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KNOWING WHERE WE HAVE BEEN IN ORDER TO KNOW WHERE WE ARE GOING: FROM PROTEST TO POLITICS

By Lacino Hamilton

As activists fighting for racial equality encounter crises similar to crises activists experienced in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, being aware of those similarities can provide a framework for questioning today's activism.

That awareness can catalyze desperately needed new approaches when inevitable problems of reaction, cooptation, insufficient knowledge and changing conditions occur. It can also fire the imagination of millions of Americans who, equipped with not just knowledge of existing facts, but also with, as Herbert Marcuse referred to it, knowledge of the "factors behind the facts" – a critical recognition revealing that "the established facts are the work of the historical practice of man" – can begin applying lessons from earlier eras to particular situations in the present by adopting tried and tested analyses and tactics as appropriate.

I'm not trying here to delineate a total program for activists or for their supporters. Rather, I merely want to argue that a once (and possibly still) widespread assumption was (and remains) incorrect. The belief that the removal of artificial racial barriers would or can result in the automatic integration of Blacks into all aspects of American life turned out to be wrong. Sixty-two years after Rosa Parks refused to obey Montgomery segregation laws on city buses, Blacks as a group still have not achieved full equality and cannot rely on the American government (re: law enforcement) for basic human treatment.

Too many Blacks have simply sought to enjoy the fruits of American society, but their quest cannot be satisfied within the framework of existing social, political and economic relations. Blacks find themselves stymied by obstacles of far greater magnitude than legal barriers of racial oppression. The problems are of course conditioned by slavery, Jim Crow, legalized segregation and de facto apartheid. Yet the problems have not vanished upon the formal demise of those identifiably racist institutions. Obstacles that are the result of the total society's failure to meet not only the needs of Blacks, but that are also the consequence and symptom of the institutionalized failure to meet human needs generally, continue to reproduce severe racial (and racist) disparities. That process in turn helps maintain a system which makes it so human life reproduces itself in maimed and incarcerated (literally and figuratively) forms, living less fully and dying too painfully and frequently as frustrated antagonists of our species-being, to use the Marxian phrase.

What W.E.B. Du Bois called the "American Assumption," referring to the prevalent idea that "wealth is mainly the result of its owner's efforts and that any average worker can by thrift become a capitalist" – what we now might refer to as the celebrated "myth of meritocracy" – has likely buoyed that aforementioned assumption I am calling into question.

While the Civil Rights Movement is unfortunately reduced to a storied caricature of a struggle in popular memory, it in point of fact provides historical illustrations of the inherent shortcomings of an activism geared toward equal civil and human rights within an inherently un-civil and dehumanizing edifice.

Beyond the Burning House: Find Meaning in Translation

The real history of the Civil Rights Movement also offers examples of how to begin transcending such shortcomings.

Not for nothing did Martin Luther King Jr. tell the legendary Harry Belafonte what troubled him was that "for all the steps" made "toward integration," he had "come to believe that we are integrating into a burning house."

Those insights were not King's alone. The Civil Rights Movement did indeed try to transform from a protest movement (a phase Black Lives Matters and others appear to be stuck in) to a political movement. We can discern lessons from those efforts. For example, based on the experiences of those in the thick of organizing against racism

several decades ago, it seems evident that eradicating racial oppression ultimately requires struggle against oppression in all its forms. That history helped clarify how and why coalitions among diverse peoples offer the most promising strategies for challenging oppression systematically.

The main direction of social activists today, though, has been to shrink from the dangerous implications of restructuring the American social and economic systems. Instead the focus has been on simpler, more comfortable ways out, like protesting for a video to be released, or for an arrest.

Protest can bring awareness to a problem that is being ignored or minimized. Provide people who are angry and frustrated an outlet to channel their energies and some worthwhile short-term goals can be accomplished. That's fine. Perhaps even force a resignation every once in a while. That can be good too. But institutional patterns and practices will not change unless protesters go beyond rallying and marching and transcend what usually amounts to empty slogans. Activists cannot be victorious in bringing about racial equality in the absence of a radical change in the consciousness and needs of the people.

