RACIAL IGNORANCE OF WHITE AMERICA

By Anonymous
When we are taught about the civil rights movement in high school, when we encounter its images on television, in text books, and popular culture, when we hear it eulogized by politicians and talking heads—what is happening, more often than not, is that we are being fed small portions of reality and heavy doses of myth: that is, we are absorbing state-sanitized and strategically structured, national narratives about how peaceful protests and non-violence back in the 60s led to the moral triumph of “love over hate” and equality over oppression. This narrative is celebrated across the political spectrum: *Now we’re all equal, no one sees color anymore; let’s go to Starbucks.*

This story is commonly known as “history” and it’s a narrative of victory and progress. Reality, however, is not so simple and not nearly as triumphant. This narrative of victory and progress we’ve all been taught “sanitizes” history by refusing to honestly engage with the extent and sheer terror of American genocidal racism as well as the violence black rebels used to fight it. Thus, the accepted narrative told about the civil rights movement nourishes in our imaginations a false memory of what the collective struggle for black freedom looked like. And as a consequence of not having a reliable understanding of how this history unfolded, we fail to grasp that the upheavals playing out in our world today have being conditioned by our past—such that when Ferguson, Baltimore, and Milwaukee began to burn, when Black Lives Matter marches block your intersection on the way to work, when riot cops brutalize protesters and journalist alike, and when white nationalists and neo-Nazis begin murdering anti-racist
protesters, like Heather Heyer, in the streets of Charlottesville, dumbfounded Americans—who have never so much as even bothered to read a book on the legacy of American racism—ask themselves: how can this still be happening!

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The American civil rights movement—because of its association with demonstrations of non-violent civil disobedience—functions as our nation’s golden example of “how to appropriately and ethically protest.” And yet, we are generally not been taught an adequate history of the civil rights struggle; the questions surrounding this history are important to investigate as we think about the ready-made, historical narratives on offer: the stories told about the civil rights movement are offered up for passively acceptance—like so many images projected onto the walls of Plato’s cave.

What we have below is an excerpt from a relatively unknown writing that focuses on a seldom discussed aspect of the civil rights struggle: the spread of black insurrections, the calls for black power, and the “white backlash” to the civil rights movement. This excerpt—which I haven entitled Racial Ignorance of White America—was written by an anti-capitalist, anti-racist protester in 1967. This excerpt is from an often overlooked book that was published after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (which formally prohibited “separate but equal” segregation) and after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (which removed
some of the legal obstacles which had barred black Americans from voting).

In his analysis, the author is arguing against the notion that riotous violence in poor black cities and the subsequent calls for black power created a “white backlash” against the civil rights movement. It was not because of the recent wave of riots that white support for the black liberation movement waned among in the mid 60s; rather, the author attributes thewaning support among whites to the fact that “white America” is deeply committed—and always has been—to the maintenance of the status quo (which disproportionately benefits whites and oppresses blacks).

Throughout his analysis, the protestor argues that “white America” has a history of deep racial ignorance and naivété, in particular when it comes to the racist foundations of America’s social, political, and economic systems, what he considers a “white power” structure. That white America is deeply invested in maintaining this white power structure is evident from the fact that even the least bigoted among white folks still tends to care more about maintaining the status quo than about undoing racial inequality. This protestor writes elsewhere that property destruction—and even non-violent disruptions to the smooth flow of life—have always angered white people much more than racial oppression has angered them.

The rhetoric and analysis is extreme in its critique of the social order of the United States; for instance, the text argues that this “white resistance” to movements for black equality
has been the underlying orientation of white America throughout the country’s history; and that this white resistance simply “resurfaces” and becomes visible during the social upheavals that garner national attention. Thus, the author’s analysis of institutional racism in the 1960s—and racism in general—is more radical than a good deal of what we tend to associate with civil rights rhetoric, especially when we think of Martin Luther King, Jr. It’s important that we listen to all of the different voices and perspectives that shaped the political discourse during his turbulent time in American history—not simply voices that have been popularized.

