

Another black man sentenced to death in Texas

Another day, and another black man is sentenced to death in Texas.

A black man sentenced by an all-white jury for a murder he says he didn't commit. He has been on death row for thirteen years, and he is scheduled to be put to death at 6pm today, Central Daylight Time.

Gregory Rousseau, 45, appealed against his sentence in 2005. Against his wishes, he was represented by the same attorneys who fielded his case in 2001, when he was charged with the brutal murder of a 75 year old white businessman.

As a drug addict, Rousseau maintains he was framed for the murder by the police, because he had knowledge of drug dealing within the town's police force. Regardless of whether his story is true, it should be a source of extreme discomfort to anyone who cares about justice and human rights that a black person can be tried and put to death exclusively by white people, in a part of the world that has such an egregious track record with matters concerning race. Well over a third of people put to death in Texas are black, despite the black population making up barely a tenth of the population as a whole.

Texas finds itself increasingly out on a limb where the death penalty is concerned, compared to other US states. Even where the death penalty is officially on the statute books, moratoria have been imposed, based on concerns that the practice is unconstitutional. Particularly, there are reservations about using the lethal injection, which has been shown time and again to deliver death in ghastly and agonising ways, because of improper handling of the drugs, and an entirely understandable reluctance on the part of qualified medical professionals to be involved.

The lethal injection was adopted as a "humane" method of execution, to replace the electric chair, which looked for all the world like "cruel and unusual punishment", as defined by the constitution. The three-drug system that is currently used in the US is designed to first knock the prisoner unconscious, then induce paralysis, and finally stop the heart. In many cases the prisoner has not been rendered unconscious during the first stage, meaning they are awake as they suffer the effects of the second and third injections, causing prolonged muscle cramping and acute burning sensations. Despite the catalogue of botched executions via lethal injection, this remains the preferred method in the US. It has claimed more than twelve hundred victims since 1976, and at 6pm today CDT, Gregory Rousseau's name will be added to the tally.

Given the miscarriages of justice that have been associated with the death penalty, including a shameful propensity to execute people who are mentally ill, or from minority groups, is it not something of an aberration that a democratic country such as the United States still clings to this barbaric activity? Especially considering how easily corruption can seep into the judicial process. Especially considering how much suffering has been needlessly caused, both during the tortuous, protracted incarcerations that are the norm on death row, and within the execution chamber. Especially considering the racial tensions that still exist in America.

Eventually, the death penalty will be entirely abolished in America, just like it was in the UK. There is no question that it is on the way out. Its end cannot come soon enough, because every time a person is condemned to death, a window is opened into the beating heart of a punitive judicial system, which brutalises the sensibilities of citizens and officials, and creates too many parallels with other countries - such as China, Saudi Arabia and Iran - where human rights violations are systemic.

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