

Black Exceptionalism and the Militant Capitulation to Economic Inequality

February 2, 2019



Cedric G. Johnson's "The Panthers Can't Save Us Now" is a compelling, historically grounded critique of contemporary anti-racist campaigns against police brutality and mass incarceration. While Johnson is encouraged by the swell of organized opposition to the carceral state and to the vigilantism precipitated by the murder of Trayvon Martin, he is pessimistic about the capacity of groups such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) to deliver on comprehensive prison reform. Specifically, Johnson contends that BLM's insistence on viewing the carceral state through the lens of "black exceptionalism" has produced narrow demands for race-specific remedies to problems—such as police violence, hyper-incarceration, and income inequality—that are rooted in political-economic processes that transcend race. Johnson traces this tendency, in part, to "a prevailing nostalgia for Black Power militancy" that has encouraged "continued pursuit of modes of black ethnic politics." Identifying the vindicationist bent of recent scholarship on Black Power as a major source of the appeal of disparitarian critiques of hyper-incarceration and inequality, Johnson challenges "black exceptionalism" by detailing the framework's origins as well as its inadequacies.

Johnson convincingly argues that the centrality of identitarianism to contemporary activist and scholarly critiques of mass incarceration and income inequality not only obscures the political-economic roots of what we tend to call racial disparities, but it also encourages counter-solidaristic politics. Non-blacks, as Johnson notes, comprise the majority of both the inmate population and those murdered by police officers. Yet legal scholar Michelle Alexander's commitment to viewing the current era of hyper-incarceration through the anachronistic lens of Jim Crow has led her to cast non-black inmates—who comprise 60 percent of the total incarcerated population—as "collateral damage." Similarly, even as whites accounted for nearly 40 percent of Flint residents poisoned by Michigan Republican Governor Rick Snyder and former Flint City Manager Darnell Earley, activists, scholars, and even presidential candidate Hillary Clinton decried this man-made tragedy as evidence of systemic racism, implying, whatever their intent, that Flint's non-black residents either deserved their fate or were beside the point. As Johnson forcefully argues, the carceral state was not birthed simply of white racism—even if racism is among the issues informing profiling and sentencing disparities—but rather, zero-tolerance policing and hyper-incarceration function as mechanisms for dispatching late-stage capitalism's surplus population, whatever their race. Snyder's and Earley's sociopathic actions were, likewise, part and parcel of the neoliberal governor's broader assault on the public sector and on poor and working-class people.¹

While liberal disparitarians' tendency toward theoretical or metaphorical abstractions often obscures the ugly class politics to which ethnic exceptionalism is frequently bound, neoliberal technocrats' disregard for poor and working-class people of all races is transparent. Just ahead of the 2016 Republican primaries, pundit Fareed Zakaria published an op-ed titled "America's Self-destructive Whites," which laid bare neoliberal identitarianism's counter-solidaristic and inhumane conclusions. Zakaria attributed the soaring rates of suicide among middle-aged, working-class whites to a collective sense of entitlement—or what some might term "white privilege." Treating neoliberalism's contribution to "white working-class" despair as simply the product of a rationally functioning market, Zakaria dismissed economic malaise as the culprit via comparison with African Americans and Latinos—compatriots who "face greater economic pressure than whites." Since blacks' and Hispanics' mortality rates had actually declined over the past few decades, Zakaria reasoned that after hundreds of years of slavery, Jim Crow, and racism, African Americans "developed ways to cope with disappointment and the unfairness of life: through family, art, protest speech, and, above all, religion."²

Operating as if the objects of his contempt had been divested of the franchise, Zakaria described working-class whites as "an elite group" who had once been "central to America's economy, its society ... [and] its very identity," but whose time has since passed. Zakaria went on to assert that Donald Trump had promised to restore their former greatness and then chastened Trump's working-class white supporters for their delusional embrace of the real estate mogul's pitch.³

Some may be unfazed by Zakaria's contempt for working-class white Trump supporters; however, the implications of his characterization of African Americans are no less callous. Indeed, Zakaria not only held up blacks as role models for lowered expectations in the age of neoliberalism, but he did so through a narrative of African American exceptionalism. In his unintentionally ironic case for religion as the opiate of the black masses, for example, Zakaria described Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech as an example of African Americans' acceptance of suffering as their lot in life.⁴ Of course, Zakaria made no mention of the fact that King and the organizers of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom—black labor leaders A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin—had demanded a more expansive role for government in the nation's economic affairs with the end of opening pathways, for blacks and even poor whites, to the stable working class. Zakaria's reflections on the so-called white working-class elite, likewise, ignore the fact that blacks have long been overrepresented among union members. Unionized black workers earn higher wages, are more likely to have pensions and health insurance, and are less likely to experience a racial wage gap than are their non-union counterparts. Blacks have, therefore, been hit harder by the decline of the manufacturing sector and the neoliberal assault on the public sector than have whites.⁵

A staunch opponent of progressive redistributive policies in the United States and around the globe, Zakaria's neoliberal agenda could not accommodate such historicist interpretations of black life. Instead, "identitarianism" allowed Zakaria to see blacks as noble, long-suffering victims of ontological racism rather than of economic processes, while neoliberalism's "entitled" white losers were simply getting their comeuppance.

