

# WHAT WE (STILL) NEED TO LEARN: STUART HALL AND THE STRUGGLE AGAINST RACISM

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**Abstract:** Forty years ago, in his seminal essay, ‘The Whites of Their Eyes’, Stuart Hall admonished the left for its – our – collective failure in figuring out how to fight back against racism effectively. Sadly, his criticism is no less valid today than it was then, and we still have a lot to learn about how to defeat racism once and for all. We’ve known for more than a century that this thing we call ‘race’ isn’t a scientifically valid phenomenon – and yet it continues to function perfectly well in the world as if it is one anyway. As Hall noted in a 2011 interview, the mere act of unmasking essentialisms and deconstructing binaries doesn’t stop them from ‘roaring away’ in the world, completely undisturbed by our analytic prowess. This essay takes stock of the current state of anti-racist struggles (at least in the US) and offers a critical analysis of how and why our current efforts to combat racism continue to be so ineffective.

**Keywords:** anti-racist activism, Black Lives Matter, racism, Stuart Hall, white privilege

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*Prefatory disclaimer: The essay below was finished in late February 2020, three months before George Floyd’s murder at the hands (or, more precisely, the knee) of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin sparked weeks of protests across the US, the re-emergence of Black Lives Matter (BLM) as a visible force in US political discourse, and a surge of public commitments from government and corporate leaders to (finally) do something meaningful to end racism and white supremacy. As I write these words in early July 2020, I am tempted to revise this essay in ways that incorporate recent events and temper the pessimism of my original analysis. The past few weeks, after all, have presented glimmers of hope that I would not have thought were possible as little as two months ago. At the same time, however, I remain aware of how much work still needs to be done, and how difficult it will be for a nation facing multiple major crises to maintain the kind of focus, energy, and commitment that is needed to see that work through. And so I’ve left the February version of my essay unchanged, since I’m not willing to believe, not yet anyway, that the events of the past six weeks really will produce the kind of deep, pervasive structural changes in the nation that would make my skepticism seem foolish. That said, I will be delighted if I can look back on this essay in a year or two (or even longer) and realise that my lack of faith was misguided.*

1. Stuart Hall, ‘The whites of their eyes: Racist ideologies and the media’ in *Silver linings: Some strategies for the eighties*, (eds.) George Bridges and Rosalind Brunt, pp28-52, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1981, p51. (Hereafter *Whites of Their Eyes*).

I want, instead, to draw a different lesson from this episode. It is the degree to which the left is unable to confront and argue through constructively

the genuine problems of tactics and strategy of a popular anti-racist struggle. To be honest, what we know collectively about this would not fill the back of a postage stamp. Yet, we continue to conduct tactical debates and political calculation as if the answers were already fully inscribed in some new version of Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?*<sup>1</sup>

Racism is a lot like the Death Star. It's unbelievably big and powerful and scary. It's a complicated, sophisticated machine that depends on vast armies of people cloaked in whiteness. It's designed to terrorise large numbers of people into submission and obedience. It's lethal on a genocidal, planetary scale. And if we could destroy it completely, the universe would be a better place.

Sadly, however, the parallels between racism and the Death Star fall apart at precisely the point where we most need them to hold true. Despite the dramatic obstacles in *Star Wars* designed to make the Rebellion's mission look hopeless, the Death Star was actually very *easy* to destroy. At the end of the day, after all, the success of the Rebellion hinged on two implausibly simple things:

- An idiotic design flaw that made it possible for something smaller than a tractor-trailer truck to annihilate something the size of a small moon with a single shot.
- An astonishing bit of off-screen analysis that allowed the Rebellion to spend a few hours examining the Death Star's blueprints, discover its improbable vulnerability, and devise a workable plan for exploiting it fully.

In real life, we've had a lot more time to study racism than the Rebellion had to study the plans for the Death Star. On the upside, this means that we really do know a lot about how racism works. On the downside, however, we still know absolutely nothing useful about how to blow it up.

This sort of pessimistic analysis is not the kind of story that the left likes to tell. It's certainly not the kind of story that most people like to hear. It's far more reassuring to share uplifting, inspirational tales about how some plucky group of activists kept fascists from marching in their town;<sup>2</sup> or how the current surge in extremist racist rhetoric and hate crimes is nothing more than the 'death rattle' of a doomed white supremacy.<sup>3</sup> Even in – or perhaps because of – our current crises, we've gotten pretty good at that sort of optimistic storytelling.