Critical thinking about the common narratives that shape our (mis)understanding of the past is required of us if we are to understand our present—this holds true not only for common narratives about the civil struggle, but for any commonly accepted historical narrative. Since 2014, the US has been gripped by more waves of black rebellion, along with activist and scholarly critiques of a “white supremacist” power structure that operates invisibly through our political, economic, and (especially) criminal justice systems.

The Black Lives Matter Movement has been incredibly controversial, and it has many enemies and critics (who are predominantly white). So, whether or not we are witnessing a resurfacing of a “white backlash” is an important social-ethical question that must be carefully considered—especially by white people, who would benefit from the existence of a “white power” structure.
As you’re reading this short excerpt from the writings of an anonymous, 1960s black protestor, reflect on some of the following questions:

1. What is the appropriate emotional response (especially among white people) when it comes to the author’s critique that it is out of a “sense of superiority” that whites believe they “have so little to learn” regarding issues of race and racism?

2. Do you think most white people tended to be racially ignorant in the 1950s and 1960s?

3. Do you think white people tend to be racially ignorant today? And do white people tend to view BLM the way white folks viewed the civil rights movement in the 60s (as a mostly violent movement that divides the country instead of unifying it)?

4. Consider this carefully—do you think that in order to understand the racialized rebellion that has been unfolding in the US since the Ferguson, that people (whites especially) must take the time to study the history of institutional racism and what the struggle against it entailed?

6. Does the author’s language and rhetoric strike you as strategically productive or counter-productive?

7. How confident are you that you know what is actually productive and counter-productive when it comes to the struggle for liberation and equality?

8. Lastly, does the author’s tone strike you as a consistent with what you associate with the rhetoric used by civil leaders in the 1960s?
Racial Ignorance of White America

During that year [1965] in several northern and western cities, most tragically in Watts, young Negroes had exploded in violence. A year later, Ramparts magazine was asserting:

After more than a decade of the Civil Rights Movement, the black American in Harlem, Haynesville, Baltimore and Bogalousia is worse off today that he was ten years ago. The movement’s leaders know it, and it is the source of their despair. The movement is in despair because it has been forced to recognize that the Negro revolution is a myth.

Had the Negroes fumbled their opportunities? Was the movement in despair? Why had the widespread sympathy with the Negro revolution abruptly and suddenly submerged into indifference or banished outright?

A simple explanation holds the following: “Negroes rioted in Watts, the call for black power was heard through the land, and the white backlash was born; thus, the public became infuriated and sympathy evaporated.” This explanation founders, however, on the hard fact that the change in mood among whites preceded Watts and the black power slogan. Moreover, the white backlash has always existed underneath and sometimes on the surface of American life.

With the Voting Rights Act, one phase of development in the civil rights revolution came to an end. A new phase opened, but few observers realized it or were prepared for its implications. For the vast majority of white Americans, the past decade—i.e., the first phase of the civil rights
revolution—had been a struggle to treat the Negro with a degree of decency, not of equality. White America was ready to demand that the Negro should be spared the lash of brutality and coarse degradation, but white America had never been truly committed to helping him out of poverty, exploitation, or all forms of discrimination. It appeared that the white segregationist and the ordinary white citizen had more in common with one another than they did with the Negro.

Why is equality so assiduously avoided? Why does white America delude itself, and how does it rationalize the evil it retains? The majority of white Americans consider themselves sincerely committed to justice for the Negro. They believe that American society is essentially hospitable to fair play and to steady growth toward a middle class utopia, embodying a racial harmony. But unfortunately this is a fantasy of self-deception and comfortable vanity.

This limited degree of concern [for black freedom] is a reflection of an inner conflict within the majority of whites, who are very cautious to measure the impacts of change to the *status quo*. As the nation passes from opposing (racist) extremist behavior to the deeper and more pervasive elements of achieving true equality, white America reaffirms it bonds to the status quo. The real cost lies ahead. The stiffening of white resistance is a recognition of the fact that the eradication of the slums that house millions is complex far beyond simply integrating busses and lunch counters.

