

Disruption: What Is It Good For?

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This article challenges a common understanding of the role that political disruption plays in promoting large-scale change. It argues that the most basic political work disruption performs is not to win public sympathy but instead to interrupt privileged people's motivated ignorance. Drawing on examples from the Civil Rights and Black Lives Matter Movements, it makes the case that successful political disruption involves three steps. First, a group of political actors coordinate to withdraw cooperation from an epistemic power relationship, which enables motivated ignorance. Second, this act of epistemic disruption brings latent conflicts to the surface and forces members of dominant groups to take sides. Third, the resulting change in the political agenda enables subordinated actors to negotiate with the politically powerful. The article explains why disruption can be politically effective, even when it fails to win widespread public sympathy.

The High Cotton restaurant in downtown Charleston, South Carolina, was serving its popular weekend brunch on April 12, 2015, a week after the fatal shooting of Walter Scott in nearby North Charleston. Scott, an unarmed black man, had been fatally shot in the back as he fled from white police officer Michael Slager, who had pulled him over for a routine traffic stop. Slager initially claimed to have shot Scott in self-defense, but a passerby caught the incident on video and eventually released that video to the media. Scott's shooting was one in a string of highly publicized incidents of police violence against black Americans over the course of the previous year.

That Sunday in April, however, the diners at the High Cotton were thinking of nicer things: things like crab cakes Benedict and brioche French toast with whipped cream and berries. A video shot at the restaurant shows white women in brightly colored dresses and blazers and white men in "business casual"—khakis or dress pants with button-down shirts or polo shirts—seated at white linen-covered tables, surrounded by the High Cotton's palm trees, paddle fans, and exposed brick walls.¹

It was time for Black Brunch. Conceived in Oakland in late 2014, Black Brunch was a tactic adopted by Black Lives Matter (BLM) activists in early 2015, first in Oakland and New York, then in San Francisco, Baltimore, Atlanta, St. Louis, and other

cities and suburbs throughout the United States. The action targeted what the organizers called "white spaces": upscale restaurants in gentrified neighborhoods and other predominantly white enclaves. Its goal was to "help black people across the US to carry the weight of their pain to communities and to people who otherwise never have to think or feel for [them]."²

At the High Cotton that Sunday, about two dozen activists—all young, most (but not all) black, most dressed in dark colors—filed silently through the restaurant's bar and into its main dining room, where they stood around the perimeter, facing the seated customers. "The time is now," announced one of the activists, a black woman, "and every space is appropriate!" The rest of the group, holding papers from which they read, chanted in unison: "No more business as usual! Black boys are dying! Black girls are dying! Black bodies are falling every 28 hours!"

The diners looked visibly uncomfortable.

A second black woman read: "We the people, in order to form a more perfect union, demand that all those who believe in freedom, fight back!"

A third speaker intoned: "Police violence against the black community is a human rights violation of the highest regard! US police officers kill unarmed black men, women, and children at the same rate that the Ku Klux Klan did at the height of their activity in the 1960s!"

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1. This description of the action at the High Cotton draws on the video "Black Brunch at High Cotton in Charleston, SC," <http://bit.ly/1Esi0sf> (accessed November 1, 2018).

2. Organizers used the phrase "white spaces" in interviews with the media (e.g., Moyer and Kirkpatrick 2015), but in their written statement about the action, they used the more precise phrase "space in areas that are predominantly non-Black" (Blackout Collective 2014).

The Journal of Politics, volume 82, number 2. Published online January 31, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1086/706766>

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“This is apartheid,” the group chanted. “We charge genocide!”

Black Brunch at the High Cotton lasted a total of four and a half minutes. It was timed, as were other Black Brunch actions, to recall the four and a half hours that the body of black teenager Michael Brown had lain on the street in Ferguson the previous summer. As the protesters read the names and ages of black victims of state-enacted and state-enabled violence—“Michael Brown, 18 years old, Ferguson, Missouri”; “Travon Martin, 17 years old, Sanford, Florida”; “Rekia Boyd, 22, Chicago, Illinois”; “Tamir Rice, 12 years old, Cleveland, Ohio”—one diner, a white, middle-aged man, stood up from his table and walked away. The video recording of the action is briefly interrupted by a white hand, which waves in front of the lens, temporarily obstructing the field of view. Still, the video clearly shows most of the restaurant’s diners as they look around the room, away from the activists, or stare intently at their menus or their tables.

The recitation of victims’ names ended with those of three people whom police had killed in or near Charleston. The third and final was Walter Scott. “Police violence happens here, too,” one of the activists declared. “Walter Scott was the father of four. He served in the Coast Guard as an officer and was recently engaged to marry his long-term girlfriend. He was shot eight times in the back by a North Charleston police officer, Michael Slager, who then planted false evidence on Mr. Scott’s body.”

Black Brunch at the High Cotton ended with an invitation to the diners to “Stand now and chant with us if you believe that black lives matter.” But from the video, it appears that none of the restaurant’s customers stood up or chanted.

POWER AND DISRUPTION

The central question this article asks is: “What is disruption good for?” In other words, what can it accomplish politically, and how? The article’s claim is that disruptive political actions, like Black Brunch at the High Cotton, can help shift the terms of public political discourse, by compelling a subset of members of the public to pay attention to things that they are motivated to ignore.

I open with Black Brunch, rather than an iconic act of political disruption, like the Flint sit-down strike of 1936–37, or the Southern Christian Leadership Council’s (SCLC) 1963 Birmingham campaign, because my aim is to identify the most basic work disruptive politics perform. Black Brunch was small in scale; it did not bring a major industry to a halt, the way the auto plant strikes did in the 1930s. It was also controversial; it did not win widespread public sympathy and support, like the SCLC’s Birmingham campaign. Indeed,

many commenters in the popular press—not just conservatives but also liberals and left-liberals—dismissed the action out of hand. For example, on the *Talking Points Memo* blog, many readers suggested Black Brunch was a failure. One wrote, “None of the restaurants involved, nor any of the patrons as far as I know, had anything to do with the deaths of Michael Brown or Eric Garner” and asked, rhetorically, “Did any of the people in the restaurants support the grand jury verdicts or the actions of the police? . . . We have no way of knowing.” Another reader commented, “I’d probably express solidarity and all, but this ‘tactic’ doesn’t strike me as all that effective. This isn’t a lunch counter sit-in; this is just acting like an ass to make sure your words get attention.”³

“This isn’t a lunch counter sit-in.” The second reader’s comment is typical of critiques of Black Brunch in that it draws attention to the way the activists presented themselves, the way they staged their action. The Brunch interrupters, this comment suggests, were unsympathetic, compared to the professionally dressed university students who sat quietly at the whites-only lunch counter in Greensboro a half century before.

