

Dear Friends,

Like so many of you I watched in horror as George Floyd died brutally while in the custody of Minneapolis police. I feel as if I am still shaking off the paralyzing combination of feelings of shock, outrage, and pain occasioned by another incident of an unarmed African American dying by law enforcement hands. This situation was made all the worse because Floyd was already subdued, hand-cuffed, on the ground and begging for relief as fellow officers casually looked on. This is not right. It is not justice.

The trauma and burdens here are many. This terrible reality and set of images hit us all as we were already reeling from the health threats of COVID-19. These threats have pressed to high public attention, the deep inequalities of class and race that mark our social existence and spread human suffering, hardship and even death in such unequal measure. What is more, the upset to the routines of all of our daily lives and work it has occasioned, the profoundly unsettled state in which we all now must live, and the often appalling lack of wise leadership and action at the national level make this an even more acutely fraught and distressing moment.

Here at Harvard, in Cambridge, the greater Boston area and Commonwealth of Massachusetts, as well as nationally and indeed around the globe, people of goodwill have responded with sympathy, mutual outrage, and condemnation of these actions and the deep-seated problem of racism in our society George Floyd's murder embodies. The calls for accountability, for change and above all for justice are echoing loudly here at home and around the world. I have been encouraged by the level of mass mobilization and civil protest now taking place locally, nationally, and around the world. Leaders everywhere need to hear and feel the righteous discontent roiling in the land. I am, of course, disappointed by and reject the violence and disorder attendant to many of these protests.

Those of us in institutions of higher learning, particularly those of us in the social sciences, have a special role to play. Each of us enter the arena as concerned individuals, fellow citizens, and thoughtfully engaged members of a larger community and nation. In addition, and importantly, we as social scientists are well positioned to be sources of information, ideas, historical knowledge and the like that can be directed toward improving and elevating public discourse and response to these challenging circumstances and times. We can and should also be ready to listen to, and provide advice and counsel to, our students who will be eager to hear our perspectives and voices on these critically important issues of our times.

Our mission to seek knowledge, truth, and deeper understanding is inextricably linked to the lofty aspiration of achieving a more just and equitable world. We have voices, let's raise them. We are sources of knowledge and perspective, let's share them with the world. We are stewards of future generations of citizen-leaders and scholars, let's re-dedicate ourselves to preparing them well. We ourselves are citizens and leaders in a trouble time, let's each of us find ways—individual and local, practical and as well as communal--to move our own lives and this world toward fuller realization of Dr. King's Dream.

Sincerely,

Larry

--

Lawrence D. Bobo
Dean of Social Science
W. E. B. Du Bois Professor of the Social Sciences
Harvard University