However, the assistant director of the Office of Economic Opportunity, in a frank statement on 29 December 1966,
declared that the long-range cost of adequately implementing programs to fight poverty, ignorance, and slums will reach one trillion dollars. Yet, he was not awed or dismayed by this prospect, but instead he pointed out that the growth of the gross national product during the same period makes this expenditure *comfortably possible*. It is, he said, as simple as this: The poor can stop being poor if the rich are willing to become even richer, but at a slower rate. Furthermore, he predicted that unless a substantial sacrifice is made by the American people, the nation can expect further deterioration of the cities, increased antagonisms between races, and continued disorders in the streets…

When the U.S. constitution was written, a strange formula to determine taxes and representation declared that the Negro was 60 percent of a person. Today another curious formula seems to declare he is 50 percent of a person. Of the good things in life, he has approximately one-half those of whites; of the bad things in life he has twice those of whites. Thus, half of all Negroes live in substandard housing, and Negroes have half the income of whites. Yet, when we turn to negative experiences, the Negro has double the share. There are twice as many unemployed. The rate of infant mortality among Negroes is double that of whites.

Depressed living conditions for Negros are not simply the consequences of neglect. Nor can they be explained by the myth of the Negro’s innate incapacities, or by the more sophisticated rationalization of his acquired infirmities (family disorganization, poor education, etc.) Depressed living conditions and mass poverty are a *structural parts* of the economic system in the United States…
There is not even a common language when the term “equality” is used. Negros and whites have a fundamentally different definition of the concept. Negroes have proceeded from a premise that “equality” means what exactly it says, and they have taken white Americans at their word when they talk of it as an objective. But most whites in America, including many persons of goodwill, proceed from a premise that “equality” is a lose expression for “improvement.” In fact, white America is not even psychologically organized to close the social-economic gap. Essentially white America seeks only to make the socio-economic gap less obvious, but in most respects they seek to retain it. Most of the abrasions and tensions between Negros and white liberals arise from this fact. A good many observers have remarked that if equality could come at once, the Negro would not be ready for it. Well, I submit that white America is even more unprepared.

The Negro on a mass scale is working vigorously to overcome his deficiencies and his maladjustments. The circulation of periodicals and books written for Negroes is now in the multimillions while a decade ago it was scarcely past one hundred thousand.

Whites, it must frankly be said, are not putting in a similar mass effort to reeducate themselves out of their racial ignorance. It is an aspect of their sense of superiority that the white people of America believe that they have so little to learn.

These are the deepest causes for contemporary tensions between the races. Loose and easy language [from white
liberals/moderates] about equality and resonant resolutions about “brotherhood” fall pleasantly on the ear, but for the Negro there is a credibility gap that he cannot overlook. He remembers that with each modest advance, the white population promptly raises the argument that the Negro has come far enough.

This characterization of white America is necessarily general. It would be grossly unfair to omit recognition of a minority of whites who genuinely want authentic equality. Their commitment is real, sincere, and is expressed in a thousand deeds. But they are balanced at the other end of the pole by the segregationists who have declared that democracy is not worth having if it involves equality.

The great majority of Americans are suspended between these opposing attitudes. They are uneasy with injustice but are simply unwilling to pay a significant price to eradicate it. The persistence of racism in depth and the dawning awareness that Negro demands will necessitate structural changes in society have generated a new phase of white resistance in the North and in the South. Negro demands that yesterday evoked admiration and support, today—to many people—these demands have become tiresome, unwarranted, and a disturbance to the enjoyment of life. Thus, cries of “black power” and riots in the cities are not the causes of white resistance. They are consequences of it.
From Course Instructor

Movement for Civil Rights:
What it Was and What it Wasn’t

From the 1950s until the end of the 1960s, the civil rights movement struggled to liberate black Americans from organized white supremacy across the United States (it was not limited to de-segregating the South.) The civil rights movement was the most visible and most urgent of the various rebellions that rocked the U.S. throughout the decade: like the labor movements, student movements, anti-war movements, women’s liberation movements, and gay rights movements. All of these converged into a broad anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist revolutionary struggle against the county’s (and even the world’s) existing social, economic and political arrangements.

