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Published online: 31 Oct 2021.

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The enduring backlash against racial justice in the United States: mobilizing strategies for institutional change

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Introduction

This essay offers a framework for contextualizing racial injustice in contemporary Black and Brown communities. We argue that present-day racial injustice in the United States is a continuation of historical patterns of discrimination that have been institutionalized and reaffirmed for centuries (Gordon-Reed, 2021). At the same time, we underscore how racism and racial injustice have assumed distinctive forms during the post-civil rights era. While the passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960s represented a watershed moment in our history, it also triggered sustained backlash from opponents to racial justice in the United States (Glickman, 2020). This legislation and opposition during the post-civil rights era is significant because of the scope and magnitude of the policies adopted, as well as resistance to them. Legislation such as the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, and the 1968 Fair Housing Act have been flashpoints for resistance (Boussac, 2021; Rieder, 1989). From its inception, opponents worked feverishly to dismantle these legislative acts which were encapsulated under the umbrella of the War on Poverty. Largely, their efforts have resulted in the curtailment and reversal of civil rights policies. It is notable that this opposition was built on a foundation of sustained discourse drawing from right-wing ideologies supporting racism and oppression, racial microaggressions, stereotypes and tropes mobilized to block the implementation of civil rights policies, and reconstructed color lines in the United States (Boussac, 2021; Rieder, 1989).

We offer this framework as a reference point for contextualizing the articles in this special issue on racial justice in Black and Brown communities. As the title of the special issue suggests, this framework is introduced in order to move beyond paying lip service to the topics covered in these articles. Understanding how racial discourse has been used (and misused) by opponents of civil rights is critical. We argue that opposition to civil rights legislation emerged as an organizing principle of the political right in the United States during the early 1960s. Although overlooked, this shift in political strategy is arguably one of the more successful policy agendas implemented during the contemporary period. Political conservatives, who constitute the

right-wing in the United States, framed civil rights policies as failures from their inception, starved them of necessary fiscal resources, lobbied to reverse them, and defined social justice movements as undemocratic, unfair, and a subterfuge for patronage politics and clientelism.

In the section that follows, we discuss how backlash to racial justice policies has been institutionalized in the United States. As we witness continued calls for social workers to collaborate with police in order to reduce racist incidents and help improve the tenuous relationships between law enforcement and Black and Brown communities, the profession also is being challenged to examine the ways in which it has been and continues to be complicit in perpetuating racial injustice (see Santiago & Ivery, 2020). As the profession seemingly pays lip service to ending structural and systemic discrimination in housing, schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, and communities, we propose strategies for social workers, community practitioners, advocates, and activists to more effectively mobilize, respond to, and dismantle institutional racism.

Institutionalized backlash politics

The silent majority is a backstop against civil rights

The post-civil rights era has been shaped by an organized effort on the political right to dismantle federal legislation passed during the War on Poverty. During this period, the right-wing began to implement their *southern strategy* to galvanize their core populist constituency – a constituency that was re-branded as the *silent majority* to serve as a backstop against civil rights (Piven & Cloward, 1971; Rieder, 1989). Achieving Republican electoral victories by stoking racial animus among disaffected whites was the end goal. The southern strategy was central to Barry Goldwater's failed attempt to win the presidency in 1964 and Richard Nixon's successful effort to win the White House in 1968. A core component of the southern strategy was to galvanize racial resentment, oppose civil rights legislation, and cultivate anti-government sentiment among white voters. This strategy was used to rouse the silent majority (i.e., disaffected white voters) and foment a sustained backlash aimed at blocking the implementation of civil rights legislation and ultimately dismantling it. The southern strategy was distinct for two reasons. First, it represented an open effort to institutionalize an anti-civil rights agenda based on racial grievances in right-wing politics. Second, it was nurtured since the early 1960s to form a sustained effort at local, state, and national levels to systematically challenge and dismantle civil rights legislation (Glickman, 2020).

In its most visceral expression, the southern strategy was used to promote the right wing populist movement's focus on "a recurring rhetoric that vowed to protect white, middle-class taxpayers from the governing elite who allegedly wasted people's money on undeserving minorities" (Boussac, 2021, p. 183).

This rhetoric was successfully mobilized to differing degrees by other national politicians including George Wallace, Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump. It also has been reinforced at the state and local levels as a sustained narrative to reverse civil rights and preserve the status quo. In total, the southern strategy has been the bedrock of the anti-civil rights agenda for over a half century.