But we should be honest with ourselves about what these stories are – and what they are not. At best, they are coping mechanisms and survival tactics, rather than actual strategies to eliminate racism. At worst, they are actually part of the problem. One of the US' unacknowledged national pastimes, after all, is taking complicated phenomena and pretending that they can be explained easily and resolved painlessly. The classic sitcom episode about racism, for instance, treats it as nothing more than a minor form of interpersonal friction

2. Ian Millhiser, 'The hilarious way a German town turned neo-Nazis against Nazism', *Think Progress*, 17 August, 2017. <https://thinkprogress.org/german-town-pranked-neo-nazis/> (accessed 31 August 2019); Julia Carrie Wong, 'Turd Reich: San Francisco dog owners lay minefield of poo for rightwing rally', *The Guardian*, 24 August, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/24/san-francisco-dog-poo-protest-patriot-prayer-rally/> (accessed 23 February 2020).

3. Ali, Wajahat Ali, 2019. 'The death rattle of white supremacy', *The Atlantic*, 4 August, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/08/el-paso-and-death-rattle-white-supremacy/595438/> (accessed 23 February 2020); Stephen Maher, 'Donald Trump's presidency is the death rattle of a racist world view', *MacLean's*, 16 January, 2018. <https://www.macleans.ca/politics/worldpolitics/trumps-presidency-is-the-death-rattle-of-a-racist-world-view/> (accessed 23 February 2020); Kathleen Parker, 'The final death rattle of our racist past', *Chicago Tribune*, 16 April, 2014. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2014-04-16-ct-race-card-erase-oped-0416-20140416-story.html> (accessed 23 February 2020).

4. Alex Dobuzinskis, 'More racial diversity in U.S. police departments unlikely to reduce shootings: Study', *Reuters*, 22 July, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-police-race/more-racial-diversity-in-u-s-police-departments-unlikely-to-reduce-shootings-study-idUSKCN1U1017/> (accessed 23 February 2020). 'White cops are no likelier to shoot dead African-Americans than black ones are', *The Economist*, 24 July, 2019. <https://www.economist.com/democracy-in-america/2019/07/24/white-cops-are-no-likelier-to-shoot-dead-african-americans-than-black-ones-are/> (accessed 23 February 2020); WWJ News Radio, 'White police officers are not targeting minorities in shootings, MSU study finds', *WWJ News Radio*, 23 July, 2019. <https://www.jnewsradio.com/articles/white-police-officers-not-targeting-minorities-shootings-msu-study-finds/> (accessed 23 February 2020).

5. Stuart Hall, 'Old and new identities, old and new ethnicities' in *Culture, globalization, and the world-system*, (ed.) Anthony King, London, Macmillan, 1991, p43.

6. Lawrence Grossberg, *We all want to change the world: The paradox of the U.S. left -- A polemic*. London, Lawrence & Wishart, 2015.

that can be cleared up with a polite conversation, a cliché or two ('we're all the same under the skin', 'can't we all just get along?'), and no lingering hard feelings. It's short, it's sweet, and it keeps the sponsors happy by never putting anything in play that might actually threaten their bottom line. But it's also a pretty useless way to deal with racism in the real world.

Even hard news stories on the topic generally steer clear of anything that looks like critical institutional analysis. When mainstream media outlets report on police shootings of unarmed people of colour, they're more likely to frame those stories as the isolated misdeeds of 'bad apples', or the unexpected side effects of well-intentioned (but poorly thought out) policies aimed at reducing crime. When a national study of such shootings indicated that black cops were just as likely as white cops to kill people of colour, mainstream journalists framed this as evidence that racism isn't a significant factor in such killings<sup>4</sup> – as if racism could *only* play a role in such killings if individual police officers were overtly bigoted. The notion that racist police violence is a *structural* phenomenon – i.e., a predictable byproduct of a justice [sic] system that sees people of colour as a problem to be solved, rather than as citizens who deserve protection – is so far removed from what traditional news organisations deem to be reasonable, that it isn't even presented as a claim that needs to be acknowledged before being rejected out of hand.

As Stuart Hall puts it, the main function of these kinds of simple stories is that they make it easier to get 'a good night's rest',<sup>5</sup> since they allow us to pretend that racism isn't really that big a problem – or even that it no longer exists at all. Though, of course, only some of us (primarily white folks insulated from the most visible day-to-day manifestations of racism) are likely to be fooled enough to really sleep well at night. And, as Larry Grossberg reminds us, bad stories make for bad politics.<sup>6</sup> What we need are better stories to tell. And truly better stories aren't necessarily simple or comforting.