An important function of activists – or, that is, pivotal theory and action for those who have defensible and well-developed ideas about a more desirable society and similar ideas and intentions as regards realizing such a society – is to “translate” protest into organized action (i.e., a base for autonomous power that can serve as a catalyst for the attainment of self-determination). That organization should have the chance to develop and to transcend immediate needs and aspirations so as to move toward radical reconstruction of society.

The intensive indoctrination and pervasive nature of social inequality today calls for intensive counter-education and organization. The dismal and in many ways reprehensible present-day conditions entreat us to better understand where we have been in order to know where we are going and, for that matter, where we want and ought to go.

Learning the Pivotal Political Lessons Previously Taught

Bayard Rustin, who was a close associate of Martin Luther King Jr., and a lead organizer of the famous 1963 March on Washington, understood as well as anyone what this transformative education and action should involve. Rustin was one of the leading tacticians of the Civil Rights Movement. His most significant literary contribution, in my opinion, is a little known article, “FROM PROTEST TO POLITICS: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement,” published in *Commentary* magazine. In this visionary article Rustin provides a framework for looking at the Civil Rights Movement from 1954 to 1964, and he explicates how that movement was evolving from a protest movement into a full-fledged social movement – an evolution the likes of which many activists are appropriately calling for today.

“In a highly industrialized, 20th-century civilization,” Rustin wrote, “we hit Jim Crow precisely where it was most anachronistic, dispensable, and vulnerable—in hotels, lunch counters, bus terminals, libraries, swimming pools, and the like.” But marches and protest did not “impede the flow of commerce in the broadest sense,” he acknowledged; they did just the opposite.

Direct-action tactics (e.g. sit-ins, freedom rides) helped bring down the legal foundations of white supremacy in America. However, Rustin recognized that in desegregating public accommodations, “Blacks affected institutions which were relatively peripheral both to the American socioeconomic order and to the fundamental conditions of life of Black people.”

The material conditions of Blacks in America did not fundamentally change.

The basic relations of Black subordination has been remarkably resistant to protest and surprisingly resilient in terms of taking on new, partially concealed forms (e.g. the disproportionate caging en masse of people of color in the supposed age of colorblindness). That's in part because racial oppression cannot be understood in individual terms alone. It's not just a matter of so-called bad people doing bad things. It is instead a fusion of institutional and systematic discrimination, personal bias, bigotry and social prejudice interacting within a complex web of relationships and structures that shade most aspects of life.

Not long after the first flush of sit-ins, several developments took place that complicated the Civil Rights Movement. One was the shifting focus of the movement in the South, symbolized by the founding of the Alabama based Lowndes County Freedom Organization (the original Black Panther Party). The organizing called for building independent Black institutions or power bases. Another was the spread of the movement from the South to the North and West where Black people were engaging in insurrection in hundreds of cities. The third, common to the other two, was the expansion of the movement's base in Black communities where revolt was always minutes away, reflecting a timing mechanism which no one had set but which could go off at a moment's notice following some unpredictable set of events.

These shifts started to transform peripheral demands of desegregating public accommodations (reform) into wider expectations for social change (revolution). No longer were Blacks satisfied with integrating lunch counters. They began to seek advances in employment, housing, schooling, the elimination of police powers and so forth. The movement expanded its vision beyond race relations to economic and political relations. Or, in the words of Civil Rights giant Ella Baker, "the struggle is bigger than eating a hamburger at a white counter." Indeed.

Revolution's Necessary Requirement: A Structural Critique

Of the many valuable analyses of the Civil Rights Movement, one of the more important was understanding the need to examine issues of white supremacy, domination and exploitation from the perspective of structural (as opposed to solely individual) factors that maintain oppressive economic and social relations.