A distinguishing characteristic of the right-wing populist movement is that its attack on the welfare state is based on a rhetorical web of stereotypes and racial tropes that provide the pretense for the use of microaggressions and more subtle forms of racist behaviors. These talking points are then deployed in an organized fashion to reinforce a belief system that buffers the status quo against efforts to promote institutional reform and critique racism (Santiago & Ivery, 2020). This discourse has taken different forms over the decades. In the 1960s and 1970s, social welfare policies were attacked as conduits for the promotion of a culture of poverty that spread social pathologies intergenerationally in the country's inner cities (Santiago, 2015). Leading into the 1980s, this discourse evolved and took on new dimensions. Attacks intensified, with opponents arguing that social welfare policies resulted in the disintegration of the nuclear family. One iconic right-wing attack deployed by Ronald Reagan and others during this period argued that the social safety net rewarded Black, "'welfare queens' who drove Cadillacs while claiming benefits" (Boussac, 2021, p. 197). The image of the welfare queen became embedded in subsequent scholarly debate about the underclass and the undeserving poor (Katz, 1990; Levine, 2018; Murray, 1985; Peterson & Rom, 1990; Wilson, 1990).

The right-wing movement's rhetorical attacks were not confined to the welfare state. They were applied across a spectrum of civil rights reforms. For example, the mobilization of white animus has been a central component of the campaign against immigration reform (Brown, 2013; Zolberg, 1999). White animus also has been mobilized in efforts to dismantle the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Feagin & Hohle, 2017). Racism was a subtext of policy debates about healthcare in the 1990s (Boychuk, 2008) and early 2000s (Maxwell & Shields, 2014; Milner & Franz, 2020). Stereotypes were mobilized to thwart efforts to expand fair and affordable housing programs (Silverman & Patterson, 2012; Silverman et al., 2021). Similarly, efforts to promote criminal justice reform were repeatedly thwarted through references to racialized stereotypes and appeals to white fear (Lane et al., 2020; Owens, 2020).

Squashing the fruits of black political gains and social justice movements

The existence of an institutionalized backlash to civil rights has undermined political gains made in Black, Brown and other minoritized communities. This has been the case both in terms of gains made when minorities win elected offices and grassroots movements anchored in civil disobedience and civil

unrest. Electoral gains by minority candidates have been described as a *hollow prize*, particularly when they are made in local elections (Friesema, 1969; Kraus & Swanstrom, 2001; Reed, 1988). When minorities win mayoral elections, they often inherit cities that have experienced disinvestment and population decline. The cities they govern are stigmatized by the broader society through the mobilization of stereotypes and tropes that are core components of the right-wing backlash to the civil rights movement. Minority-led cities are characterized as places where intergenerational poverty is sustained by welfare dependence, public corruption, and failed social policies. This type of framing places constraints on the scope of local redistributive policies that minority mayors can pursue. In order to placate the local and regional business interests, minority mayors face pressure to abandon redistributive agendas focused on making investments in social infrastructure, and instead they focus on things like business retention and the policing of the residential population (Bennett, 1993; Johnson, 2016; Reed, 1988). Ironically, they abandon the agendas of the local coalitions that brought them into power in order to show a response to right-wing political rhetoric that is deployed to dismantle civil rights policies.

The notion of a hollow prize has application at the state and federal levels of government as well. Black and Brown elected officials and their allies face obstacles to achieving legislative goals that are both an outgrowth of opposition driven by right-wing backlash and consequently embedded in institutional structures (Sekou, 2020). In the contemporary period, this is exemplified by stalled legislation at the federal level related to criminal justice reform, immigration reform, healthcare policy, fair housing, voting rights, and other civil rights issues. In the same way the reform agendas of Black and Brown mayors are blocked by the threat of accelerated disinvestment, efforts to implement civil rights and social justice reforms are blocked at the state and federal levels by backlash politics designed to maintain the status quo.

It is important to highlight that backlash is used to generate conflict, reframe political discourse, and disrupt democratic processes. It has emerged during the past half century in response to repeated cycles of civil disobedience aimed at addressing civil rights violations and social injustice. During the 1960s and early-1970s, backlash surfaced in response to the civil rights movement. As Black-led protests were gaining support from the public and through legislative initiative, opponents to civil rights reform encourage backlash and reframed protest movements as violent (Wasow, 2020). The reframing of social justice movements as violent led to waning public support for civil rights reforms. Similarly, after the 1992 acquittal of police officers videotaped beating Rodney King in Los Angeles and the civil unrest and disorder that ensued, there was increased support at the local level for policy reforms aimed at addressing the underlying structural inequalities that produced these mass acts of civil disobedience (Enos et al., 2019). Yet, local policy reforms did not

translate into change at the national level. Instead, reframing of the Los Angeles civil uprisings as opportunistic rioting detached from the root causes of civil disobedience produced a backlash that effectively blocked efforts for changes in national policy. The ongoing inability of social justice movements to produce tangible policy change at the national level continues to be identified as a point of concern. For instance, Szetela (2020, p. 1367) argues that the ability of the Black Lives Matter movement to have a legislative impact at the state and federal levels is dubious, in part, because the "conservative backlash would have unprecedented ammunition for its race-charged destruction of the social welfare state."

