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Jonathan Choe
Seattle University

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The George Floyd Protests: A Manifestation of Fear in our Society

Jonathan Choe

Over the last six days, we have witnessed unimaginable distress and protests against the death of George Floyd—who was killed mercilessly at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer using unjustified force. In response, protests took to the streets of Minneapolis, which spread to cities across the United States, including Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco and of course, Seattle. We have even seen, internationally, cities outside our borders take up the cry for racial justice and equality for all, insisting that there can be no peace without justice.

And we have seen, far more often than not, peaceful protests give way to looting, rioting and destruction of property, which, like the peaceful protests, started in Minneapolis and spread to other cities across the United States. And as recently as Monday night, we have seen police officers come out in riot gear and throw tear gas, flashbang grenades and use other crowd control measures on largely peaceful assemblies. Even on children, the press and the vulnerable. What is the common denominator? Are all police officers corrupt officials who desire nothing more than to be aggressors and blame the other side? Some, as we have seen, certainly do. However, as we have seen officers kneel in solidarity with protestors in cities such as Flint, Michigan and San Jose, California, I believe we can confidently answer no, not all police officers are corrupt. Even the police chiefs of police forces across the nation have condemned the violence caused by police officers in the movements throughout the last week.

However, we must ask ourselves this: is there something unspeakably questionable about justification regarding the use of force by the police in our country? Police officers can justify their use of tear gas, flashbang grenades and other crowd control techniques by claiming fear for their own lives. They can justify drawing their guns and shooting innocent men by claiming the victim took an action which made them fear for their lives. Amadou Diallou reached for his wallet. Tamir Rice had a BB gun. Eric Garner was suspected to be selling cigarettes without the proper tax stamps and was believed to be dangerous (of which he was not found guilty).

Police officers can use fear to justify the shooting of innocent men.

People arrive at protests in fear of what might happen to them should only one of them step even an inch out of line and someone reacts poorly. And they are justified in feeling this way.

On both sides of that fine line, one underlying emotion drives all of these reactions: Fear.

Fear divides. Fear separates. Fear prevents those from speaking out who want to see a just world for all. Fear drives motivation to anger. Anger breeds division, and division once again births fear. Fear keeps our order in line. It is a vicious cycle which governs the political paradigm we know today.

American political philosopher John Rawls argued that a just society should be well-ordered, but not by fear, or, as he put it, a Hobbesian modus vivendi governed by the equal division of powers. Such a paradigm would constitute only a veil of what appears to be a just society. A truly well-ordered society is one that is governed by a spirit of positive cooperation, one that promotes peace and equality for all in the face of our diversity. It appeals to a common conception of the good and of justice, not of fear. Do we see that today?

There is no doubt we need order in our society. We cannot deny the stability that it gives our communities, our autonomy and the support it provides. But we cannot be governed by fear. It does not create lasting peace—it only prevents us from creating disorder, a barrier so daintily fragile, as we have witnessed.

Turning to our Jesuit character, we can perhaps look to Scripture for an answer in these trying times: “Do not be afraid, I am with you” (Isaiah 41:10). These words are in fact repeated more than 40 other times in our scriptures. The characters of Scripture were reminded so many times not to give in to fear. How will all of us—citizens, law enforcement, government collectively—respond to this call?

—Jonathan Choe, Seattle University '20
BA in Philosophy and Humanities for Teaching