Throughout the 1960s, millions and millions of Americans (along with millions throughout the world) truly felt that the popular revolutions that were playing out on the world’s stage were going to totally transform societies from top to bottom. And the participants in the civil rights movement were at the forefront of guiding the aspirations, the desires, and new visions for the good life that inspired many social revolutionaries across 1960s America.

What the civil rights movement was not: 1) a struggle only against Jim Crow; 2) a purely “non-violent” movement that achieved its victories primarily through peaceful, civil disobedience; 3) a movement organized solely by Martin Luther King, Jr.; 4) a movement which simply demanded
increased racial mixing and voting rights for black Americans.

On the contrary, the philosophical vision for economic and political freedom that emerged from civil rights revolutionaries consisted of ideologies and platforms that would be considered “too radical” and “too extremist” by mainstream politics today. More, the civil struggle was composed of a vast number of rebellious personalities scattered throughout the U.S. The struggle was not dominated by a vision offered by MLK. Equally diverse were the tactics and strategies employed in the struggle for black liberation—tactics ranging from non-violence to violence”; from pacifism to armed-self defense; from economic boycotts to property destruction; from marches and protests to riots and insurrections.

Popular history, however, has strategically reduced what was in reality a multi-faceted movement of often militant black rebellion to a few sanitized images of peaceful marches and sit-ins, held together by an equally sanitized and repackaged memory of Martin Luther King, Jr., orating about “peace and non-violence,” “dreams and unity,” “love and brotherhood.”

**What Happened to the Civil Rights Movement and its Participants**

Most important for us to remember, however, is that the revolutionary organizations that formed the civil rights movement did not simply abandon their projects and activities in the 1970s because victory had been achieved and racial justice won, as though it were now time for everyone
to go back home. Rather, the civil rights movement for black liberation was dismantled, violently, by the United States government. Activist networks were targeted and neutralized by intense state repression—accomplished through the surveillance, infiltration, and criminalization of political communities and individuals. This state-repression of the civil rights movement was spearheaded by the FBI’s CONTELPRO (Counter Intelligence Program), which instructed local and state police forces on how to disrupt, discredit, and neutralize black activist communities throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. Of course, this fact doesn’t tend to make its way into the national narrative of “progress” and “moral triumph” that is peddled in D.C. and popular culture.

**Two Phases of the Civil Rights Movement**

The civil rights movement can be divided into two phases. It is this second phase the author-protester was analyzing above in “Racial Ignorance of White America.” In the latter half of the 1960s, many civil rights activists began to adopt the slogan **black power.** Calls for black power indicated two related ideas:

**First.** Calls for black power represented an ethical vision for black liberation in particular and collective liberation in general (the liberation of all people from exploitation, regardless of race). This ethical vision rested on a conception of political justice, where political power could be fully concentrated in communities themselves, through autonomous, democratic self-organization: “people power.”
Secondly. Calls for black power represented a new political strategy for achieving this form of life. That is, black power rejected the prevailing strategy of “moral-suasion” that had been dominant during the earlier phase of the civil rights movement.

In this context, moral-suasion refers to the use of non-violent (usually, pacifistic) protest tactics that aimed to persuade the moral conscience of white America to reject the existing institutions of racial oppression (hence the concept, “moral-suasion”). The basic ideas was that if civil rights protesters could claim the moral high-ground in the civil rights struggle, then white allies (especially powerful ones) could be won to the cause and structural changes to the country’s economic and political intuitions (which disproportionately advantaged whites over blacks) could be achieved. The common history we are taught suggests that moral suasion was overwhelming successful, and that by virtue of this tactic, institutional racism was eliminated.

Black power, emerging in the second half of the 60s, rejected the strategy of moral suasion, along with many of the non-violent protest tactics that were used to implement it. Black power articulated a different strategy for achieving liberation. Here, the focus was not on seeking concessions
from the white power structure; rather, the focus was on building up the material power of autonomous black communities. This was to be achieved by creating social, political, and economic institutions and forms of life that were not dependent on the existing economic and political institutions (a “white power structure”).

