THE REAL WHITE BACKLASH

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The "white backlash" is one of those colorful, somewhat mystical

terms that arises in times of social change to depict in broad strokes

something that people sense is going on. The referent of such a term is

never precise. It carries different connotations according to the orienta-

tions and purposes of people who use it. For example, "white backlash" is in

one sense a slogan quickly picked up by members of the White resistance to

convey to Black men the warning that if they don't stop being so aggressive

in their demands for change, White Americans will give them their comeup-

pance. On the contrary, it means to many Black Americans the resistance to

even the most moderate black demands which White Americans invariably mount,

but afterwards conveniently forget when they have finally reluctantly made

some concessions to these demands.

The term "white backlash" began to be used sometime in the period

before the 1964 Presidential elections when it became evident that there

was resistance to Black progress, not only in the South but in other regions

of the country. Part of this resistance was symbolized by conflicts between

labor unions and Black protesters when picket lines and lie-ins were staged

at construction sites in northern cities. The referendum on Proposition

Fourteen in California and the surprising number of votes given George

Wallace in Presidential primaries outside the South also contributed to the

notion that a new sort of resistance was arising. Barry Goldwater's attempt to make crime in the streets an issue in the Presidential campaign led to interpretations that he was seeking a "white backlash" vote. His failure to garner any electoral votes outside Arizona and the Deep South was widely interpreted as a sign that the "white backlash" had failed to materialize. Whether there was, indeed, such a phenomenon at all became a favorite topic of debate among social analysists. What observers seemed to be looking for under the rubric of the "white backlash" was an increase in expressions of prejudice or hostility toward Black Americans. Yet, numerous public opinion polls have indicated all along that expression of agreement with abstract notions of civil rights have been increasing in frequency in all regions of the country. Moreover, in spite of strong resistance, the Congress has since 1964 passed so many laws aimed at eliminating discrimination based on race that many White Americans ask sincerely, "What more do Black people want?".

On the other hand, Black Americans, whether they be classified as moderates or militants, seem to perceive a significant slow-down in the rate of progress toward the achievement of real equality. The growing verbal assent of White Americans to notions of equal rights, the glowing words of each new civil rights act and the defeat of such candidates for public office as Mrs. Louise Day Hicks are not accompanied by reductions in the very real, material, and psychological deprivation which so many Black men experience. This failure to make substantial progress seems to point to the existence of something which is real and which may be called a "white backlash", even though it might not show up on a social distance scale.

I have suggested elsewhere that the real backlash consists of the

refusal of White Americans to take "the immediate steps necessary to make possible the entrance of the Negro community into society en masse".[1] It is this sort of entry, not the infiltration of white society by upward mobile, "qualified" Negroes, that is necessary if America is to avoid Apartheid.

When non-southern Whites began to realize that the civil rights movement was demanding more than just token integration of schools and desegregation of restaurants in the South, their own latent prejudices were unmasked. These prejudices were not based on a system of symbolic segregation in which Black men were an integral and subordinate part, as in the South. They were rooted in a system of which James Baldwin wrote:

> Negroes represent nothing to (the Northerner) personally, except perhaps the dangers of carnality. He never sees Negroes, Southerners see them all the time. Northerners never think about them, whereas Southerners are never really thinking of anything else. Negroes are, therefore, ignored in the North and are under surveillance in the South, and suffer hideously in both places.[2]

After over three hundred years of slavery, segregation, and discrimination, Black men find themselves an excluded and disavantaged group in a highly structured, technological society. They are victims of handicaps and of indifference, as well as of crude racism. The White man does not have to try to discriminate against the Black man. All he has to do is to follow his standard business practices and move in his normal social circles for the Black man to be counted out once again. Special effort is demanded to include the Black man in the society in a meaningful way. This special effort must

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[1]Lewis M. Killian, The Impossible Revolution (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 133.