The (hopefully) better story that I need to tell you about racism in the US is, I'm afraid, fragmented and depressing. It's fragmented, partially because this is the way I've learned to tell stories most effectively,<sup>7</sup> but mostly because there isn't a straightforward, linear story to tell about racism that's also accurate enough to be useful. It's depressing because it doesn't have a happy ending – or even a clear sense that a happy ending is possible. Nearly forty years after Hall's scathing assessment of the left's inability to confront (much less defeat) racism, the back of his hypothetical postage stamp remains distressingly empty.

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I came out of a screening of *I Am Not Your Negro* – the award-winning 2016 documentary on US race relations built around James Baldwin's writings, speeches, and interviews – into a bright, chilly Minnesota afternoon in early March. The transition was harsher than usual. This wasn't just the standard disorientation one feels after spending two hours in a darkened cinema and

then finding oneself in full daylight. This was the abyss between Baldwin's withering commentary on the brutality of US racism – in particular, on white America's apparent *need* for a racist hierarchy that transforms black Americans into 'niggers' – and the smiling, oblivious cheerfulness of the *very* white world I'd re-entered. Somehow, I managed to find my way home without pushing myself in the face of every white person I saw – which, in Minnesota, is pretty much everybody – and screaming, 'WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU PEOPLE??' at the top of my lungs. But the temptation was very strong.

Mind you, given that I'm a light-skinned person of colour – light enough that I 'pass' for white more often than not, especially in places (like Minnesota) where the 'high yellor' population is too small for most people to know the semiotic codes that would help them recognise people like me as anything other than white – most of the people whose days I would have disrupted, would not have understood that my rage had anything to do with race or racism. Of course, this ignorance – the privilege of being able to move through the world and rarely (if ever) have to acknowledge (much less think seriously about) the racial injustices that permeate US culture – lies at the heart of Baldwin's critique.

The very next day, this point is driven home for me even harder. I'm sitting at a local bar for brunch and scribbling on a rough draft of this essay. The white woman sitting next to me – who may already be a little tipsy (though this is no excuse for what follows), and who I definitely don't know (so there is no pre-existing familiarity here that might justify what follows) – wants to know what I'm working on. So she pulls the piece of paper that I am actively writing on (which includes early versions of the two paragraphs above) away from me, starts reading it, and then turns to me and tells me, with absolute certainty, that I'm white. I tell her she's wrong about that, but she doubles down on her claim anyway. She asks me why I hate being white so much, and then tells me that she doesn't 'give two shits' about race and that she never brings the subject up herself. I point out that we're only talking about it now because she grabbed what I was writing away from me and then wanted to insist that what I'd written – about my own identity, mind you – was clearly wrong. She then gets (more) upset because I won't let her pull my draft away from me again so that she can read more of it.

I want to be cautious about reading too much into a single encounter. After all, I don't have these sorts of openly antagonistic confrontations over racial issues on a regular basis. So maybe this was just an anomaly. And yet, something about it still felt depressingly normal and predictable. A white person is suddenly faced with a facet of the US racial formation that they don't know about (or that they've managed to repress) and responds as if they have been threatened to their very core.<sup>8</sup> Which, in many ways, is *precisely* what such moments are, since they challenge the dominant racial myths of the nation: e.g., that race doesn't matter anymore, that race is only an issue for people of colour, that racism is dead, and so on. What the white person has learned

7. Heather Ashley Hayes and Gilbert B. Rodman, 'Thirteen ways of looking at a black film: What does it mean to be a black film in twenty-first century America?' in *Quentin Tarantino's Django Unchained: The Continuation of Melaninema*, (ed.) Oliver C. Speck, New York, Bloomsbury, 2014, pp179-204; Gilbert B. Rodman and Cheyanne Vanderdonckt, 'Music for nothing or, I want my mp3: The regulation and recirculation of affect', *Cultural Studies*, 20, 2/3, 2006, pp245-261; Gilbert B. Rodman, 'Race . . . and other four letters words: Eminem and the cultural politics of authenticity', *Popular Communication*, 4, 2, 2006, pp95-121.

8. Omi, Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, New York, Routledge, 1994.

in this moment simply can't be true. The bearer of the news in question must be lying or delusional or mistaken or *anything* other than accurate. And then, of course, the very subject should never have been raised in the first place. To even acknowledge race – much less racism – gives the lie to the tranquil, privilege-drenched fairy tale that we live in a colour-blind world.

