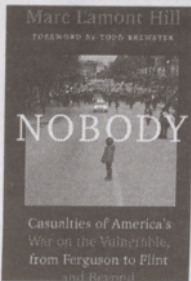


Looking through the killing and injustice to find a clearer picture



Nobody:
Casualties of
America's War on
the Vulnerable,
from Ferguson to
Flint and Beyond
by Lamont Hill

BY MIKE WOLD
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When you hear about one more killing by police, read one more statistic about racial disparities in arrests and mass incarceration, or protest one more black majority city screwed over by an emergency manager, it's easy to put it down as just one more example of America's racism and injustice, without giving real consideration to how these things came to be. Marc Lamont Hill's "Nobody" is a good corrective to that.

Hill has a flair for connecting the dots while he explores the background of the killings of Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin and Eric Gardner; the involvement of a third of the Black male population in the punishment-end of the criminal justice system; and the poisoning of an entire city in Flint, Mich. In the course of this exploration, he uncovers illuminating facts and connections.

For example, Michael Brown's death in Ferguson wasn't just about brutal policing by a white-dominated government in a Black suburb; it was the result of a history of residential segregation in the St. Louis area, the bulldozing of a historically black neighborhood and its replacement by a high-rise housing project, and the destruction of that housing project and dispersal of the residents into Ferguson, which was formerly a segregated White suburb.

Eric Gardner's death was a consequence of a decades-long trend of "broken window" policing that involved selective enforcement of frequently violated laws. Gardner's "crime" was selling loose cigarettes, which is common on New York streets.

The poisoning of Flint was the latest stage in the deindustrialization and destruction of unions in the Midwest, coupled with an increasing trend toward privatization.

The common thread, Hill asserts, is not simply racism, though, as he puts it, "White supremacy is foundational to the American

democratic experience." It is the way in which the most vulnerable have been made into "Nobody."

"To be Nobody is to be abandoned by the State ... to be Nobody is to be considered disposable ... While Nobodyness is strongly tethered to race, it cannot be divorced from other forms of social injustice." Hill is writing about "intersectionality," or the ways that multiple forms of oppression operate simultaneously against the vulnerable. In particular, Hill calls out class. "Unlike other forms of difference, class creates the material conditions and relations through which racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression are produced, sustained, and lived ... we cannot begin to address the various forms of oppression experienced by America's vulnerable without radically changing a system that defends class at all costs."

While this intriguing discussion frames Hill's exploration of "nobodyness," he never really expands on these ideas after he introduces them. The result is a fine, well-written analysis about the context for some of the major protests and discussions around race in the past few years, framed within a book that Hill promises but doesn't deliver, which would illustrate how racial oppression intersects with and is fueled by other forms of oppression.

Hill does include some discussion of economic issues toward the end of his chapter on the Flint water crisis. He brings up the revived discussion of inequality in this country, referencing Thomas Piketty's "Capital in the Twenty-First Century," as well as the Occupy movement, and deplores the neoliberal trend toward privatization of public spaces, coupled with the growing tendency for people to withdraw from face-to-face social groups in favor of social media. Again, though, he doesn't really develop this discussion, as if it's a piece of the book that he never quite wrote.

For example, if racial injustice is part of a broader intersection of other oppressions,

and fueled by the system's defense of class privilege, what is the best way for progressives to address all these oppressions at once? And, just as crucial, how does the increasingly (and fortunately) unfulfilled "promise" of white privilege and male privilege intersect with class oppression and "Nobodyness" in the white working class to mobilize many from that group to support the Right and to see immigrants and people of color as their enemies?

There probably aren't easy answers to these questions. Hill sees the driving force of the current crisis in the neoliberal push to subject all aspects of life to the logic of the market rather than the public good. His one-paragraph argument against privatization is incisive and focused: "In the way that privatization separates government responsibilities from democratic accountability, the notion is flawed from its very conception. Businesses are not made to function for the public good. They are made to function for the good of profit ... People need to know that the decisions of governments are being made with the common good as a priority. Anything else is not government; it is commerce."

Hill calls for crafting "a new set of frameworks for our economy ... schools ... justice system ... public housing. We must resist the power and persuasion of market values. We must reinvest in communities." He sees hope in the current "resistance movement organized, led, and engaged by ... Nobodies."

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