[2]Nobody Knows My Name. (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1961), p. 70.

include more than inviting selected, "qualified" Negroes to live in one's neighborhood, work in one's business, send their children to his white control-led neighborhood schools, or to come across town to lend a touch of color and tone of liberalism to a party. It must involve radical changes in the social, economic, and political structure of American society--a peaceful revolution, if you will. It is the unwillingness of the great majority of White Americans to make these radical changes that constitutes the real "white backlash". Tokenism has become acceptable to a large number of White Americans just at the time it has come to be recognized by Afro-Americans as a sham and an excuse for avoiding basic social reforms. What are some of these basic reforms that are needed? Or to put it another way, what are the traditional values which, whether for the sake of poor White men or poor Black men, affluent Americans are unwilling to give up?

One is the structural pluralism which, according to Milton Gordon, causes not only Black Americans, but Jewish, Italian, and numerous other types of Americans, to live in separate social worlds despite a high degree of acculturation.[1] If this exclusiveness in communal associations and institu-tions extended only to intimate primary group relations and religious organizations, its preservation might be of small consequence. It extends, however, to the neighborhoods in which people must find housing and to the so-called neighborhood schools in which children are educated. Kurt and Gladys Lang analyze this type of resistance to desegregation in a study of opposition to a school pairing plan undertaken in a predominately Jewish

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[1]Assimilation in American Life. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

section of Jackson Heights. They found that many Jews who insisted that they were not prejudiced against Negroes nevertheless mounted strong resistance to this plan for desegregation of what they perceived as a neighborhood school. The Langs observed:

> For many of the Jews against the plan, the neighborhood was in certain respects an upgraded version of the familiarly comfortable but shabby, run-down ghetto from which they had escaped. Many respondents stressed the fact that they (and others) had worked hard to get here. It was a good neighborhood and they wanted nothing to spoil it.[1]

The process of invasion and succession, in which White householders defend their neighborhoods as long as they can and then exercise the option of fleeing to new lily-white suburbs, is a familiar one. Open housing laws which depend for their effectiveness on the courage and persistence of Black men in overcoming hostility and circumvention will be no more successful in dispersing Black ghettoes, than freedom of choice plans have been in eliminating segregated schools. If the ghettoes are to be dispersed, affirmative government action to relocate Black families throughout metropolitan areas is required, even if this might necessitate condemnation proceedings and the purchase or building of homes by the government for rental or sale to Black house holders. This would mean the end of the free-housing market as White Americans have known it. It is safe to say that there would be strong resistance to such a program by many Whites who proclaim themselves integrationists, but shudder at the thought of governmental action to establish racial quotas in schools or in neighborhoods. The alternative is to accept the Black ghetto

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[1]"Resistance to School Desegregation: A Case Study of Backlash Among Jews", *Sociological Inquiry*, 35 (Winter, 1965), p. 103.

as an enduring and self-determining reality.

Another goal which seems to be highly acceptable now to many Americans is equality of job opportunities for Americans regardless of race. What is acceptable is the traditional idea that if they have equal qualifications, Black men should have the same opportunity to obtain employment and to advance as White men. What is less acceptable is the notion that in order to compensate for years of unequal treatment, Black men should receive preferential treatment in the job market when their qualifications are only equal to those of Whites. Even more serious is the problem of workers who, according to present standards, have less than equal qualifications for obtaining jobs or entering institutions of higher learning. Standards of efficiency and respectability, as measured by standardized test scores, middle-class appearance, and absence of a police record, are sacred values which are taken for granted by many White Americans. They are luxuries which many ghetto youths have not been able to afford. Color-blind application of what are actually White middle-class standards closes the door of opportunity for many people who are neither White nor middle class. Just as the myth which half a century ago held that women could not perform many of the tasks which they now perform were re-examined and abandoned, our modern-day myths about job and educational qualifications must be re-examined. This has a particular bearing on the administration and implementation of federally financed self-help programs in the ghettoes. There is evidence available already that some of the most effective such programs have been led by young Black men who seemed poorly qualified by these standards.