As an aside, I would advise as Rustin did those who think that self-help is instead the answer to familiarize themselves with the long history of such efforts in the Black community, "and to consider why so many foundered on the shoals of ghetto life." To be clear, don't disregard the legacy of Black collective self-organization nor the extensive, if often ignored history of cooperative economics produced by people of color in the US and beyond. More recently, many Blacks released from prison, faced with barriers to employment that keep some 60 percent of formerly incarcerated people without wages a year after their release, have after all been recuperating that history by successfully forming worker co-ops and advancing the solidarity economy. But don't de-emphasize the extensive structural forces which have historically crushed and marginalized such alternative practices, especially when those people creating alternatives mistakenly view their actions as compatible with the continued operation of the same established institutions seeking their marginalization and often demise.

What should be remembered is that an action-focused structural perspective provided those in the Civil Rights Movement a dangerous analysis. It was dangerous because it created the possibility of Blacks and whites uniting on the issue of class exploitation. That is, such an analysis foregrounded the need to expose and critique normative assumptions that conflate democracy with capitalism. It stressed examination of the role of capitalism and its bedrock institutions and ideologies in suppressing the exploration of alternative economic and social arrangements.

This sort of analysis did not escape a large portion of the movement. King, for instance, had grasped it and had started to publicly share this perspective.

At Dean Francis Sayre's invitation, King delivered his last Sunday morning sermon, "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC, on March 31, 1968. As King stood in the pulpit, paused, looked out into the congregation, and began to speak, his words acknowledged the need to move from protest to politics: "There can be no gainsaying of the fact that a great revolution is taking place in the world today." An observation he followed by stating, "It is an unhappy truth that racism is a way of life for the vast majority of white Americans, spoken and unspoken, acknowledged and denied, subtle and sometimes not so subtle—the disease of racism permeates and poisons a whole body politic."

King and others began asking dangerous questions, like, in whose interests did the prevailing systems of domination and exploitation operate? Asking who benefits and who pays for the prevailing practices helped to expose hierarchal relationships as well as hidden advantages and penalties embedded in a purportedly fair and neutral system. Whites were locking Blacks out of positions that would allow their collective, rather than token, economic and social advancement. Marching and protesting alone was clearly not going to change that.

Hundreds of thousands of people participated in organizing of one kind or another in hundreds of cities throughout America. What began as a protest movement was being challenged to transform itself into a political movement. "Black Power" was the new slogan—an expression of distrust of any "progress" given or conceded by whites, a rejection of paternalism.

King, though still respected, was being replaced by new heroes – like Huey P. Newton and George L. Jackson, for instance – who understood the contours of the political struggle. The people became more and more concerned about problems untouched by Civil Rights laws (e.g., problems coming out of poverty). At issue, after all, was not civil rights, strictly speaking, but social and economic conditions. Or, in the words of Rustin, "the very decade which witnessed the decline of the legal Jim Crow," also saw "the rise of de facto segregation in our most fundamental socioeconomic institutions."

Rustin laid bare the situation. More Blacks were unemployed in 1964 than in 1954, and the unemployment gap between Blacks and whites had widened. The median income of Blacks during the same time had dropped. A higher percentage of Black workers were concentrated in jobs vulnerable to automation than was the case ten years previous. More Blacks attended de facto segregated schools in 1964 than in 1954 when the Supreme Court handed down its famous *Brown vs Board of Education* decision. And behind all that was the continuing growth of racial slums trapping Black in a milieu which, whatever its legal definition, sowed an "unimaginable demoralization."

Lessons in Internal Problems and External Reaction

But the challenge that faced the Civil Rights Movement, the challenge which involved evolving from a protest movement into a full-fledged social movement, became hung up on two apparently contradictory lines of thought: the call for "intelligent moderation," and the "strategy of shock." The first was based on the premise that Blacks' problems were so enormous and complicated that massive reforms required to eradicate them could not realistically be anticipated. Therefore, Blacks' just demands were unrealistic and would only antagonize white people. Rustin's quarrel with that line of thought was that it did not envision radical changes. Moderates "ignore (or perhaps see all too well) the potentialities inherent," he wrote, in connecting Blacks' "demands to broader pressures for radical revision of existing policies." The admonition of moderation, was, for all practical purposes, admonition of the acceptance of the status quo.

