

The limits of white liberal antiracism mean that combatting structural racial inequality must be about building power, not sympathy



In the wake of the police murder of George Floyd in May of 2020, many Americans took to the streets under the banner of “Black Lives Matter” to protest deep-seated racial injustices that, unfortunately, are commonplace in American society. Notably, an overwhelming number of white Americans also participated in the protests – but did this mean that they were finally ready to match their antiracist rhetoric with action? [Jared Clemons](#), a scholar of Black political thought, provides a theoretical account of white antiracism, and argues that despite their antiracist sentiments, so long as white liberals are unwilling to sacrifice their own familial capital, meaningful antiracist strategies must seek to change the political-economic conditions in society that produce racial inequality.

In July 2020, a few weeks after protests erupted in response to George Floyd’s police murder, Betsy Hodges, mayor of Minneapolis from 2014-2018, [penned an op-ed](#) in the *New York Times* titled “As Mayor Minneapolis, I Saw How White Liberals Block Change.” In it, Hodges claimed that “despite believing we (white Liberals) are saying and doing the right things, (we) have resisted the systemic changes our cities have needed for decades.” Instead, Hodges continued, white liberals have often “settled for illusions of change.”

The Principle-Policy Gap: The Difference Between Talk and Action

What Hodges called attention to is what social scientists call [the principle-policy gap](#), or the chasm between individuals’ abstract principles and their unwillingness to support policies that would fulfill those principles (known as the referred to as the principle-implementation gap). Why many white Americans—particularly those who espouse racially egalitarian principles, in this case, white liberals—harbor a principle-policy gap on matters of racial equality has preoccupied social scientists since explicit forms of racial discrimination were dismantled during the high-water mark of the Civil Rights Movement.

Many researchers locate the source of the principle-policy gap in white Americans’ so-called “racial attitudes.” The underlying assumption is that if white Americans harbor positive views of Black Americans, these positive racial attitudes should predict support for policies or efforts to address structural racial inequality. If they do not, the instruments used to measure these attitudes (typically survey questionnaires) must be updated to uncover “true” attitudes. If attitudes are *actually* improving, the logic goes, so, too, should racial inequality.

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Jared Clemons of Duke University writes that the limits of white liberal antiracism mean that combatting structural racial inequality must be about building power, not sympathy.

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The Privatization of Racial Responsibility: A Theory of Contemporary White Antiracism

Of course, one need not be a social scientist to see that although most white Americans [believe in racial equality](#), at least in the abstract, structural racial inequality still exists and, in many cases, has gotten [worse](#) since the modern Civil Rights Movement. To explain why, my theory, *the privatization of racial responsibility* argues that the primary driver of the principle-policy gap among white liberal Americans isn't the negative racial attitudes they might have about Black people but arises instead because many acts of antiracism would require them to forgo what they consider to be their material security. In doing so, I build upon the insights of Martin Luther King, Jr. and A. Philip Randolph, two giants of the modern Civil Rights Movement, to argue that meaningful antiracist strategies must emphasize changing the political-economic conditions that produce racial inequality rather than the hearts and minds of white liberals, or anybody for that matter.

King and Randolph understood that racism wasn't simply a matter of white racial prejudice but was also rooted in inherently unequal capitalist processes. And since Black people, due to historical legacies of racism, were [overrepresented](#) among poor and working Americans most adversely affected by these processes, they concluded that antiracism had to grapple with these exploitative practices. More still, they had seen the limits of white liberals' sympathetic antiracist gestures and understood that the way to improve the lives of Black people would be through organizing *all* poor and working people, including white Americans, who shared similar material interests and could struggle collectively in furthering those interests. In King and Randolph's estimation, antiracism was about building solidarity among poor and working people of all racial backgrounds rather than imploring white liberal professionals to relinquish their economic privilege, which they viewed as a political dead-end.

And yet, I argue that contemporary antiracism often amounts to just that. To that end, many areas in which racial inequalities remain entrenched because better-resourced individuals—disproportionately white—find ways to accumulate the wealth which can hopefully guarantee a life of material comfort for themselves and their families, which I shorthand as *familial capital*. These forms of capital include not only money but also social and human capital (such as education credentials) and other wealth-building assets (like homeownership). And since these forms of capital have increasingly come to [stand in](#) for a more robust social safety net, few Americans are willing to forgo this capital, even if doing so might be the more principled thing to do. As a result, I argue that white liberal Americans who are principally committed to antiracist aims will engage in antiracist acts to the extent that doing so does not require them to sacrifice their familial capital; hence, their penchant for symbolic gestures. Of course, King and Randolph understood that few Americans would be willing to make sacrifices of this sort, which is why they were adamant about building a working-class, cross-racial movement based upon shared material interests.

Heeding Martin Luther King, Jr. and A. Philip Randolph's Teachings

While King and Randolph did not live to see America transition into the [neoliberal order](#)—marked by growing inequality (racial and general), a comparatively weak social safety net, and a labor movement that, [until very recently](#), was disciplined by private, monied interests—they knew that the best and perhaps only hope for combatting structural racial inequality was through the collective action of Black and other working-class Americans seeking to make changes to the capitalist economy. This recognition is what led A. Philip Randolph to spearhead (alongside Bayard Rustin) the [Freedom Budget for All Americans](#) in 1966. This plan to eradicate poverty argued that the federal government's refusal to address Black poverty—and by extension, *all* poverty—was a matter of political will rather than political means. This explains why King made the *Freedom Budget* the centerpiece of his ultimately ill-fated, but ambitious [Poor People's Campaign](#). Politics, to both men, was ultimately about power rather than principles alone.

Many white liberal Americans undoubtedly harbor antiracist sentiments. However, as long as capitalism continues unabated with wealth [increasingly accruing to the top](#) and federal social provisions remaining weak, the odds of those antiracist principles translating into support for antiracist policies—in other words, the closing of the principle-policy gap—will likely be beyond reach. For as King and Randolph understood, the antiracism of white liberal Americans had its limits. If [recent labor organizing](#) is any indication, however, it seems that many Americans committed to a more just world are beginning to recognize the same.

- *This article is based on the paper, 'From "Freedom Now!" to "Black Lives Matter": Retrieving King and Randolph to Theorize Contemporary White Antiracism', in Perspectives on Politics*

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