By creating networks of autonomous communities that were often armed and capable of defending themselves from police brutality, black power aimed to create new, freer worlds in the shell of the old—communities that could equally distribute economic resources that were necessary for the reproduction of life. Moreover, most black power organizations—following the lead of the Black Panther Party—emphasized multi-racial solidarity, establishing networks of cooperation with other racial and ethnic communities, including communities of poor white people, which (at times) joined the revolutionary project.

This strategic orientation of black power should be clearly distinguished, then, from the tactics of non-violent civil disobedience: tactics of illegal, non-violent demonstrations (often designed to trigger a collapse of civil
infrastructure) in order to to protest unjust laws, claim the moral high-ground, change the mind of whites, and place demands on the existing “white power structure.” To put it another way: unlike the tactic of civil disobedience, and the strategy of moral-suasion it falls under, calls for black power did not aim to “change white people’s minds” about racial injustice and did not demand of the political class that they “govern black communities more humanely.” Rather, proponents of black power placed demands on themselves and their communities to build new forms of life, and did so without asking permission and without appealing to or accepting the (supposed) moral legitimacy of the U.S. government.

For the Black Panther Party, building material power included the creation of free food programs and free health clinics, promoting black-owned businesses and educational programs, organizing workers unions and cooperative housing, along with armed, self-defense patrols to keep black communities and neighborhoods safe from police terror. Ultimately, the strategy of black power attempted to increase black liberty in the U.S. without channeling the entirety of activist energy into marches, sit-ins, and “freedom rides” and other symbolic protests that sought to reform the existing system. Black power built power outside of the existing political and economic structures, which had been identified as racist to their marrow.
This black power movement was at once beautiful, noble, and galvanizing for an otherwise oppressed, impoverished, and often hopeless black youth living throughout the second half of the 1960s. However, the black power movement and its leaders were ultimately unable to protect their community-building efforts from the repressive wing of United States law enforcement. Over ten years, the networks and communities who were committed to black power were criminalized, neutralized, and assassinated out of existence by racist political legislation, white vigilantism, police terrorism, and state surveillance. Thus, the civil rights movements receded into history, just as the war on drugs was launched, which further decimated those neighborhoods where black power organizing had been the strongest. Now, after 40 years of mass incarceration, largely fueled by this war on drugs, black rebellion against institutional racism has once again resurfaced—and along with it: more white backlashes, as many have argued quite persuasively.

**The Relationship Between Riots and Organizing**

*What is the relationship between the spread of riots and rebellions in the mid 60s and the birth of black power organizing?* It’s helpful to consider a basic comparison. Just as the food riots, the tax riots, and the Boston Tea Party galvanized American Revolutionary consciousness in the middle of the 1770s, massive rebellions and riots accelerated the political consciousness of black youth in the middle of the 1960s.
Militant political action (like acts of property destruction) has historically *galvanized* oppressed communities: communities who tend to lack access to traditional forms of institutional power. In fact, every successful struggle for liberation—from the women’s suffrage movement and the modern labor movement, to the civil rights movement—has involved riots, rebellions, and property destruction (rebellions now forgotten or erased.) In the middle of the 1960s, hundreds and hundreds of riots, rebellions, and insurrections against the police had engulfed poor black communities, often costing millions upon millions of dollars in property damage, notably in places like Watts, Harlem, Newark and Detroit. From the ashes, a new phase in the civil rights movement emerged. The strategy of disciplined, civil disobedience was rejected by many black revolutionaries who were convinced that having to appeal to the moral conscience of white people through protest was not be the best, or most liberating, strategy for getting free from organized white supremacy. Black political organizations were becoming more vocal in their revolutionary aspirations and much more radical in their vision of life outside of existing economic-political structures—or “white power” structures.
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Cries of “black power” and riots in the cities are not the causes of white resistance. They are consequences of it.