Attempts were made to do with Blacks what had been historically done with whites: to lure a small number into the system with economic enticements. Soon there were more Black faces in government and board rooms, in newspaper and television, creating the impression of change, siphoning off into the mainstream a small but significant number of Black leaders. This amounted to a small amount of change and a lot of publicity. The system was working hard by the late 1960s and early 1970s to contain the frightening explosiveness of a growing revolutionary consciousness.

The second line of thought derived from the premise that there were no forces prepared to move toward radical structural changes. From that it was concluded that the only viable strategy was "shock": Blacks could only change white hearts by traumatizing them with spectacular tales of racial violence and dreams permanently put on hold. But hearts were not relevant to ending Black suffering. Neither racial affinities nor racial hostilities are rooted there. Racial inequality has deeper – institutional – roots which ultimately mold collective sentiments. The struggle for racial equality was and is thus an essentially revolutionary struggle, whether it was or is widely recognized as such or not.

The term revolutionary, as I am using it, as Rustin and other social justice advocates used it before me, refers to the

qualitative transformation of fundamental institutions more or less rapidly to the point where the social and economic structures those institutions comprise can no longer be said to be the same. The approach must be long-range and cooperative, and it must entail the understanding and good will of as many whites as Blacks in order to foster a broad and continuing dialogue among the many people who struggle to find more effective ways to challenge racial inequality.

Of course, that kind of revolutionary approach is not always well received by those at the helm of or by those reaping massive rewards from the institutions in question.

The case of Fred Hampton, for example, illustrates the reaction and repression which has historically been unleashed upon emergent social movements and upon their revolutionary protagonists. Hampton, who was chairman of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party, was renowned for his skill in facilitating broad-based coalitions of different groups of people. He had an uncanny ability, it seems, to cultivate within people a dangerous sensibility – the belief and feeling that they could individually assert their dignity by working together to transform the conditions that actively deprived them of their personal and collective dignity.

Hampton was just 21 when he was killed in his bed by Chicago police who raided his apartment on December 4, 1969. Evidence later surfaced the Federal Bureau of Investigation had conspired with the Chicago Police Department to assassinate him. He was one of the many targets of COINTELPRO, the covert and largely illegal FBI-driven campaign to surveil, harass and repress social movements of the 50s, 60s and early 70s.

From Is to Ought: People's Autonomous Power as a Goal and Vehicle for Self-Determination

First, then, it should be clear that with protest or politics one of the crucial goals ought to be to negate the repressive powers of the state. Second, fundamental to abrogating racial inequality is the principle that we must build and employ independent political vehicles that are not bound to nor controlled by either of the two monopoly political parties or established institutions. And third, while the building of autonomous power outside of the realm of the state in the form of independent institutions is primary, civil rights experiences and the summation of the experiences of others in general teaches that ignoring the power of the state is dangerous.

Marching and protest must lead to structural change if people are to redress inequality in America and rid America of the ideology enabling that inequality to persist, if in mutating forms, with frequently widespread support. The law cannot do this. The people must do it for themselves. They must become revolutionaries and refuse to accept the old, traditional roles of protesting for a few superficial concessions that keep in place the structures and systems that make racial inequality possible.

In organizing along these lines marches and protests are more likely to transform into the material base needed to build programs (e.g., critical literacy, media literacy, political theory, political economy, human rights advocacy), and more likely to support and lead to radical reconstruction of society. It is this legacy, the challenge and attempts to transform protest into vehicles of self-determination and into the autonomous political authority of oppressed people, which the struggle for racial equality is grounded in. It is a legacy I encourage today's activist to study to help guide collective practice in the present and to build a better future.

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