Doug McAdam, a pioneer in the scholarly study of social movements, likely would agree. In an important piece in which he critiques what he calls the “ideational bias” of most research on social movements, McAdam (1996) outlines his understanding of the political work performed by disruptive actions.⁴ In McAdam’s view, disruption effects change when it presents onlookers with a clear-cut confrontation between good and evil. To be successful, disruption must win the public’s sympathy, by pitting morally worthy activists (like peaceful university students) against unsympathetic antiheroes (like white segregationists). In his telling, such staging was critical to the SCLC’s success in Birmingham. It helped the activists garner sympathetic attention from what he calls a “bystander public,” especially from white liberals in the North, who watched television broadcasts of the Birmingham police siccing attack dogs on peaceful protesters and training high-pressure fire hoses on schoolchildren.

McAdam’s argument spells out the intuition that informs many popular critiques of Black Brunch and other similar actions. Disruption effects change, McAdam writes, when it stages a “stark, highly dramatic . . . confrontation between

3. “Discussion: The Latest Venue for Anti-Police Brutality Protests: Your Fav Brunch Spot.” <http://bit.ly/2AbuCj3> (accessed November 14, 2018).

4. By “ideational bias,” McAdam (1996, 340–41) means “an almost exclusive concern with ideas and their formal expression by movement actors” in “speeches, writings, statements, or other formal ideological pronouncements.”

good and evil” (1996, 347). Such staging attracts favorable media attention and wins the public’s sympathy. And then (because in a democracy the elected officials care what the public wants), it moves policy.

If this view is right, then perhaps Black Brunch at the High Cotton was a failure. It would be a stretch to say that the activists in Charleston “staged a dramatic confrontation between good and evil.” The brunch-goers were not unsympathetic, the way the white hecklers in Greensboro were, or the way Birmingham’s infamous Commissioner of Public Safety, Eugene “Bull” Connor, was. And one need not go all the way with the *Talking Points Memo* reader and say that participating in Black Brunch amounts to “acting like an ass” to see the difference between sitting quietly at a lunch counter and interrupting others while they eat.

But before jumping to the conclusion that Black Brunch was ineffective, let us consider an alternative account of how disruption yields political change: this one from Frances Fox Piven, the sociologist and activist who is best known as the cocreator, together with her late husband, Richard Cloward, of the “Cloward-Piven strategy.” The strategy was a plan from the mid-1960s to flood the rolls of local welfare agencies, generating a fiscal crisis that Cloward and Piven thought would compel the Democratic Party to enact antipoverty legislation ([1966] 2010). The pair first outlined their strategy in a 1966 article in which they explained: “We ordinarily think of major legislation as taking form only through established electoral processes. We tend to overlook the force of crisis in precipitating legislative reform, partly because we lack a theoretical framework by which to understand the impact of major disruptions” (Cloward and Piven [1966] 2010).

Piven went on, after her husband’s death, to develop such a theoretical framework, arguing that, to understand the impact of disruption, we must begin by thinking about power (Piven 2006). Piven’s central claim is that power relations run, not just top to bottom, but also bottom to top. In other words, it is not simply the case that people who are subordinate depend upon, and are vulnerable to, people who are dominant. Dominant people also depend upon the subordinate to cooperate in an ongoing manner. That makes them vulnerable to threats by subordinate people to withdraw their cooperation. In Piven’s words, “Agricultural workers depend on landowners, but landowners also depend on agricultural workers, just as industrial capitalists depend on workers, the prince depends in some measure on the urban crowd, merchants depend on customers, husbands depend on wives, masters depend on slaves” and so on (Piven 2006, 20).

Anyone who has taught students, or supervised workers, or even minded small children will recognize the insight. The subordinate can impose costs upon the dominant if they act

together to withdraw their cooperation from power relations that render them mutually dependent. That’s what political disruption is, on Frances Fox Piven’s account: withdrawing cooperation from interdependent relations.

To see how it works, let us compare her model of successful political disruption with McAdam’s. For McAdam, disruption works, in the sense that it yields political change, when three things happen:

- First, a group of political actors stage a conflict, which they calculate will be widely perceived as a contest between good and evil.
- Second, their calculation proves right. The disruptive action wins sympathetic attention from a bystander public, which is moved to support the activists’ ends.
- Third, the change in public opinion transforms the political calculus for people who hold or who aspire to hold elected office. They respond by changing their political platforms, in the case of candidates, or in the case of public officials, the political decisions they make.

Note that, in this model, disruption is contained in the first step. It is the face-to-face confrontation between activists, like the students at the lunch counter, and their immediate opponents, like the owner of Woolworth’s. In step two, that act of disruption has a communicative effect. Because of the way it is staged, it communicates a message about the moral worthiness of the two sides, and that message wins public sympathy and support. Then, in the third and final step, the shift in public attitudes influences politicians, who respond by changing their platforms and policies.

Piven’s model is different, and it is different at every step. To begin, it is not her view that a successful act of disruption must stage a conflict between good and evil. She does not even claim that successful disruption must be staged, in the sense that it must take the form of a confrontation that plays out before an audience. Imagine a boycott that is highly disruptive of a business or industry, or maybe a strike that wins major concessions from an employer, but that takes place “behind the scenes,” or out of the public eye. Piven’s view is that subordinate people can coordinate to withdraw cooperation from power relations, and they can do that to great political effect, without staging a public confrontation with the people who dominate them.