From shock troops to institutional barriers to social change

The tactic of deploying the silent majority as shock troops to quell calls for civil rights reform has been sustained by the political right in the United States for over a half century. On the surface, the politics of backlash are the centerpiece of resistance to social justice movements in the contemporary period. However, the strategy of bombarding policy discourse with hyperbole and ad hominem attacks serves a greater purpose. It distracts attention away from the broader neoliberal agenda of the political right which is delineated by scholars like Hackworth (2019). In order to engage this agenda, we must look past the strawman that frames civil rights policies as flawed, wasteful, sectarian, left-wing folly.

Hackworth (2019) argues that efforts to dismantle civil rights legislation are at the forefront of a broader right-wing agenda to promote neoliberal policies aimed at creating a minimalist social welfare state, deregulating industry and the economy, promoting free trade, and lowering taxes. He notes that, "the key policy applications of neoliberalism – austerity, free trade, low taxes for the rich – are unpopular and most politicians do their best to cloak their implementation in some other discourse or rationale" (Hackworth, 2019, p. 54). In order to clear a path for neoliberal policies, the right-wing movement mobilized around white racial resentment. By redirecting public discourse, the movement has created an army of foot soldiers willing to fight against what is arguably their own best interests. Brown (2018, p. 74) elaborates on the dilemma created by the contemporary right-wing political movement and its implications for civil rights policies and social justice reform:

> Neoliberalism indicts the social as a fiction through which equality is pursued at the expense of the spontaneous order generated by markets and morals. It indicts the political as pretending to knowledge and making use of coercion where, in fact, ignorance prevails, and freedom should reign. A depoliticized and anti-regulatory state that also provides support for enhanced claims of the personal sphere is forwarded as the antidote to these dangers. However, the effect of this antidote is to de-democratize political culture and to discredit norms and practices of inclusion, pluralism, tolerance,

and equality across the board. Advocacy of these norms and practices is cast by neoliberal reason as a wrongheaded effort that spurns freedom, replaces morals with political mandates, and enlists the social engineering that builds totalitarianism. Hence the labeling of "social justice warriors" as "fascists" by the alt-right.

Recognizing the unpopularity of neoliberal policies, their proponents consciously pursue a path of popular disenfranchisement designed to dismantle democratic governance. It also has led to the rise of tenuous coalitions of governing partners with widely disparate views whose work together has been largely ineffective (see extended discussion in Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019). To date, the strategy has worked. In order to reverse course, the veneer produced by backlash politics must be stripped away.

How social workers and community practitioners can respond to backlash politics

There is an urgent need for social workers, community practitioners, activists, and advocates to redouble their efforts to deconstruct backlash politics. The deployment of strategies based on backlash politics has allowed the broader neoliberal agenda to fly under the radar with limited scrutiny and accountability. This has resulted in the weakening of civil rights policies and the reproduction of inequality and discrimination in an array of social institutions – including those served by social workers (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2020). In this section we outline a three-pronged strategy that practitioners can use to respond to backlash politics. It entails: (1) removing the will of members of the silent majority to engage in backlash politics; (2) recruiting institutional allies to social justice movements; and (3) expanding the capacity of social justice movements in order to foster policy change and incubate new programs at the local, state, and federal levels. All three components of this strategy need to be pursued simultaneously.

Winning the hearts and minds of the silent majority

One of the ironies of the right-wing movement's southern strategy is that its goal of dismantling civil rights policies works to the detriment of disaffected whites. For instance, the Bureau of Labor Statistics has documented that contrary to widely held beliefs among the general citizenry, whites disproportionately benefit from social welfare, housing, transportation, healthcare, social security, and other public programs designed to reduce poverty (Foster & Rojas, 2018). Advocates for social justice need to redouble their efforts to highlight how the silent majority benefits from the policies it opposes. One way to achieve this is by disseminating data on social welfare program participation. Another is to support and publicize initiatives that appeal to a wide range of voters, including the silent majority. For example,

most Americans support limits on the profits of pharmaceutical companies, through negotiating for the cost of prescription drugs (Hamel et al., 2021). Making the silent majority more aware of how social welfare programs benefit disaffected whites can create a wedge that allows for discourse about the detrimental effects the broader neoliberal agenda of the right has for working- and middle-class families.

It is imperative to defuse the silent majority's willingness to fight against civil rights policies. This group constitutes the shock troops of the right-wing movement. Even if the silent majority doesn't join social justice movements, convincing them to disengage from politics and remain at home to preserve self-interests that, in turn, will change the dynamic of public discourse. Without the firewall of the silent majority, proponents of neoliberal policies will be forced to make a case for their ideas out in the open. In such a forum, advocacy for austerity measures, unfettered free trade, tax cuts for the rich, political disenfranchisement, and other neoliberal policies will wither.