BLM's Vision for Black Lives proposed the kind of egalitarian agenda that is anathema to the likes of Zakaria. Still, according to Johnson, BLM's embrace of "black exceptionalism" has led activists to understate the impact of issues like automation, the decline of unionization, deregulation, and public sector retrenchment on the plight of blacks and other working people. And while the Vision for Black Lives attempted to broaden BLM's scope, Johnson argues that its commitment to ethnic group politics—which, among other things, presumes that shared racial status can bind black leftists, liberals, and conservatives in common cause—undercuts activists' capacity to mobilize a broad constituency, motivated by common interest, for either police reform or income equality.

Johnson ultimately traces the appeal to contemporary activists of black exceptionalism, in part, to popular conceptions of Black Power, which have failed to take stock of either the movement's origins or its actual political legacy.

Black Power, according to Johnson, reflected a conservative turn in postwar liberal politics. The decline of left-labor militancy during the Cold War combined with a growing spatial divide between working-class whites and poor and working-class African Americans to engender a postwar liberal discourse that—in contrast to New Deal liberalism—uncoupled inequality from political economy. By the 1960s, this tendency would lead Democratic policymakers to devise an inadequate War on Poverty centered on the combination of growth initiatives and race-specific remedies. The Great Society's War on Poverty on the cheap predictably failed to eliminate the root causes of racial disparities; however, Johnson makes clear that programs like Job Corps, Community Action Program (CAP), Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), and Model Cities not only nurtured a nascent black professional middle class, but CAP's "maximum feasible participation" encouraged urban African American activists to embrace a vision of democracy rooted in ethnic pluralism and racial group authenticity.

The reactionary implications of Black Power's ethnic pluralist framework were plain to the movement's contemporary left critics. Bayard Rustin—a critic of both Black Power and the War on Poverty—noted, in 1966, that the growing tide of cultural nationalism aided and abetted an anemic War on Poverty. According to Rustin, Black Power's embrace of ethnic-group succession diminished both the government's and the union movement's indispensable contributions to white ethnics' ascendancy from tenements to suburbs. In other words, black cultural nationalists' Moynihan-like tendency to attribute white ethnics' economic mobility to group culture rather than, say, the National Labor Relations Act and the Federal Housing Act was not only wrong, but it also validated the War on Poverty's rejection of the kind of interventionist policies that had, in fact, improved the material lives of millions of white workers from the New Deal through the 1960s. Rustin ultimately warned that Black Power's emphasis on racial-group representation would serve the interests of an aspirant African American political and managerial class at the expense of the vast majority of poor and working-class blacks. Identifying automation and the deindustrialization of American cities, rather than white supremacy, as the principal culprits, Rustin insisted that race-specific remedies were incapable of redressing racial disparities. Instead, he, A. Philip Randolph, and economist Leon Keyserling proposed the Freedom Budget for All, which—like the failed Full Employment Bill of 1945—would have mandated a living wage and guaranteed public sector employment to the nation's unemployed.⁶

Rustin, Randolph, and Keyserling's Freedom Budget was not to pass, as neither the War on Poverty nor Black Power could accommodate the type of class-based politics that they and other labor liberals believed was essential to redressing 1960s-era disparities. By the 1970s, however, the political training that War on Poverty initiatives like CAP provided Black Power "radicals" helped usher in the first wave of black elected officials since Reconstruction. According to Johnson, many of the black urban regimes of the 1970s and early 1980s addressed their black constituencies' concerns about police brutality. But with the War on Drugs, black officials threw in with draconian policing—pressured not just by the federal government, but by *black* constituencies in high-crime neighborhoods in cities rocked by deindustrialization.

In the wake of the 2016 presidential election, the value of Cedric Johnson's important article is clear. The Clinton campaign successfully used identitarianism to counter a Sanders insurgency that traced disparities to a quarter-century of bipartisan commitment to neoliberalism. Clinton's efforts to use this tactic to both push back left critics and woo black voters may have been more transparently opportunistic than the Lyndon Johnson administration's efforts to co-opt Black Power militants; nevertheless, both tactics diverted attention from the political-economic roots of disparities and

undercut the prospects for a better politics for disproportionately black and brown poor and working-class people. While some have taken Donald Trump's successful use of white identity politics, also known as white nationalism, as proof of race's realness and racism's permanence, Trump's cabinet and Supreme Court appointments make clear that his presidency—which will likely usher in a return to Lochner-era labor and regulatory laws—does not bode well for *anyone* who works for a living. Indeed, even if Trump's regular vilification of black and brown people ensures that the horrific implications of his presidency are clearest for people of color, his Supreme Court picks will deal major blows to not just antidiscrimination laws and abortion rights, but the right to collective bargaining, protections from employer coercion and caprice, environmental protections, food and drug safety, and more. When read in the full context of the past half-century of American politics, then, the crucial takeaway from Johnson's trenchant analysis of Black Power-thinking is that when it comes to identity politics, fighting fire with fire only ensures that poor and working people—a grouping that encompasses most people of color—will get burned, while capital warms itself in the glow of victory.

Notes

1. Josiah Rector, "Neoliberalism's Deadly Experiment," *Jacobin*, Oct. 16, 2016.
2. Fareed Zakaria, "America's Self-destructive Whites," *Washington Post*, Dec. 31, 2015.
3. Zakaria, "America's Self-destructive Whites."
4. Zakaria, "America's Self-destructive Whites."
5. Cherrie Bucknor, "Black Workers, Unions, and Inequality," Center for Economic Policy and Research.
6. Bayard Rustin, "'Black Power' and Coalition Politics," *Commentary*, Sept. 1966.