Of course, Piven might agree that part of the success of the actions in Greensboro and Birmingham came from the contrast that they drew between peaceful protesters and violent racists. Yet the fact that such staging worked in those cases does not mean it is necessary in order for disruption to effect

change. On Piven's view, all that is necessary is that the subordinate (e.g., black Americans in the midcentury South) act collectively to withdraw cooperation from some power relation or set of power relations that depend on it (the Jim Crow system).

What about steps two and three? They are not necessary either. Sometimes—as in the case of the behind-the-scenes strike—the subordinate can get a win just by coordinating to withdraw cooperation. That said, when it comes to disruption that drives major political change—change like the abolition of slavery, the introduction of social welfare programs, or the passage of civil rights legislation—on Piven's view, that takes more.

Why? Because what looks like a simple, direct relationship between some powerful agents (e.g., white Southerners at midcentury) and the people they dominate (Southern blacks) very often is embedded in a network of rules, norms, and institutions that bolster it and give it form. The racial order of the Jim Crow South was one such network. It was backed by the power of the American state. It involved laws, policies, and institutions made at a distance from places like Greensboro and Birmingham. That means that the Jim Crow system implicated many people who were not actively involved in enforcing racial segregation. For example, elected officials in Washington, DC, cooperated to help support Jim Crow. So did the voters—including the liberal white Northerners—who elected them. Northern whites may have seemed uninvolved in what happened at the Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina. They may have appeared to have been no more than innocent "bystanders." This is especially the case for those who did not take sides, for example, by expressing political opinions for or against civil rights legislation. But if so, on Piven's telling, that is because elites, including the national leaders of both major American parties, exercised political power to keep the divisive civil rights issue off the agenda.

What political scientists call "agenda-setting power" plays an important role in Piven's model of successful large-scale disruption. In the United States, she writes, the structure of the two-party system incentivizes political elites to suppress conflicts that threaten their capacities to construct and maintain electoral majorities. She argues that successful American social movements challenge the parties' agenda-setting power. In her words, they "raise the conflictual issues that party leaders avoid, and temporarily shatter the conservative tendencies of two-party politics. . . . Where politicians seek to narrow the parameters of political discussion, of the range of issues that are properly considered political problems and of the sorts of remedies available, movements can expand the political universe by bringing entirely new issues to the fore

and by forcing new remedies into consideration" (2006, 104). The midcentury civil rights movement may have won the sympathetic attention of some white voters, as McAdam suggests. But its more basic accomplishment was to force a set of political issues onto the agenda that, for decades, party elites had suppressed.

Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz famously argued that power has a hidden "second face" (Bachrach and Baratz 1962, 1963). People exercise power, not just by winning conflicts but also by preventing potential conflicts from arising. Piven's claim is that even power's second face runs, not just top to bottom but also bottom to top. Elites depend on the masses to cooperate in their agenda-setting schemes. That makes them vulnerable to the withdrawal of such cooperation. In the midcentury United States, the SCLC and other civil rights groups coordinated to withdraw cooperation from party elites' agenda setting and, in so doing, challenged the framework that defined the boundaries of American political discourse. This second kind of disruption—the disruption of agenda-setting power—is the second step in Piven's model.

It connects directly to the third and final step: disrupting electoral coalitions. By the time of the actions in Greensboro in 1960 and Birmingham in 1963, the national Democratic party included black voters and white liberals in the North, as well as staunchly anti-civil rights white Southerners. The last thing national party elites wanted was to take a stand one way or the other on civil rights. But when activists forced that issue onto the agenda, they forced elites to take sides. The Democratic party acted on civil rights in the mid-1960s, not only because activists won public sympathy and support but also because they disrupted elites' agenda-setting power.

In sum, Piven's model of a successful act of political disruption looks roughly like this:

- First, a group of political actors coordinate to withdraw cooperation from a power relationship in which they participate.
- Second, this disruptive act disrupts elites' agenda-setting schemes. It forces onto the political agenda issues and problems that elites prefer to suppress.
- Third, the disruption of electoral coalitions transforms the political calculus for people who hold or who aspire to hold elected office. They respond by changing their political platforms, in the case of candidates, or in the case of public officials, the political decisions they make.

MOTIVATED IGNORANCE

What difference does that make? How might Piven's view change the way that we think about an action like Black

Brunch at the High Cotton? Black Brunch did not stage a dramatic confrontation between good and evil, recall, and it is far from clear that the action won the sympathy of a bystander public. But if what really matters is withdrawing cooperation from power relations, then perhaps it may have been politically efficacious after all.

Or perhaps not. Recall the *Talking Points Memo* reader's rhetorical question: "Did any of the people in the restaurants support the grand jury verdicts or the actions of the police?" We might translate this worry into Piven's terms by asking: "To be effective, doesn't disruption have to target people who exercise power, or at the very least, people who approve and endorse, and thus indirectly support, its exercise?" Perhaps Black Brunch activists missed the mark, the suggestion seems to be, when they disrupted whomever happened to be dining in "white spaces," rather than people who exercise, or who at the very least condone, racialized state violence.

On the face of it, this critique may seem compelling. But in this section, I want to suggest that it is misguided: that Black Brunch activists did withdraw cooperation from an important power relationship, and that the people they targeted were key participants in that relationship. Once we acknowledge the political significance of agenda setting, we see that the people whom McAdam calls the "bystander public"—people like the brunch goers at the High Cotton in Charleston—are not nearly as impotent as that phrase might imply. Public inattention enables elites' agenda-setting power. And to sustain public inattention, members of the public must cooperate in an ongoing way. When a subset of the public withdraws that cooperation, compelling other members of the public to heed a claim like "Black bodies are falling every 28 hours!" they exercise political power from below.⁵

To see why, let us begin by imagining that one of the customers in the video of Black Brunch at the High Cotton is politically very liberal. He is an upper middle-class white man, let us say, who has had no personal experience with police harassment but who believes, on principle, that excessive police force is wrong and strongly disapproves of racial inequality and discrimination. Imagine this man did not support the grand jury verdicts in Ferguson and Staten Island and thinks what Michael Slager did to Walter Scott in North Charleston was morally reprehensible.

