In Europe, we also can't breathe

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So why are we protesting police brutality in the US but not at home?

The protests that have flared up [across the world](#) in response to the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis are heartening: They are gestures of solidarity and powerful expressions of outrage at the brutality of systemic racism in the United States.

But, as someone working to raise awareness of police brutality in Europe, watching the hashtag "Black Lives Matter" trend outside the U.S. has also been bittersweet. It made me wonder: Why are people in Berlin, London and Auckland joining in the chorus of "Black Lives Matter" chants, but staying silent in the face of police brutality and racism in their own countries?

In Belgium, the death of Floyd has sparked more public displays of indignation than any instance of police brutality in our own country. Social media is full of expressions of solidarity, and every major political party has spoken out against the incident.

Many of the same policymakers who for years pushed for the militarization of our police forces and the criminalization of victims are now jumping at the chance to condemn a particularly egregious example of police violence — because it happened somewhere else.

> French activists have been raising red flags about ethnic profiling by police for decades.

Europe is no stranger to police brutality. So why do we fail to show the same anger and willingness to protest when we are confronted with incidents of police violence at home?

It's not for lack of tragic incidents. Just a few weeks ago, [Adil](#) — a 19-year-old teen of Moroccan descent — was killed during a police chase in Brussels while allegedly fleeing from a police check. His death sparked calls for justice and short-lived [riots in his neighborhood](#), but it did not mobilize people in the way we're seeing today.

Nobody organized mass protests or connected his death to the larger struggle to combat systemic racism. Hardly any politicians spoke out, and those who did were met with massive backlash from the public and police unions. Rather than host a debate around policing tactics and racial profiling, Belgian media discussed the question of Adil's guilt, effectively criminalizing him.

In France, mass rallies are being held in the wake of Floyd's death even as videos of [violent and intrusive arrests](#) of people of color by French police have become the new normal on our Twitter feeds. French activists have been raising red flags about ethnic profiling by police for decades.

If the problem is more pervasive — and more visible — in the U.S., Europe is not immune to discrimination and violence at the hands of police. And yet we are still far more reluctant to talk about it, and the result is that we have largely remained ignorant of the extent of the issue.

Compared with the U.S., Europe has taken far fewer practical steps to combat police violence. While

the Senate introduced the [End Racial Profiling Act](#) in 2001 (though it still hasn't passed), for example, countries such as France, the Netherlands, and Belgium are still discussing whether racial profiling happens and should be formally recognized by law. The U.S. is also miles ahead when it comes to the use of bodycams and anti-bias training.

These measures in themselves are clearly not enough but the fact that they exist in the U.S. and are almost non-existent in Europe tells us something about where we stand on the issue.

The death of Floyd also highlighted the importance of video footage. Police brutality happens every day — it is those incidents that come with [proof of wrongdoing](#) that provoke public responses of disgust and anger.

That's an issue in Europe, where filming police remains controversial. Although not strictly forbidden, the legislation in many countries is [far from clear](#). In France, for example, protesters are allowed to take footage of police but [could face legal action](#) if members of certain police task forces are recognizable in videos. [In Belgium](#), police officers have been known to confiscate or break phones to stop people from filming.

Media coverage of police brutality in Europe is also part of the problem. In reporting on deaths and arrests, news agencies tend to take police statements at face value, without investigating the whole incident. In these statements, the victim is typically treated as a perpetrator and receives the blame for his or her death or wounds.

A police statement in the case of [Mitch Henriquez](#), a 42-year-old man from the Caribbean killed by police in The Hague, for example, stated that he was violent, intoxicated and resisted arrest. As in the case of Floyd, the official autopsy differed from an independent one, which found that Henriquez did not die from "acute stress" but from the chokehold for which the police officer was later convicted.

Historical context also plays a role here. The U.S. has done more to reckon with its experience of colonialism, slavery and segregation laws than elsewhere. Its civil rights movement from the 1960s still inspires anti-racism groups in Europe. Although there is still much work to be done, the average U.S. citizen is aware of their country's history and the systems of oppression and racism on which it was built.

The same can't be said of Europe, where speaking about race and racism remains a major taboo and where countries — including Belgium, the U.K. and the Netherlands — are still struggling to come to terms with legacies of slavery and colonialism. Although debates about race and white privilege are starting to take place, they are still far from penetrating the mainstream.

Perhaps that is part of the reason it is easier to express outrage at incidents of racism abroad. It is much easier to condemn a problem on another continent than to admit to flaws at home.

Anger at what is happening in the U.S. is not misplaced. But it will be wasted if we do not also examine what is happening in Europe and apply those hard-learned lessons to how we police our streets.

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