many ways it is remarkable that the crime rate isn't higher given the contracting economy. Hoodlums are not unique to the black community; Latin and white thugs plague their communities, but blacks have been particularly hard hit due to their ever-precarious position within the market. Currently, a relatively small, but still significant percentage of black youth have adopted the full-time and rather

low-paying job category of crime since traditional wage work is unavailable to them. But the racial factor makes it more than just another job; it is one infused with resentment and rage over the hopeless status assigned to it.

The youths Goetz shot fit this model perfectly. They are terrifying young hoodlums who live by assault and rip-off, and each had a criminal record of violence before and after their confrontation on the subway. But social monsters such as these, particularly when they exist in such profusion, don't leap from the gates of Hell; they are created in the bowels of this society. The economic collapse of the black community and the resulting erosion of many of its social bonds has transformed it into a war zone. This is the logical culmination of the murderous blows blacks as a people have been dealt by their enslavement and captivity in Babylon.

#### Ancestors of the Subway Youth

Despite the valiant efforts of black people to live a life of dignity over the long centuries spent in America as slave, sharecropper and worker, the same anonymous forces of the market which originally brought them here are further eroding their possibilities today. The ancestors of the subway youth lived in Africa with eons-old traditions guiding their way through earth-centered cultures until the slaver arrived with his cruel ships (ironically named "Brotherhood", "Justice," "Gift of God," "Jesus" and "Mary") to take their unfortunate captives to the New World—the only ethnic group to arrive unwillingly on these shores.

Immediately upon disembarking every attempt was made to strip these new arrivals of their cultural identity and traditions through separation, whip and Christianity and to begin their transformation into beasts of burden. This process was never completely successful and was resisted at every turn through slowdown, flight and even revolt, but isolation in the new land and slavery's institutionalization overwhelmed much of the resistance, leaving dreams of freedom to song and legend.

## Ideology of Racism

Since their introduction as plantation slaves, blacks have been manipulated as elements central to the development of capital. Slaves created the original accumulation of capital in this country through brutally extracted, unpaid agrarian labor. The slave masters, being good Christians, could only justify this systematic instrumental use of others by the erection of a complex ideology of racism which denied human characteristics to their captives. Variants of this racialism persist into the present as rationalizations as to why the social and economic status of blacks remains so far behind that of whites.

While almost all whites know that American blacks are the descendants of slaves, few are willing to face the enormity of this brutality in which millions of Africans were used in a manner suggestive of Nazi slave labor camps and which was the cornerstone of American economic development. Like passengers on the trains to Auschwitz, thousands aboard slave ships died in passage each year to the extent that the waters of Charleston Bay, South Carolina were often choked with the bodies of those who had perished on the trans-Atlantic trip making city residents fearful of drinking the water. Mistreatment and the killing of slaves was commonplace and not made illegal until the 19<sup>th</sup> century although the laws were rarely enforced.

As American capital developed and the dominant Southern planter class came into conflict with the rising lords of Northern industry for political control of the state, force of arms finally dictated that slavery was to be abolished and wage labor would reign supreme in America. After the Civil War, most blacks continued to live in the South constituting a class of semi-peasantry tied to the land by tenant farming. Black exclusion from the mainstream of American life, enforced by terror, custom and law, continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, leaving blacks to live in and work at only that which was shunned by whites as dirty, dangerous or undesirable.

However, with the introduction of wide-spread mechanized agriculture in the South and increasing industrialization in the North, a massive Northward migration occurred which packed black people into the poorest sections of urban areas. Upon arrival in the Northern metropolises of Detroit, Chicago and New York, racism dictated that they would occupy only the lowest stratum of wage work.

Always the poorest paid, last hired and first fired, the black community continued to experience super-exploitation—that which exceeded the normal limits to capitalist looting of labor. However, by the 1960s, through the diligent and often heroic demands for formal inclusion in Constitutional guarantees and access to political

power and economic opportunity, sections of the black population at times were able to gain a toe-hold and a measure of dignity in what passes for the American Dream. But with the erosion of the industrial base of American capitalism over the last 15 years, black poverty and desperation have become more severely pronounced than ever, leaving the federal and city bureaucracies as one of the few bastions of black economic security (but often in the dubious role of being part of the control apparatus—politicians, cops, municipal/social service bureaucrats, teachers, etc.).

Now, a full third of blacks live beneath the official poverty line and very likely the government statistics belie an even greater number. In Detroit (a 70% black city) 40% of the population receives government assistance of some type, unemployment is officially 15% for black adults, three times that for black youth and, again, undoubtedly much higher in reality. These are depression level statistics that are the norm and only threaten to grow dimmer. Every index of social well-being gives signs of increasing immiseration within the black community: income, health, mental illness, crime, infant mortality.

On the opposite end of the social spectrum, a life of relative opulence continues apace for the white middle classes, despite their own economic crunch and growing sense of alienation. Materially and psychically immersed in the world of the commodity, they seem oblivious to the hunger and homelessness so far from their suburban sanctuaries except when it intrudes in the form of a break-in or an assault during a visit downtown.

Actually, Goetz was only reenacting the frontier: fantasy of the settler mystique that has always accompanied anglo-american violence against conquered peoples—the civilized pioneer responding heroically to an unprovoked, vicious ambush by bloodthirsty “savages”...But how far are any of us, black or white, from the mentality which led him to that crucible of madness underneath the streets of a rotting city stalking a target for his rage?

This writer personally has experienced several home break-ins, an attempted armed robbery, the mugging of a relative (all committed by the same social types Goetz gunned down). In each incident I seethed with hatred for those who had violated my home, made me fear for my life and loved ones. My mind was filled with violent fantasies of revenge for what I had experienced. Nothing is particularly strange about the desire to defend oneself or to punish those who have hurt you. What is strange is that so little is done by any of us to confront the realities of what has created this social war.

The increasing social disintegration within the black urban areas creates a social recipe for exactly the wave of crime and violence we are witnessing—what else could one expect from this situation? Yet, through a process of massive and mass denial on the part of whites, they view themselves as the victims of black poverty and crime rather than the sector of the population which benefits from the inequities of income distribution. Hatred of black criminals has been generalized into a return of a virulent racism, seemingly suppressed during the civil rights era, aimed at all blacks and has led to a dramatic increase in attacks upon innocent blacks from racist mobs, the Klan and killer cops. The white working class, beset with its own economic immiseration, is allowing street crime to serve the important ideological function of a scapegoat for the deterioration of urban life and as further justification for white skin privilege and racist oppression. But to the degree that white workers succumb to this politically orchestrated hysteria, they are turning their backs on their natural allies in what must become a generalized struggle against capital, if anybody's basic human dignity is to be defended against the current onslaught. Identification with vigilantes and the police will not put an end to crime or the causes of crime but will lead to a fratricidal race war in which the lower levels of the social pyramid slaughter one another while the structures of domination remain intact.

None of the foregoing is meant as an excuse for the predatory actions of young men who react to their dehumanized existence by attacks on others, but rather only to suggest the causes for them. It is they, even more than the rest of us who have to face the enormous task of reconstructing human solidarity and combating the Leviathan we face. To call upon ghetto youth to transform the world may sound quite absurd since they probably aren't reading this newspaper, but really, what options do they have? It is either to emerge as revolutionaries committed to the destruction of this system or to remain among its most despised victims.

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