Even if we imagine that this man holds these beliefs, we would hardly expect them to occupy his mind all, or even

most, of the time. Instead, we would assume that, as he goes about his day, he focuses on what he is doing and thinks about matters at hand. Perhaps on this Sunday in April, he is thinking about his teenage daughter, who will be applying to colleges in the fall. Maybe he and his wife took her to brunch in order to have a talk with her about her school work. They were hoping to persuade her to work harder, to try to bring up her grades. As the man takes his seat at the table, he thinks about how best to broach this potentially sensitive topic. Then he notices the waiter approaching and refocuses. He thinks about food.

Our hypothetical diner holds many principled beliefs. When those beliefs are activated, they can shape his opinions. But that does not mean that he is usually attentive to, or even consciously aware of, the myriad ways that the world around him violates his principles. Nor does it mean that when he acts politically—when he decides which candidates to support, for example, or when he talks politics with his friends and neighbors—those beliefs are all operative.

Let's go back to the video of Black Brunch at the High Cotton and watch it again from the start. We see the backs of the protesters, who are walking, single file, on the sidewalk outside the restaurant. They turn and enter. Then they pass through the bar area and file through a door that leads to the High Cotton's main dining room. The hypothetical diner would have traced this very path when he entered the restaurant and walked with his family to their table. Did he notice what we now notice, when we shift our attention and focus on the members of the restaurant staff, whom we can see in the background? Each of the eight uniformed servers who are visible in the video is white. Seven of the eight are white men.

It would not be surprising, however, if the (very liberal, white) diner had not noticed. Remember, his attention was on the conversation he and his wife were about to have with their daughter. And, of course, the staffing pattern at the High Cotton is hardly out of the ordinary. Throughout the American restaurant industry, employers disproportionately hire white men to work as servers in upscale restaurants, while they hire white women to staff midpriced, full-service restaurants, and men and women of color for low-paying kitchen, bussing, and fast-food jobs (see, e.g., Restaurant Opportunities Center of Seattle 2015). This pattern violates the man's ethical principles, but that does not mean that it catches his attention.

Nor is the man attentive to every violation of his principles when he acts in his capacity as a democratic citizen. Some of his principles sometimes shape his political choices and actions. Sometimes they influence political decisions he makes, even to the point where they prompt him to act against his material self-interest. Perhaps, by this point in the spring of 2015, he has decided to vote for Bernie Sanders in the upcoming Democratic primary. Maybe one reason is that he endorses

5. Here I depart from Piven, who draws a sharp distinction between speech, which she notes can change public discourse, and disruption, defined as refusing to perform one's duties (e.g., failing to report to work) and thus interrupting the functioning of social institutions. See, e.g., Piven (2014, 2017). As I argue in the third section, one important form of disruption this distinction elides is the epistemic disruption of motivated ignorance.

Sanders's proposal for a more progressive income tax, even though, if implemented, that plan would increase his own marginal tax rate. Still, it is entirely possible, on this Sunday in April, four months before BLM activists will interrupt a Sanders rally in Seattle, that this liberal white voter has not noticed that his candidate's platform has no racial justice plank. In that respect, it resembles the platform of every contender for his party's nomination. If we could travel back in time and ask the brunch goer where Bernie Sanders stands on racial justice—if we could ask him what Hillary Clinton's positions are on matters like racial profiling, or racial disparities in criminal sentencing—if we could interrupt his brunch and shift his focus, even just briefly, this liberal white diner might think about it and realize that he does not know.

To be sure, there are innumerable things that the diner does not know. Some of what he does not know, he does not know because he trusts other people (like medical experts) to know it for him. Some of what he does not know, he does not know because it lies beyond the current limits of human knowledge. And some of what he does not know, he does not know simply because, given limits to his time, energy, and cognitive capacities, it is not among the things that he has decided that he needs or wants to know. The term “willful ignorance,” which is used in law, psychology, and moral philosophy, and which has worked its way into the popular lexicon, is not meant to signal forms of ignorance like these (Charlow 1992; Lynch 2016; Sarch 2015).⁶ Instead, willful ignorance involves the attempt to avoid liability (law) or a subjective sense of guilt (psychology) or the cognizance of one's moral culpability (philosophy) through the refusal to know some unsettling, and typically compromising, truth.

Perhaps I am a business owner, and I am willfully ignorant of the discriminatory hiring practices of one of my managers. He gets the job done, and on a certain level, I do not want to know how. Or perhaps, in my capacity as a consumer, I am willfully ignorant of the poor conditions under which the workers who make my clothing labor or of the suffering of the animals whose meat I eat. I like the clothing. I like the meat. They are both cheap, and they are easy to procure, and I really do not want to know the details about how they get made. In each of these cases, I fail to attend to and to fully acknowledge something that I might, in principle, comprehend. But my not knowing is qualitatively different from my not knowing something I consciously have decided not to know.

If you were to tell me that you think that anyone who calls herself a political scientist ought to know some basic facts, and that among those facts is the exact size of the US federal

budget deficit, I would tell you—rather unabashedly—that I disagree. If you then said that, as of today, the projected deficit for fiscal year 2020 is \$1.1 trillion, I likely would forget. But if you told me that one of my managers routinely makes racist comments about job applicants, or that I just purchased clothing from a company that is notorious for exploiting sweatshop labor, or that the chicken on my plate lived its short life confined to a massively overcrowded, windowless shed, my reaction would be different. I might offer excuses. I might try to make myself look—and feel—better, by protesting that I would not have hired the manager, or bought the clothing, or ordered the chicken if only I had known. I might claim that for some reason these were especially difficult things for me to know or point out that many other people also do not know these sorts of things. I might protest that there are just too many morally relevant facts for anyone to know all of them. But what I would not do is tell you that I choose not to know and then try to defend the validity of that choice. Nor would I easily forget what you had told me.