Collaborate with guerillas in the bureaucracy

Advocates for social justice must prioritize the development of relationships with allies in local, state, and federal governmental agencies. Moreover, with more than four out of ten employed in government, social workers have a responsibility not only to work for social justice within these agencies but also to serve as social change agents within their employing organizations (NASW Center for Workplace Studies and Social Work Practice, 2011), These individuals can disseminate information about institutional practices, provide technical support to grassroots and nonprofit organizations, and identify paths to connect the broad goals of social justice organizations with concrete policies. This type of bridge building is essential to addressing the disconnect between the ideological imperative of social justice movements and the need to deliver tangible benefits to affected communities. This disconnect is identified by Szetela (2020) as a major obstacle to sustained social movements and institutional change.

When forging these relationships, leaders of social justice movements need to be diligent in identifying allies in government who are both amenable to their goals and willing to disclose information to grassroots organizers. Needleman and Needleman (1974, p. 326–327) discuss the critical role that *administrative guerrillas* can fill in community development and social justice movements. These insiders can provide community members with nonpublic information and technical assistance that, in turn, can be used to build their capacity, protect their interests, and forward their policy agendas.

In order to further this type of strategic collaboration, institutions that train professionals in fields like social work and community practice need to incorporate political agency and administrative guerrilla tactics as core

component of the professional curriculum. These practices need to be embedded in codes of ethical and professional conduct for practitioners in order to transform the helping professions and disentangle them from existing institutional structures where an ethos of racism, clientelism and institutional dependence supplants community empowerment (NASW 2011). Otherwise, the concerns expressed by Piven and Cloward (1971) and Lipsky (1984) about the role of social welfare institutions in regulating and disenfranchising members of American society will endure. As noted by Reisch (2013), as long as those in social work and other helping professions continue to embrace approaches (including the training of new generations of professionals) that support the status quo by emphasizing individual adaptation, personal change and compliance while de-emphasizing resistance, social action, and social solidarity against oppressive institutional structures, we diminish opportunities to engage in meaningful structural change and dismantle racism.

Putting the policy rubber to the road

Finally, there is a need for social justice movements to increase their focus on producing tangible benefits for communities. One of the longstanding critiques of these movements is that they become prisoners of platitudes at the expense of being incubators for policy innovations. Advocates must amplify concrete policies that will lead to meaningful social change. These activities go beyond simply advocating for new laws to be passed and programs to be implemented. In addition to these activities, there is a need for movements to incubate and initiate pilot programs of their own. Consistent with Iverson's (2013) description of Do-It-Yourself activities aimed at social change, resident-driven actions, such as Reclaim Northside (Teixeira & Sing, 2016), which utilized data-driven community organizing techniques to document neighborhood blight and property abandonment in a predominantly Black neighborhood in Pittsburgh, may serve as tools for equity and racial justice in Black and Brown communities. The authors in this special issue describe pilot programs that focus on crime prevention collaborations in Langley Park, Maryland (Lung-Aman, Alvarez & Green) and fostering positive contact and relationships with returning citizens in Buffalo, New York (St. Vil & Boatley). Thurber, Bates, and Halvorson (this issue) discuss the use of community preference policies to advance racial justice and wellbeing in gentrifying neighborhoods in Portland, Oregon. Finally, preliminary findings from two different types of leadership programs aimed at training Black and Brown leaders at the intersection of politics, race and policy are discussed (Douglas-Glenn, Marlowe, Shaheen & Faulks; Chupp, Crawford Fletcher & Graulty).

In the existing neoliberal institutional milieu, civil rights and social welfare programs are systematically blocked and stunted at the federal and state levels (Lipsky, 1984). There is a pressing need for existing policies to be augmented

at the local level. Advocacy groups need to incubate and design programs that can be piloted at the local level in order to generate models that can be replicated and scaled-up elsewhere. In this way, social justice movements can drive policy innovation by delivering concrete benefits to communities on the ground. Although they might find inspiration from existing policies and programs across the United States and in other countries, local social justice movements need to take the lead in policy innovation and pilot novel programs. Recent examples from Detroit, Michigan include the resident opposition to Project Green Light, the Detroit Police Department's surveillance program which led to the 2019 rescission of the use of facial recognition technology and enhanced accountability for the misuse of data and technology. Moreover, a coalition of residents, community activists and community groups championed the creation of the Detroiters' Bill of Rights which addresses issues such as "affordable water and housing, disability rights, safety, immigration rights, and a right to recreation and quality of life" (Petty, 2021, p. 7) as part of the revised City Charter. The revised charter proposes the establishment of Offices for Immigrant Affairs and Disability Affairs, restructuring of the Board of Police Commissioners, and the demilitarization of the police. These examples highlight how the incubation of social justice reforms at the local level can form a reservoir of policy options to be drawn from for broader adoption.

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