One of the reasons this encounter felt normal is that I see a (genuinely) kinder, gentler version of the same shock wave hit (most of) my white students every time I teach my course on 'Media, Race, and Identity'. Someone will always respond to some historical (or even a contemporary) truth about race and racism by saying they had 'no idea' such things had ever happened (or are happening today). They were never taught *this* version of history. To my students' credit, they never react with anything like the anger that my barstool-neighbour did. At least not where I can see them. But the sense that they've had a bubble of some sort burst, is strikingly similar.

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There was *lots* of white privilege on display during the 2016 US presidential campaign but, for me, the most unsettling version of such racial blindness came from white folks who favoured one candidate (mostly, though not always, Hilary Clinton) and who wielded 'white privilege' as a club with which to beat different white folks who favoured some *other* candidate (mostly, though not always, Bernie Sanders)... and where *everyone* involved in these arguments seemed unable to see their own privilege. To be sure, given the overt xenophobia on display from the Republican side of the ballot, it was good that so many Democrats were thinking about race and racism as significant factors in terms of which candidate to support. But depressingly few people involved in these debates seemed to recognise how problematic it was that these were morality tales told by white people to other white people about which white candidate would be better for people of colour. And there was even less recognition that the most significant racial lines around the election were not about which (white) candidate was the most woke, but about which segments of the citizenry (hint: the ones that were disproportionately people of colour) had been disenfranchised completely. The trifecta of the prison-industrial complex, voter ID laws, and gerrymandering meant that tens of millions of black citizens either no longer get to vote at all or that their votes have been structurally shifted into districts that minimise their impact on the actual results.<sup>9</sup>

On top of this, the Democrats also failed to recognise an important generational difference in the electorate. Insofar as they managed to visibly woo voters of colour, such efforts were largely concentrated on 'respectable', bourgeois people of colour and/or veterans of the Black Civil Rights Movements (BCRM) of the 1950s and 1960s. But younger generations of voters – e.g., the ones whose racial politics have been forged through such movements as

9. Michelle Alexander, *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colourblindness*, New York, The New Press, 2012.

Black Lives Matter (BLM) – were largely ignored by the party’s leaders. From the perspective of the party’s elite, after all, BLM’s ‘problem’ is that it ‘fails’ to celebrate the sort of safe narratives of ‘progress’ and ‘uplift’ that were the cornerstone of much (though certainly not all) of the early BCRM. What the Democrats couldn’t (or wouldn’t) see is that this ‘failure’ is rooted in the very different issues and struggles that BLM is engaged with compared to the BCRM. Mind you, it’s not as if racist police violence is something new – or even as if such issues were completely invisible to the BCRM (cf. Emmett Till). More than a few lynchings from the early twentieth century were enacted by off-duty police officers and/or enabled by police departments that knowingly turned a blind eye to ‘mysterious’ deaths of black folks. But the central messages of the BCRM were more closely aligned with safe visions of the American Dream – ‘give us jobs’ and ‘let us vote’ and ‘end segregation’ – than with pointed critiques of the system (e.g., ‘stop killing us!’).

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One of the many lessons about race that Hall taught us is that neither knowledge nor analysis are sufficient to defeat racism. As he pointed out in a 1994 lecture, we’ve known for more than a century that this thing we call ‘race’ isn’t a scientifically valid phenomenon – and yet it continues to function perfectly well in the world as if it is one anyway.<sup>10</sup> As he noted in a 2011 interview, even the most compelling and insightful academic analysis doesn’t do anything significant to slow down – much less prevent – racism from doing great harm:

A large body of work in cultural studies and critical theory generally thinks that if you unmask an essentialism, it’s finished. You’ve shown it’s contradictory. You’ve shown the binary doesn’t work. Well what more are you going to do? *Out there*, the essentialism is roaring away just as it ever was. It doesn’t give a damn. It does not care a bit. It’s not that the act of deconstruction is wrong, but that the deconstruction has to come back. It has to affect the practice in the real world, the people and the relationships and the institutions and what they do in the real world. So you’ve completed half the task.<sup>11</sup>

The main problem here, though, isn’t that we’ve only completed half the task: it’s that we don’t know how to start working on the other half. Knowing how racism works is *not* the same thing as knowing how to *stop* it from working – any more than our knowledge of how tides work allows us to stop them from rolling in and out every day.

To be clear, I don’t want to discount the value of all that analysis. As Hall notes, ‘Political calculation begins with defining the target of action, the limits of the terrain, an accurate estimation of the balance of forces and a correct estimation of the enemy’s strength’ (*Whites of Their Eyes*, p49). We

10., Stuart Hall, *The fateful triangle: Race, ethnicity, nation*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2017, pp31-79.