These are examples of the kind of ignorance that the philosopher Charles Mills has in mind when he writes of “*an ignorance that resists . . . an ignorance that fights back . . . an ignorance that is active, dynamic, that refuses to go quietly*” (2007, 13, emphasis in original; see also Mills 1997, 1999). Mills emphasizes that willful ignorance gains support from people's internalized beliefs and assumptions, and he stresses that it is reinforced by what he calls the “concepts” through which we perceive and make sense of the world. When Europeans colonized the Americas, Mills writes, they spoke “with no sense of absurdity of ‘empty’ lands that [were] actually teeming with millions of people, of ‘discovering’ countries whose inhabitants already existed.” He continues: “Even seemingly straightforward empirical perception will be affected—the myth of a nation of hunters in contradiction to widespread Native American agriculture that saved the English colonists' lives, the myth of stateless savages in contradiction to forms of government from which the white Founders arguably learned, the myth of a pristine wilderness in contradiction to a humanized landscape transformed by thousands of years of labor” (Mills 2007, 27). Concepts like “savage,” his claim is, “orient us to the world” (27). They enable us to not see and thus to not know even readily evident truths, since “it is not a matter of seeing the phenomenon with the concept discretely attached but rather of seeing things through the concept itself” (27).

Consider a concept like “meat.” Meat shapes my perception of that object on my plate. It helps me to see it as food and to disassociate it from the sentient creature that, on some level, I know it used to be. Even if it were relatively easy for me to learn the facts that might influence my ethical thinking about my consumption of that object—if, for example, there

6. See also Hayward (2017), on which the discussion in this section draws.

were a free app that would identify the exact farm where my chicken had been raised and the precise practices that had been used to produce it—everything we know about human psychology suggests that it is highly likely that I would refrain from doing so. Hence, Mills’s emphasis on the tenacity of willful ignorance. Surely, he is right on that count. Yet at the same time, my ignorance only does the work that I want it to do—it only lets me eat the chicken (and wear the clothing, and retain the manager) while continuing to regard myself as an ethical person—if I am doubly ignorant. I not only need to not know; I also need to not know that I do not know (Tuana 2006).

If, like me, you do not know the US federal budget deficit—if you learned it just a few paragraphs back, when I mentioned it in passing—stop for a moment now and try to recall what it is. Can you remember? It would hardly be surprising if you cannot. But if I took you by the shoulders, looked you in the eye, and told you that the shed where the chicken on your plate lived its life was so overcrowded that the animal was never once able to stretch, or to flap its wings; if I drove you to the factory farm and brought you into the “broiler house”; if you heard the sounds of the birds’ distress and smelled the stench of the ammonia in the air, it would be challenging for you to maintain your ignorance.

“Willful” has a connotation of deliberateness and intentionality that fails to capture this double not-knowing. I may be willful when I know I do not know the size of the US federal budget deficit, and when I defend my choice to continue not knowing. But when I avoid or direct my attention away from something that implicates me in a practice that, upon reflection, I regard to be unethical, that ignorance only works if it is less than fully conscious.

“Motivated ignorance” is a more accurate term (Hayward 2017). Social psychologists and cognitive scientists have amassed considerable evidence that people routinely engage in what they call “motivated reasoning” (see, e.g., Hart and Nisbet 2012; Lodge and Taber 2000; Redlawsk 2002). That is to say, we do not always weigh evidence and evaluate arguments in an unbiased manner. Instead, we often seek out, selectively attend to, and disproportionately weight evidence that supports beliefs that we have a preference to hold. If I am a deeply religious person, I might dispel evidence that challenges key tenets of my faith. If I am a supporter of a particular political candidate, I might downplay the significance of a blunder that she makes. If I perform well in my year-end review, I will attribute that success to my own ability and hard work, but if I perform poorly, I will pin my failure to situational variables. In each of these cases, I have an end or a goal, apart from simply knowing the truth, that motivates how I process evidence and arrive at conclusions.

Motivated ignorance is a cousin of motivated reasoning. Like motivated reasoning, it involves an end that motivates the relevant not knowing: namely, the goal of maintaining an understanding of the self as a good person—a person who behaves ethically, a person who acts in accordance with principles that, upon reflection, she endorses—while at the same time enjoying the benefits of complicity in practices that violate those principles. I take pleasure from eating the delicious meat. I enjoy the stylish, inexpensive clothing. I like it that the manager runs my business efficiently and that I profit, without exerting much effort. These things all make my life convenient and comfortable, and I am motivated to believe that they are ethically unproblematic. To maintain that belief, I avoid exposure to, or I ignore, or I discount, evidence that refutes it.

In this, I am like the hypothetical (very liberal, white) diner who does not notice when he patronizes a restaurant with an all-white wait staff. On principle, he opposes racial discrimination and inequality, and yet, when he dines at the High Cotton, he helps to reproduce them. He can do that, and he can do it without experiencing cognitive dissonance, or remorse, or other any psychological discomfort, just so long as he does not know.

WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?

Six months before the Black Brunch action in Charleston, a group of activists stood during the intermission of a St. Louis Symphony Orchestra (SLSO) performance of Brahms’ Requiem and sang what they called “A Requiem for Mike Brown”:

Justice for Mike Brown is justice for us all,
Justice for Mike Brown is justice for us all,
Which side are you on, friend? Which side are you on?
Which side are you on, friend? Which side are you on?⁷

The SLSO action, like Black Brunch, was short. The singing lasted only a couple minutes. After they sang, the activists unfurled from the balcony of the symphony hall a series of banners with messages including “Racism Lives Here” and “Requiem for Mike Brown, 1996–2014.” Then they filed out of the hall, chanting “black lives matter.”

Recall that, on Frances Fox Piven’s view, elites depend upon the public to cooperate with their agenda-setting schemes. That makes them vulnerable, since the public can withdraw

7. The activists sang to the tune of “Which Side Are You On?” a song written by Florence Reece, the wife of an organizer for the United Mine Workers’ strike in Harlan County, Kentucky. For a detailed description of the SLSO action and a link to a video recording, see Rivas (2014).

their cooperation. If my argument in the previous section is correct—if, within the body called “the public,” there exists a subset of people who are motivated to not know (to not attend to, to not maintain conscious awareness of) some of the problems elites want off the agenda—then those people are vulnerable, as well. Call the ignorant the *I*'s, and the activists who disrupt their ignorance the *A*'s. The *I*'s depend upon the *A*'s to cooperate by allowing them to maintain their motivated ignorance.