It is highly questionable, however, whether the normal growth of the

private sector of the economy, even when accompanied by liberalization of
standards of entry, will meet the problems of income. Problems of income
maintenance are not limited to Black men today, although they fall dispropor-
tionately on them. It is questionable whether, with the growth of automation
and the growth of the population, the economy will be able to provide jobs for
all who need them. Two types of proposals are already being advanced for meet-
ing this growing problem. One is the expansion of public services paid for by
taxes, with an accompanying expansion of the number of jobs available in ed-
ucation, recreation, law enforcement, public health, and family services,
such as child care. The other is the provision of a guaranteed income through
a negative income tax or family allowances. Such proposals as these would
require for their implementation the sacrifice of three traditional values.

One is the idea that taxes are a necessary evil imposed by the govern-
ment on the self-sufficient to take care of the undeserving poor. Taxes
must come to be viewed, instead, as the price which all citizens must pay for
a viable society not to be destroyed by illiteracy, crime, disease, air pol-
lution, and alienation. The clearest manifestation of the real "white backlash"
is seen in the current Congressional reluctance, sustained no doubt by millions
of constituents, to increase taxes. In spite of the repeated warnings that
the plight of the cities is as much a threat to the survival of American
society as any external enemy, there is no ground swell of popular opinion to
spend the money necessary to meet this threat.

The second value which is threatened by such proposals for income
maintenance is the traditional concept of the rights or absence of rights of
government employees. The right of people who are employed in the private

sector of the economy to organize, negotiate and strike is now recognized in law. That people employed in the public sector might have a similar right to influence the terms of their employment and the conditions under which they work is a new and radical idea. Comparisons of the reaction of county school boards in Florida to the walkout by public school teachers and the reaction of the city council in Memphis to the strike of garbage collectors shows that resistance to this new idea is not based simply on racial prejudice. If government employment is to become an increasingly significant type of employment, those who work for the government will not be satisfied to remain second-class citizens when compared to workers in such semi-private industries as the steel industry, the air lines, and the railroads.

The most basic value that is challenged, however, is the ethic of work itself. In The Secular City, Harvey Cox observes:

> The reason we feel unable to explore other ways of linking production to consumption is the religious meaning we still attach to the job. We can produce enough for everyone and we believe, or we say we do, that everyone is entitled to a decent share in the productivity of the economy. But we cannot put our convictions into practice in this instance because we still feel that only by providing a market-determined job for everyone can the ludicrous imbalance between production and distribution be reconciled.[1]

He goes on to say:

> When it is separated from strictly market requirements, full employment immediately becomes a rational possibility. It means the application of the human desire for self-expression, achievement, and cooperation to the vast amount of work that still needs to be done in in education, conservation, social work - the areas we call public sector".[2]

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[1] (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1965) p. 183.

[2] Ibid., p. 187.

The most forceful way of expressing this is through the example of the mother who is an AFDC recipient. Today she is defined as an unproductive person who receives a welfare handout to keep her and her children from starving. She could be regarded as a worker who is paid for the important task of providing her children with a good home.

The catalog of traditional practices and values which might have to be given up in order to make equality of opportunity a reality instead of a paper promise for Black Americans could be lengthy. Why call the reluctance to give up these traditional values the "White backlash" if the values defended are not uniquely related to Black progress? They may be called the "white backlash" because it is this dedication to the status quo which makes promises of equality meaningless for Black people and because the people who have the power to change the status quo through normal legislative processes are, for the most part, White. But White power is aligned on the side of the status quo, awaiting for gradual, painless changes to solve the problems of poverty and alienation without disturbing the tenor of life as it is lived on family-type TV shows. No such sense of crisis exists in the affluent, predominately White portion of the society as prevails in the poor, disproportionately Black "other America". These affluent Americans are willing to say to the Black man, "Enter into the mainstream of American life", but they are unwilling to make the sacrifices necessary to make this mainstream something which Black men can enter. Opposition to effective gun control laws suggests that many White Americans are unwilling to give up the privilege of hunting deer in order to reduce the likelihood that some Americans can arm themselves to hunt men!