11. Stuart Hall, ‘Stuart Hall interview - 2 June 2011’, *Cultural Studies*, 27,5, 2013, pp757-777, p769.

can't possibly act productively if we don't have solid knowledge about the nature of the problem. And the extent of our knowledge is impressive. Let me point to a tiny handful of important examples:

12. Carol Stabile, *White victims, black villains: Gender, race, and crime news in US culture*, New York, Routledge, 2006.

13. George Lipsitz, *The possessive investment in whiteness: How white people profit from identity politics*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006.

14. Michelle Alexander, *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colourblindness*, New York, The New Press, 2012.

15. Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism*. New York, New York University Press, 2018.

16. Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why are all the black kids sitting in the cafeteria? and other conversations about race*, New York, Basic Books, 1997.

- Carol Stabile maps out the ways that professional journalism and law enforcement in the US have actively worked together for more than a century to maintain a white supremacist and patriarchal social order.<sup>12</sup>
- George Lipsitz describes the ways that US laws and policies ostensibly designed to undercut institutional racism have repeatedly been undercut themselves in ways that negate their ability to change the racial status quo significantly.<sup>13</sup>
- Michelle Alexander shows us how the prison-industrial complex manages to perpetuate racial apartheid (and even, in many ways, racialised slavery) in the US, in spite of the formal end of Jim Crow laws and 'separate but equal' forms of segregation.<sup>14</sup>
- Safiya Umoja Noble explains how algorithmic culture and digital technology function, not as the objective or neutral tools they are often touted as being, but as an assemblage of invisible biases that work to privilege whiteness and reinforce racial hierarchies.<sup>15</sup>

The studies above have all helped to expand our knowledge of how racism does its ugly work in the world – and there are dozens, perhaps even hundreds, more examples that we could add to this list. We really *do* know a lot about how racism operates, and it's important that we continue to produce such knowledge.

But how do we *prevent* racism from working? How do we blow up the Death Star? That remains a mystery. I will not pretend to have some magical answer to that question to share with you (though, of course, I wish I did). What is clear to me, however, is that there are (at least) three basic facts we need to be clear about and five logistical obstacles we need to overcome if we're going to have any chance at all of winning this struggle.

**Fact #1.** We need to be clear about the distinction between racism and bigotry.<sup>16</sup> If we don't get this bit right, then nothing else we do will matter. Many people see 'racism' and 'bigotry' as interchangeable synonyms, but this bad habit merely serves to erase awareness of structural/institutional forms of oppression (racism) by reducing the problem to personal/individual examples of prejudice (bigotry). One of the major reasons we haven't made much headway in terms of defeating racism is that, too often, even well-intentioned people are fighting the wrong enemy. To be sure, changing individual minds and hearts matters, but the systems and institutions that perpetuate racism don't need the people who work inside them to be bigots. They just need those people – well-intentioned and good-hearted though they may be – to keep the machinery of racism running smoothly.

**Fact #2.** We need to be clear about questions of responsibility. There's a big difference between who's responsible for making a mess and who's responsible for cleaning it up. In a perfect world, of course, these two kinds of responsibility go hand in hand: i.e., people who create major problems should also do the bulk of the work necessary to repair the damage they have caused. In *this* world, however, the people who originally made the mess that is racism are long dead. That leaves *us* to do the cleanup work – or it leaves the mess untouched. To the extent that there are institutions actively working to keep racism in place because they benefit from it – and there are – it would be nice if they took the lead on cleaning things up. But those institutions will only do such work if they're pressured to. And so one small part of the task at hand is that the rest of us need to apply that pressure. There's important work for all of us to do on this issue.

**Fact #3.** We need to be clear about who *really* needs to step up their game here. Hint: it's not people of colour. A large part of how racism maintains itself (and how it reorganises itself whenever it feels threatened) is that it bestows passive benefits on some people – the vast majority of whom are white – that also give those people an implicit (if often unrecognised) stake in keeping the larger system in place. *This* is what many anti-racist activists mean when we talk about privilege.<sup>17</sup> Privilege is a lot harder to eradicate than overt racism or open bigotry because it's something that many people don't recognise as an important and powerful force in their lives. And it's incredibly hard to fight against – or even to see that one *needs* to fight against – something woven so deeply into the fabric of one's daily life that it's virtually invisible.