For Piven, disruption begins when people coordinate to withdraw cooperation from a power relationship. My claim is that one important type of power relationship—and one corresponding form of political disruption—is specifically epistemic in form. It centers on what the *I*'s know, and on what they do not know. More precisely, it centers on what they are motivated to not know, and on the *A*'s capacity to disrupt their motivated ignorance. To put this claim in a form consistent with that used in the first section of this article:

- First, a group of political actors coordinate to withdraw cooperation from an epistemic power relationship, which enables motivated ignorance.

What then? Clearly, it is not the case that epistemic disruption always, or even often, wins public sympathy and support. To the contrary, people frequently have negative reactions to disruptive tactics like Black Brunch. Not only people who oppose the activists' ends but also some people who support them (think of the *Talking Points Memo* reader) criticize the confrontational means that they adopt. What is more, disruption can generate backlash. Moderate opponents can become vocal critics, while strong opponents can grow angrier, more aggressive, more militant.

But even when it does not win sympathy, epistemic disruption can win attention. And sometimes it can shift the focus of public political discourse. This was clearly the case with the mid-century Civil Rights Movement, as McAdam and others have noted. Recall that, in his work on disruption, McAdam emphasizes the importance of winning sympathetic public attention. However, the key piece of evidence he cites to support this claim is change in responses to what pollsters call the “most important problem” (MIP) question: an open-ended question that the Gallup Poll Organization has asked Americans since the start of World War II. When Gallup poses this question, it asks “what do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?” and invites respondents to name whatever issue concerns them the most.⁸

8. Although in the early “most important problem” surveys, the wording varies, the most common wording is: “what do you think is the

most important problem facing this country today?” For a detailed discussion, see Smith (1980).

Answers vary widely, ranging from foreign affairs problems, like “war,” to economic problems, like “low wages” or the “high cost of living,” to social problems like “crime” or “juvenile delinquency.”

The MIP measures the salience of an issue, in other words, not respondents' attitudes toward the actors who draw attention to it. But salience matters. The answers cited in the previous paragraph were some of the answers that Gallup's respondents gave in the fall of 1951. At that time, just 0.3% named “civil rights,” “racial problems,” “discrimination,” or “states' rights” as the most important problem facing the country.⁹ In this respect, the results were typical. For a decade after the war, the American public did not regard such problems as among the most important facing the country. The percentage answering the MIP with a reply like “civil rights” or “discrimination” ranged from 0 to, at the very highest, just under 7 (Heffington, Park, and Williams 2019).

Then, after the Montgomery bus boycott, the issue's salience spiked. By the fall of 1956, between 9% and 23% of Americans named civil rights issues as the country's most important problem (Heffington et al. 2019).¹⁰ Gallup recorded another spike in the fall of 1957, during the battle over school desegregation in Little Rock, and two additional spikes following renewed struggles over school desegregation in 1959 and the lunch counter sit-ins in the spring of 1960. Then, after a three-year lull, there was a remarkable surge in Americans' attention to civil rights. Between 1963 and 1965, respondents to the MIP consistently named “civil rights” or “the racial problem” as among most important problems confronting the country (see fig. 1). In fact, in half of the polls conducted during these years, the percentage of respondents who identified civil rights issues as the most important problem was greater than 40, and that figure never once fell below 20%. As McAdam (1996, 351) underscores, the two highest spikes came just after the Birmingham and the Selma campaigns. In other words, in a nation that, from its founding, had been marred by profound racial injustice, during this relatively brief period, the ordinarily inattentive public turned its attention and focused on race.

Then it turned away once more. Through the decades of the 1970s and the 1980s, the percentage of Americans identifying “civil rights,” “race relations,” or “race problems” as the

9. Gallup Poll 480, September 19, 1951. These answers were amalgamated into a single category.

10. On September 9, 20.1% said “civil rights,” the “Negro problem,” “segregation,” or “racial prejudice” was the country's biggest problem. On September 20, October 5, and October 18, 14.5%, 11%, and 9.9% gave responses that Gallup put in that category (Heffington et al. 2019).

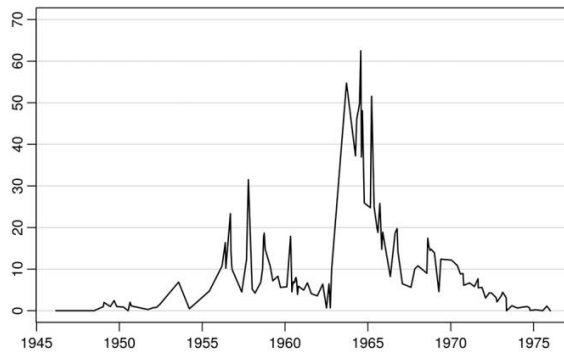


Figure 1. Percentage naming race the “most important problem” 1946–76. Source: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

country’s biggest concern ranged from 0% to 5%. In fact, in the half century from the mid-1960s to the mid-2010s, the American public focused on race exactly once. It was the spring of 1992. Riots had erupted in Los Angeles, following the acquittal of the white Los Angeles Police Department officers who were videotaped brutally beating black motorist Rodney King. That May, 15% of Americans identified “racial problems” or “racial unrest” as the country’s most important problem.¹¹ But by the start of the following year, that figure was back down near zero, where it would remain for another quarter century.

In the meantime, the Gallup Poll Organization standardized the response categories that it used in recording responses to the MIP, making it easy to track issue salience at the aggregate level. The organization also began to ask the question more frequently. By the end of 2013, Gallup had asked the MIP a total of 161 times since 1994, the year when it began to categorize responses that focused on racial discrimination as “race relations/racism.” Across all 161 surveys, between 0% and 5% of Americans named “race relations/racism” as the country’s most important problem. On average, just 1% gave replies that fit that category.