The authors of the Kerner report observe:

> Powerful forces of social and political inertia are moving the
> country steadily along the course of existing policies toward a
> divided country. This course may well involve changes in many
> social and economic programs--but not enough to produce funda-
> mental alterations in the key factors of Negro concentration,
> racial segregation, and the lack of sufficient enrichment to
> arrest the decay of deprived neighborhoods".[1]

Black power is a response to the inertia of White power. To identify re-
sistance to the achievement of pride and material security by Black people as
"White racism" is to oversimplify the problem. White society must not only
be opened to Black people; it must be reformed if Black and Whites are to live
together in a united America. Black power carries a clear and urgent message
for White America.

> If you will not reform the society which you control, then we
> will attempt to build our own separate society which we will
> control regardless of the cost to you. This may not appear
> feasible, and it may not be the kind of society which fits
> your model of the American way of life, but attempting to
> build it will be more edifying than to continue to eat the
> crumbs from your table. For better or worse, we will exer-
> cise power in it, and we will derive pride from knowing that
> it is our own creation and not a shoddy imitation of your
> society.

White involvement in the Black ghetto and the costs to White society
of Black self-development dictate that the dominant group will not willingly
aid and abet such an attempt. Furthermore, power and pride cannot be con-
ferred or granted. To constitute the basis for full group development, they
must be won in a power struggle as a consequence of which the group can
envision itself as a victor, not as a beneficiary. Feelings of subordination

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[1] Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders,
(New York: Bantam Books, 1968), p. 396.

must be eradicated. These feelings have been produced by constant demonstra-
tion of the superior power of the dominant group. They can be eliminated only
by a clear demonstration that the power differential has been removed.

White Americans have not limited themselves to demonstrating the
power differential through economic and political domination. One of the most
important symbols of power has been the relative impunity with which White
men have been able to use violence against Black men in the past. This has
been demonstrated in lynchings, in the differential application of the death
penalty to Black and White offenders, in assaults on non-violence civil
rights workers, and most recently in the "overkill" of Black people during
ghetto insurrections. Tragically, therefore, the stage has been set for the
manifestation of Black power not only through economic and political means,
but through violence. Jean Paul Sartre has said, "The rebel's weapon is the
proof of his humanity".[1] It may be predicted that many Black men will feel
that the proof of their humanity and the reality of their power is the ability
to use violence as freely as the White man has. Such violence would be
retaliatory, but not in the sense of retaliation by a specific act. It would
be retaliation for years of living in fear of the brutal policeman, the Ku
Klux Klan, or simply the White man who feels confident that, "I don't have to
take nothing from no uppity niggers". This violence will not be safe for
those who commit it, and there will not be assurance that it will lead to any
sort of victory. But, as Sartre suggests, it is not simply overcoming the
dominant group, but the mere act of attacking it which produces a new spirit

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[1]Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, Constance Farrington, trans.
(New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 18.

and a new unity in the minority.

Black power seems to constitute a revolutionary rejection of traditional American values. Yet, there remains a strong cultural tie between Black men in revolution and the culture which they have shared as part of American society. One strand of this culture has been the American tradition of violence. It should not be surprising, therefore, that the use of violence should become a symbol of Black pride and Black power. Nor should it be surprising that there should arise what seems to be a new "white backlash" in the form of demands for violent repression of Black insurrection. Yet this new backlash may be viewed as only the ultimate manifestation of the real "white backlash", the unwillingness of White Americans to accept the drastic reforms required to make possible a meaningful place in the social system for Black men. As Black men have shown that they are willing to demand these reforms by whatever means are necessary, a large and influential segment of White America has displayed its determination to defend the status quo by the ultimate but traditional method of violence.