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The three facts above are, arguably, the 'easy' part of blowing up the Death Star. But there's nothing remotely easy about turning these facts into meaningful actions since, unfortunately, none of the three is widely understood or believed – and so we can't treat them as an existing base of knowledge from which a successful anti-racist movement can proceed. So one of the fundamental challenges that we face is the need, not just to articulate these facts out loud (though that should happen too), but to somehow make them *stick* in the minds of enough people that we can focus our real energies on overcoming the much larger obstacles that stand between us and the end of racism.

**Obstacle #1.** We don't really know how to move people – especially white people – to be *actively* anti-racist. We can – sometimes – help people not to be overtly racist. On a very good day, we may even be able to help people see the racism that exists in the world where, previously, their privilege had rendered that racism invisible. These are all good things, and we should continue working to make them happen when and where we can.

17. Peggy McIntosh, (1989), 'White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack', reprinted in *The Race and Media Reader*, (ed.) Gilbert B. Rodman, New York: Routledge, 2014, pp33-36.

But they are also nowhere near what we most need to accomplish. It's not enough for people to simply 'not be racist', since racism doesn't need people to openly espouse white supremacist values in order to survive. It's already so deeply entrenched in US culture that it requires little more than passive acceptance to remain in place. As long as most of white America sees racism as someone else's problem, and thus doesn't actively do anything to stop it, racism can continue on its merry way without much extra effort required.

**Obstacle #2.** We need to solve mainstream US culture's historical amnesia when it comes to race and racism. With alarming frequency, we cycle through major public crises or news events that get framed as some kind of major break-through that will *finally* open the nation's collective eyes to the truth about the racism all around us. And yet none of these supposed watershed moments ever seems to stick in the public memory long enough to actually produce the changes in the culture that they promise to deliver.

To offer just one example, the Ferguson uprising that took place in the wake of police officer Darren Wilson's fatal shooting of Michael Brown in 2014 *could* have changed the national conversation about institutional racism in significant ways. The major pieces of the puzzle were right there for the mainstream media to pick up and put together. There was a community visibly outraged enough to take to the streets. There was a police force sufficiently convinced that it had the right – and even the duty – to use military-grade weaponry against the community that it was supposed 'to serve and protect'. There was evidence that the Ferguson police department deliberately used ticketing and fines to pay for its own largess and to help keep the community it 'served' poor and frightened and disempowered.

Yet the bulk of the stories that mainstream media outlets told were primarily about Wilson and Brown as individuals, and whether justice would be served with respect to the specific case at hand. We did *not* get mainstream analysis of a long, entrenched, historical pattern of police forces brutalising and terrorising communities of colour across the nation – at least not any such analysis that had staying power. Instead, we got stories about Brown and Wilson that shrunk the issues down to the details of their encounter on that fateful August afternoon. And, at that level, there was never much of a chance – even if Wilson had been indicted, tried, and convicted – that mainstream journalism would engage those larger issues. 'Is there enough evidence against Wilson to indict him?' or 'Was Brown a visible threat in ways that justified Wilson's actions?' are not questions that open themselves up to broader analysis of which communities police forces are most invested in protecting, which they are most invested in controlling, and how the historical legacies of racism shape those investments.

White America has a stubborn habit of sleepwalking through these kinds of wake-up calls about racism. It rouses itself long enough to realise that

*something* is happening (but it doesn't know what it is, does it, Mr. Jones?) and then it slaps the snooze button and dozes off again. It slept through Michael Brown and Philando Castile and Freddie Gray and Sandra Bland and Eric Garner and Tamir Rice. It slept through the Charleston shooting. It slept through Rodney King. It slept through the Birmingham church bombing. It slept through Emmett Till. And so on. And so on. And so on.

More problematically, in those fleeting moments when white America is visibly disturbed by the ungodly noise of racism, it routinely misrecognises the problem. It thinks the problem is the Nazis. Donald Trump. The Klan. David Duke. George Wallace. Bull Connor. In short, white America believes the problem is the people who are making the loudest noises. To be sure, those folks are *part* of the problem. But the *real* problem is that white America is fast asleep, and lost in dreamland, when what it needs to be is awake. Or, more pointedly, woke.

**Obstacle #3.** Even when people are woke, however, we don't know how to mobilise them effectively. Partially, this is because it's hard to get people to think and act collectively in a culture that emphasises individual agency as much as ours does. We need a large-scale movement of people working together for a common goal, rather than just isolated individuals trying to change their own little corner of the world. To be sure, we see occasional flashes of such organising – Black Lives Matter being the most obvious recent example – but nothing on the scale that's necessary to shift the culture as a whole.