This pattern changed dramatically in late 2014. By mid-December, after the mass protests of the nonindictments of the police officers who killed Michael Brown in Ferguson and Eric Garner in Staten Island, 14% of Americans said “race relations/racism” was the most important problem facing the United States. It was the first time since the mid-1960s that a plurality of respondents had given such a reply.¹² Over the next three years, racial problems remained salient. In the 20 surveys that Gallup conducted between December 2014 and

July 2016, an average of 7% of respondents identified “race relations/racism” as America’s most important problem. There was a small peak (8%) in the spring of 2015, after the protests of Freddie Gray’s death at the hands of the Baltimore police, and another that summer (9%), after protests of the mass shooting of black churchgoers in Charleston. Then, in the summer of 2016, there was a significant jump (to 19%), following BLM actions in response to the police shootings of Anton Sterling and Philando Castille.¹³

It is not easy to compare these figures to those from the mid-1960s, due to changes in the structure of Gallup’s survey. But it is a relatively straightforward matter to track changes from the mid-1990s to the mid-2010s. Doing so reveals a pattern remarkably similar to that from the 1950s and 1960s: a long stretch of public inattention to racial discrimination and racial inequality, punctuated by a shorter period, in the wake of large-scale disruptive actions, when the public turned its attention to race.

Figure 2 shows a striking increase in the salience of “race relations/racism.” It shows that in late 2014 there was a pronounced shift in public political discourse, as Americans began to pay attention to a problem to which, for half a century, they had been inattentive. It does not show that members of the public had positive feelings about the activists who helped to shift their attention, let alone that public sympathy moved Americans to support BLM activists’ ends. That said, if part of what disruption disrupts is motivated ignorance, then perhaps disruptive politics can move public opinion, even without winning widespread public sympathy and support.

Disruptive politics shift public discourse. They put issues on the political agenda that previously were off. In so doing, I want to suggest that they can prompt some members of the public (like the hypothetical, very liberal, white diner) to attend to problems that they are motivated to ignore. If so—if disruption can compel a person like this one to notice how the world around him violates his principles—then perhaps it can shape his opinions simply by forcing him to answer the question that the SLSO activists posed in song (“Which side are you on, friend?”). In other words, perhaps political disruption can move public opinion, even without winning widespread sympathy and support, by activating the principled beliefs of a subset of the public, prompting people like the hypothetical liberal white diner to pay attention, to take a side.

Survey evidence from the Pew Research Center (2016) suggests something like this may have happened in response to the BLM protests of the past few years. In the spring of 2014, just months before the fatal shooting of Michael Brown

11. Gallup Poll May Wave 1, May 7–10, 1992.

12. Gallup Poll GPSS-Lifestyle, December 8–11, 2014. That month “the economy in general” came in a close second, at 13%.

13. Gallup reported a third spike (14%) in the fall of 2017, following the violent white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia.

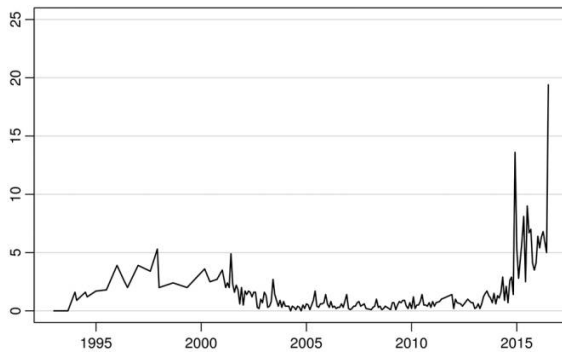


Figure 2. Percentage naming race the “most important problem” 1994–2016. Source: Gallup Analytics.

in Ferguson, Pew asked respondents which of the following statements they agreed with more:

“Our country *has made* the changes needed to give blacks equal rights with whites,” or

“Our country *needs to continue making* changes to give blacks equal rights with whites.”

At that time, Americans were evenly split in their responses, a pattern consistent with what Pew had found since first posing this question in 2009. But in 2015 there was a significant shift. Only a third of respondents said that “our country has made the changes needed to give blacks equal rights with whites,” while close to two-thirds said that “our country needs to continue making changes to give blacks equal rights with whites.” Disaggregating these results, Pew found significant racial and ideological divides. Black respondents were consistently more likely than whites to say that “our country needs to continue making changes to give blacks equal rights with whites,” as were respondents who identify with, or who lean toward, the Democratic party.

These patterns are unsurprising. What is striking, however, is that if we break the responses down by race and party identification simultaneously, we see that, in March 2014, the spring before the start of the protests in Ferguson, just 60% of white Democrats said that “our country needs to continue making changes to give blacks equal rights with whites,” while two years later, a full 79% of white Democrats chose that response. Before the start of the BLM actions in 2014, 22 percentage points separated white Democrats from black Democrats, and more black Republicans than white Democrats thought that “our country needs to continue making changes to give blacks equal rights with whites.” But by 2016, the margin separating black and white Democrats had shrunk to just 10 percentage points, and more white Democrats than black Republicans agreed with the statement. The change

among white Republicans, although nontrivial, was about half the change among white Democrats.

Why the significant differences in the first two cells of the sixth column (of table 1, showing the change for white Democrats vs. white Republicans between 2014 and 2016)? If part of what disruption disrupts is motivated ignorance, and if it is racially privileged people who are motivated to not know (to not attend to, to not maintain conscious awareness of) racial inequality, then we would expect a greater increase in the proportion of white respondents than black respondents who agree, post-Ferguson, that the country needs to continue making changes to give blacks equal rights with whites. But why such a stark contrast within the subset of white respondents, once we break that group down by ideology? Shouldn’t disruption disrupt motivated ignorance, regardless of party identification or ideological beliefs?

It should. But, of course, a person can have her attention drawn to a problem and still not revise the way that she thinks about that problem. A final thought experiment will illustrate. Imagine that, just across the room from the very liberal white diner at the High Cotton in April 2015 sits a very conservative white diner, who is also out to brunch with her family. When the activists interrupt this second diner’s motivated ignorance, what difference will it make? Perhaps it will prompt her to think to herself: “If you don’t do anything wrong, you don’t get in trouble with the police!” If so, then this second diner might reason that the causes of the deaths of the people whom the activists name were their individual choices and actions. Were this conservative white diner asked the MIP, she might reply that America’s most important problem is “race relations.” Perhaps she found the disruption at the High Cotton deeply problematic. But that would not mean that she had come to view racial inequality as unjustified, let alone to believe that the United States “needs to continue making changes” to redress it.