Mostly, though, we're stymied because we don't know precisely where to point a mobilised community that will change what needs to be changed. Part of where the Death Star metaphor starts to fall apart is that racism is not a giant machine working to destroy US society from the *outside*. Rather, racism is something that lives and breathes *inside* US society. It's in the courts and the cops and the schools and the legislatures and the media and the farms and the factories and the grocery stores. It's in the DHS and the IRS and the FBI and the CIA and the FCC and the DoD. It's baked into our social, economic, political, cultural, and legal orders so deeply that it's not clear that we could kill it off without also destroying society as we know it.

Put a different way, the changes that we really need in order to bring an end to racism look much more like revolution than like reform. We will not blow up the Death Star by passing a new piece of civil rights legislation, or putting a new cohort of politicians into office. One of the most important lessons we should take from all the things we *do* know about how racism works is that, if we're truly going to end it, we need to dismantle a broad range of existing institutions and replace them with something better.

**Obstacle #4.** We need to move beyond our common tendency to focus our attention (and wrath) on individual villains. The left has arguably been

much better at scapegoating individual people for their racist deeds and words than at teaching those people how to move through the world in less harmful ways; much better at pointing to the racist policies and practices of various institutions than at getting those institutions to think and act more inclusively. We are quick to dogpile on individual ‘bad actors’, but we’re flummoxed by how to get ordinary white people even to *see* the racism all around them (much less to do something about it). We can call out racist police brutality and political gerrymandering and urban segregation, but we seem utterly impotent when it comes to transforming the institutions that perpetuate those things.

More pointedly, our tendency to parade the heads of individual villains around on a metaphorical pike only serves to reinforce the notion that racism is about individuals rather than institutions. For instance, ‘shock jock’ radio personality Don Imus could (briefly) lose his job for describing the Rutgers women’s basketball team as ‘nappy headed hos’, but the institutions that made his career possible – the networks he worked for, the sponsors who helped pay for his show, and the broader industries that those corporations are part of – didn’t have to change how they do business in any substantial fashion. As Michael Awkward argues, national politicians and media outlets were very quick (and very efficient) to reframe themselves as sympathetic figures who were keen to ‘do the right thing’ by supporting the calls for Imus to be fired.<sup>18</sup> But the major result of this particular morality play was simply to deflect attention away from the larger structural and institutional forms of racism that had made Imus’ career possible in the first place. Imus’ downfall didn’t spell the end of ‘shock jock’ radio or ‘politically incorrect’ talk shows. The sponsors who dropped him didn’t suddenly shift their economic weight to support people and organisations working for racial justice. Sacrificing Imus merely allowed these institutional players to claim they were ‘doing the right thing’, without having to change anything substantive about their own racist practices.

**Obstacle #5.** Perhaps the biggest hurdle we face, though, is that we’ve got no viable plan for the ‘what happens next?’ part of the story. In a somewhat different (albeit related) context, Meaghan Morris has posed the question by noting that ‘even the most lucid dissatisfaction cannot tell us *how* to take that next step, or *how* to keep going along whatever line we are on’ and wondering ‘what material forces can sustain people’s political desires in the grinding economy we now inhabit?’<sup>19</sup> And in yet another different (yet also related) context, Larry Grossberg has insisted that we need to do better at imagining a positive politics for the future. Such visions, he argues, ‘are important because both the right and the left have been fighting a negative politics for too long: the right fighting against liberalism, the left fighting against social and economic injustices. Many of the apparent positive politics of each side are simply the negation of the negation’.<sup>20</sup>

18. Michael Awkward, *Burying Don Imus: Anatomy of a scapegoat*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

19. Meaghan Morris, ‘On the power of exhilaration’, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 14, 3, 2013, pp449-452, p450.

20. Lawrence Grossberg, *Under the cover of chaos: Trump and the battle for the American right*, London, Pluto Press, 2018, p143.

But what does a *positive* politics around race look like? Not just the negation of racism (though, to be clear, that would still be good to achieve), but what should happen to race and racial identity in a world that really does manage to move beyond racism? Does race simply disappear entirely, in some version of the ‘colour-blind’ society that so many people claim to want? Or does race become a form of difference that we still recognise without simultaneously being something that we use to establish hierarchies between people? At the moment, neither of these scenarios seems to be remotely possible – which makes it hard to choose between them in a meaningful way. How do we work towards building a better future when we can’t imagine the shape of that future well enough to create it (much less to know if we’re actually moving in the right direction)? These are questions that, on the whole, we haven’t considered as thoroughly as we should.

One of the major exceptions to this tendency comes from Paul Gilroy, who suggests an end-goal – an end to race entirely – and makes a convincing (to me anyway) case for why such an endgame is the one we should be aiming for (short version: racialised thinking is too tightly articulated to misguided notions of purity and nationalism *not* to lead inexorably in the direction of fascism, and this is as true for visions of racial pride that come from oppressed communities of colour as it is for such visions when espoused by eugenics-loving white folks)... but he’s also got no plan for how we get there.<sup>21</sup> To be clear, I can’t (and don’t) fault Gilroy for this it’s a huge problem to fix, and he’s under no obligation to be the person who finally figures out how to blow up the Death Star – but his polemic serves as a good example of how the best we can generally do is to point to some version of our ideal destination, in the hopes that imagining it hard enough and long enough might eventually help us find (or build) the path that actually lets us reach it.

Part of the lesson that I take from Gilroy is that we should be aiming for a post-racist (rather than a post-racial) world: i.e., something more than just a version of our current world where people are somehow no longer able to see (or at least to care about) race or racial difference, but not much (if anything) else needs to be changed. In the US (and elsewhere too, of course, but the US’ specific inflections of these articulations are the ones I have in mind here), race is too tightly articulated to class for us to dismantle systems of hierarchy and oppression around the former without also doing the same for the systems that create and maintain massive inequalities of wealth. Similarly, race is too tightly articulated to problematic norms around gender roles – e.g., the strong, assertive male; the hyper-sexualised female – and family structures (the persistent claims that the ‘problems’ of black America are rooted in the destruction of ‘traditional’ families) for racism to go away without us also dismantling patriarchy and heteronormativity. And so on. And so on. And so on. Part of what makes a positive politics of race hard to conceptualise is just how radical such a project is. Given how deeply interwoven racism is with capitalism, patriarchy, imperialism, xenophobia, heterosexism, religious

21. Paul Gilroy, *Against race: Imagining political cultural beyond the colour line*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2000.

intolerance, classism (and so on), any social order where racism is *really* dead is going to be so dramatically different from the social order we know that it's hard – if not impossible – to imagine what such a world will look like or how it will operate.

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Given all the above, it's not surprising that I don't have a happy, uplifting conclusion: certainly nothing like the catharsis of blowing up the Death Star and giving everyone medals for saving the Rebellion. Once again, our current 'solutions' for racism are nothing more than coping mechanisms. This doesn't make them worthless – they're still absolutely necessary – but finding a way to survive in a white supremacist culture is not the same thing as figuring out how to get rid of white supremacy for good.

And maybe that's all we ever get. Maybe we have to learn to live with that.

We need to assume that this is an ongoing struggle, and that we will not win it tomorrow, or next year, or – in all probability – in our lifetimes. What we're trying to produce is a paradigmatic shift in the social, cultural, and political order that, by necessity, if we're ever fortunate enough to bring it about, will roll out slowly over decades, rather than appearing as a fully formed new utopia after a short, sudden burst of action. And so we probably need to let go of our implicit desire for a 'solution' that works as quickly and magically as blowing up the Death Star.

It's also possible – if we *really* want to be honest about it – that we *never* get to a place where racism is gone. It's proven to be too resilient to believe that it won't find a way to survive whatever resistance we might throw at it. If we're lucky, we may eventually get to a place where racism is more of a minor, low-grade, localised form of injustice than it is a pervasive, systemic force of global oppression and violence. But we're nowhere near that goal today. And even if we manage to get there, we will still need to remain vigilant in order to keep racism in check. Whatever victories we may enjoy in the future, after all, are by no means guaranteed to be permanent.

Still, the world really would be a better place if we *could* kill off racism for good. And so we need to keep trying. To keep struggling. To keep fighting. Part of what I've always taken Gramsci's notion of 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will' to mean is that we need to be intellectually honest enough to understand how badly the deck is stacked against us, humble enough to accept that our struggles will almost certainly fall far short of our ideal goals, and yet hopeful enough to keep struggling. We may not ever defeat racism, even if the Force is somehow with us, but racism will certainly survive – and grow – if we don't continue to fight back against it anyway.

Fighting back effectively, though, requires us to be honest with ourselves about how little we *really* know about the task ahead, and to do more – much more – than we have to this point to figure out how to *fix* the sprawling,

tangled web of problems that is racism once and for all. As Hall puts it in *Whites of Their Eyes*:

My own view is that we hardly begin to know how to conduct a popular anti-racist struggle or how to bend the twig of racist common sense which currently dominates popular thinking. It is a lesson we had better learn pretty rapidly (p52).

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