In short, even if both diners are motivated to not know the very same things, and even if both are equally susceptible to the disruption of their motivated ignorance, their motivated reasoning may lead them to weight and to process the claims

Table 1. Percentage Who Say the Country Needs to Continue Making Changes to Give Blacks Equal Rights with Whites

Race/Party ID	2014	2015	2016	2014–16 Increase
White:				
Democrat	60	74	79	19
Republican	25	38	35	10
Black:				
Democrat	83	88	89	6
Republican	68	65	68	0

Source: Pew Research Center (2016).

put before them in radically different ways. A disruptive action like Black Brunch might prompt the conservative to dig in her ideological heels. At the same time, it might push the liberal to a tipping point. For him, the desire to see the self as an ethical person—that is, as a person who conforms to the principles that, upon reflection, he endorses—even while enjoying unearned privilege might interact with the loss of ignorance to produce a shift in opinion about politics (see Hayward 2017).

Recall that motivated ignorance is most tenacious when it is the case, not only that a person does not know but also does not know that he does not know. Political disruption, if it upsets that equilibrium, can prompt even privileged people to abandon their passive acceptance of an unjust status quo.

CONCLUSION

Near the start of this article's final section, I summarized the first step in my model of political disruption this way:

- First, a group of political actors coordinate to withdraw cooperation from an epistemic power relationship, which enables motivated ignorance.

And I asked, “what then?” Before concluding, I want to answer by summarizing the argument above in a form consistent with that used in the article's first section:

- Second, this act of epistemic disruption brings latent conflicts to the surface and forces members of dominant groups to take sides.

To be clear, my claim is not that epistemic disruption eliminates motivated ignorance. On the contrary, I suspect such ignorance is a perennial feature of human social relations and hence of the political landscape. If so, then for those who aim to dismantle structural inequality, the endgame involves exploiting partial and temporary interruptions of motivated ignorance, with a view to institutionalizing structural change. To examine that process in detail is beyond the scope of the present work. An illustrative example will have to suffice. During the 2016 Democratic primary campaign, each of the two main contenders for the party's nomination, Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, after confrontation and negotiation with BLM activists, unveiled comprehensive racial justice platforms.¹⁴ BLM's influence was apparent during the July 2016 Democratic Convention as well, from the presentation by the “Mothers of the Movement,” to major, prime-time speeches by President Obama, vice presidential candidate Kaine, and presidential candidate Clinton, each of whom

14. See <https://www.hillaryclinton.com/issues/racial-justice/> and <https://berniesanders.com/issues/racial-justice/> (accessed November 8, 2018).

highlighted the problem of systemic racism and underscored the need to enact reform. And BLM's influence was apparent in the 2016 Democratic Party platform, which included a section titled “Ending Systemic Racism” that specifically invoked the phrase “black lives matter.”¹⁵

Surely McAdam and Piven are correct when they argue that, in representative democracies, one important effect disruptive politics can have is to transform the political calculus for people who hold, or who aspire to hold elective office. Recall that, by 2016, a significant majority of Democrats thought that “our country needs to continue making changes to give blacks equal rights with whites.” No doubt, party elites were attentive to this shift in their base, and no doubt they took it into account when designing their platform and planning their convention. Nevertheless, I want to characterize the final step of a successful act of political disruption in broader terms.¹⁶ To state my claim in a form consistent with that used in this article's first section:

- Third, the resulting change in the political agenda enables subordinated actors to negotiate with the politically powerful, with a view to enacting change.

This formulation strikes me as appropriate for two main reasons. First, the relevant leverage point is not always electoral pressure. Consider that, in the case of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), important power holders whom activists brought to the negotiating table included administrative agencies like the National Institutes of Health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Food and Drug Administration, as well as nongovernmental actors, like major pharmaceutical companies. Although competitive elections are very often key leverage points for enacting political change, disruptive politics can produce pressure on any political actor who depends on a relatively widespread sense of legitimacy.

Second, the language of “enabl[ing] subordinated actors to negotiate with the politically powerful” highlights the agency of the oppressed. Recall Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (King 1963), which he wrote in April 1963, just two weeks after the start of the Birmingham campaign and four days after his arrest for having participated. A public response to white clergymen who had criticized the campaign's disruptive tactics, urging in their place the “honest

15. 2016 Democratic Party Platform,” 14. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=117717> (accessed November 8, 2018).

16. Note that the qualifier “successful” is key. After the second step, those who “take the other side”—in the present case, white nationalists and others who aligned themselves with Trump's agenda starting in 2016—may form a coalition that effectively shores up, or even heightens extant hierarchies or represses further acts of political disruption.

and open negotiation of racial issues,” King’s letter acknowledged the need for negotiation and underscored that “this is the very purpose of direct action.”¹⁷ “Nonviolent direct action,” he wrote, “seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue” (1963). King noted that, prior to the campaign, multiple attempts at negotiation with white political elites and white business leaders in Birmingham had proven fruitless. When it comes to transforming power relations, he stressed, “it is a historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily” (1963).

Nor do they come to the table ready and willing to negotiate. Instead, the subordinated bring them to the table, compelling them to address the latent conflicts that they prefer to suppress. Were Martin Luther King Jr. alive today, I imagine that he would see the Black Brunches of 2015, less as efforts to win the sympathetic attention of a bystander public than as disruptive acts that impel negotiation. Black Brunch at the High Cotton was only one such act, among many, over the course of multiple years. Its success—or its lack thereof—will hinge on the negotiations it helps make possible.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Previous versions of this article were presented at the Injustice, Resistance, and Progress conference at the London School of Economics; the Faculty Fellows’ Seminar at the Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics at Harvard; the Boston University Research in American Politics Seminar; the Harvard Kennedy School’s Ash Center Democracy Seminar; and the 2018 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association. I am grateful for the helpful feedback I received from those in attendance at each of these sessions. I would also like to thank J. B. Duck-Mayr for his invaluable research assistance and the anonymous reviewers and the editor of this journal for their constructive criticisms and suggestions. Support for this research was provided by the Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics at Harvard University and Washington University in Saint Louis.

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17. For the full text of the white clergymen’s statement, see “Public Statement by Eight Alabama Clergymen,” April 12, 1963. http://www.massresistance.org/docs/gen/09a/mlk_day/statement.html (accessed May 28, 2018).