Solidarity or Allyship? Racial Justice and White Liberals Under Neoliberal Capitalism

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"An outcome favorable to the black and white common people (following Reconstruction) is, in short, a might-have-been that probably could not have been. Even so, we may well pause for a moment and consider why not. To do so is to remind ourselves that the 'race problem' took its form, not from discrete attitudes, but from the circumstances under which ordinary people had to make their choices."

- Barbara J. Fields, *Ideology and Race in American History*

"Within the white majority there exists a substantial group who cherish democratic principles above privilege and who have demonstrated a will to fight side by side with the Negroes against injustice. Another and more substantial group is composed of those having common needs with the Negro and who will benefit equally with him in the achievement of social progress."

- Martin Luther King, Jr. *Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community*

Introduction

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, a black resident of Minneapolis, was arrested by Derek Chauvin, a 44-year-old white man, after a local store clerk accused Floyd of attempting to buy cigarettes with a counterfeit $20 bill. While being arrested, Chauvin pinned Floyd to the ground and drove his knee into Floyd's neck for nearly nine minutes. Eventually reaching a state of asphyxiation, Floyd laid pulseless for minutes until medical technicians arrived on the scene. Once they arrived, they immediately pronounced Floyd dead.

As news of Floyd's murder spread across Minneapolis, so, too, did mass demonstrations. What began as small protests quickly grew into community-wide ones, some of which reached a simmer. These mass protests, however, were not confined to Minneapolis. Within days, hundreds of thousands of individuals began to take to the street under the banner of "Black Lives Matter,"

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eventually comprising what the *New York Times* would later describe as potentially being the largest mass movement in American history (Buchanan et al. 2020). The far-reaching nature of the protests was all the more impressive, given that they took place against the backdrop of the COVID-19 crisis, the most devastating pandemic in over a century. This pandemic threw into sharp relief the pervasiveness of racism under capitalism, as evidenced by the persistence of inequities in access to medical care, education, and so forth. The racist logic of capitalism was also exposed when so-called "essential" workers—the majority of whom, because of racial ideologies, are Black, Indigenous, and Latinx—were forced to labor through the pandemic. At the same time, everyone else hunkered down at home, safe from the rapidly circulating virus. Thus, while Floyd's untimely death may have reignited the movement for Black Lives, one could reasonably argue that the campaign was ultimately a response to the excesses of racial capitalism.

But while Black Lives Matter calls attention to the racial injustices faced by Black people, it is not merely a movement comprised of Black people. Indeed, as protests spread across the country, the interracial bent of the movement became apparent. Across America, in cities both large and small, individuals from all racial backgrounds turned out to protest the unjust nature of racial capitalism. Even whites. I single out whites in this way not because there are no historical antecedents that might suggest that whites have been mainly absent in the Black Freedom Struggle and in efforts to combat social injustices writ large. Instead, I mention whites in particular because in recent times—or, more specifically, during the so-called "post-Civil Rights Era"—the common understanding of whites' commitments to racial justice is that their obligations are largely conditional, remaining in the realm of ideal rather than practice. In other words, scholars argue that whites are committed to racial justice in principle but will not relinquish their material standing to achieve racial justice. What roles, then, do whites play in the fight for racial equality, and how have they figured into the Black Freedom Struggle throughout

American history?

Since the mid-1960s, which many interpret as the Black Freedom Struggle's apotheosis, the characterization of whites' role in the fight for racial equality has gone as follows. Many whites, in the mid-1960s, finally came to recognize the brutality of the American racial order, leading to a change of hearts and minds. This awakening was widespread enough to turn public opinion in favor of the movement and, as a result, elite response. Upon passage of the Civil and Voting Rights Acts, however, many whites believed that the federal government had taken enough action on that front and that Black people could now participate in political and social life free of discrimination. However, when Black people continued to push for more rights—calling for economic justice—many whites' attitudes began to sour. As riots broke out in inner cities in response to the organized abandonment of Black communities, whites in these areas started to flee for the suburbs, taking their tax dollars and other resources that are often needed to secure a more socially democratic environment. Henceforth, any time Black people made efforts to get their slice of the economic pie, so to speak, whites began to hoard their opportunities even more aggressively. This opportunity hoarding often led to explosive encounters between Black and white people, underscoring the racist demarcations that continued to persist despite the passage of the Civil Rights Act and other significant pieces of legislation. Many scholars present clashes over busing and affirmative action as microcosmic; they are evidence of whites attempting to maintain the racial status quo. Thus, even though many whites might feel more favorably towards Black people than they did during, say, the height of Jim Crow, these positive "racial attitudes" are often dismissed as virtue signaling, at best, and obfuscation (of one's "true" attitudes) at worst.

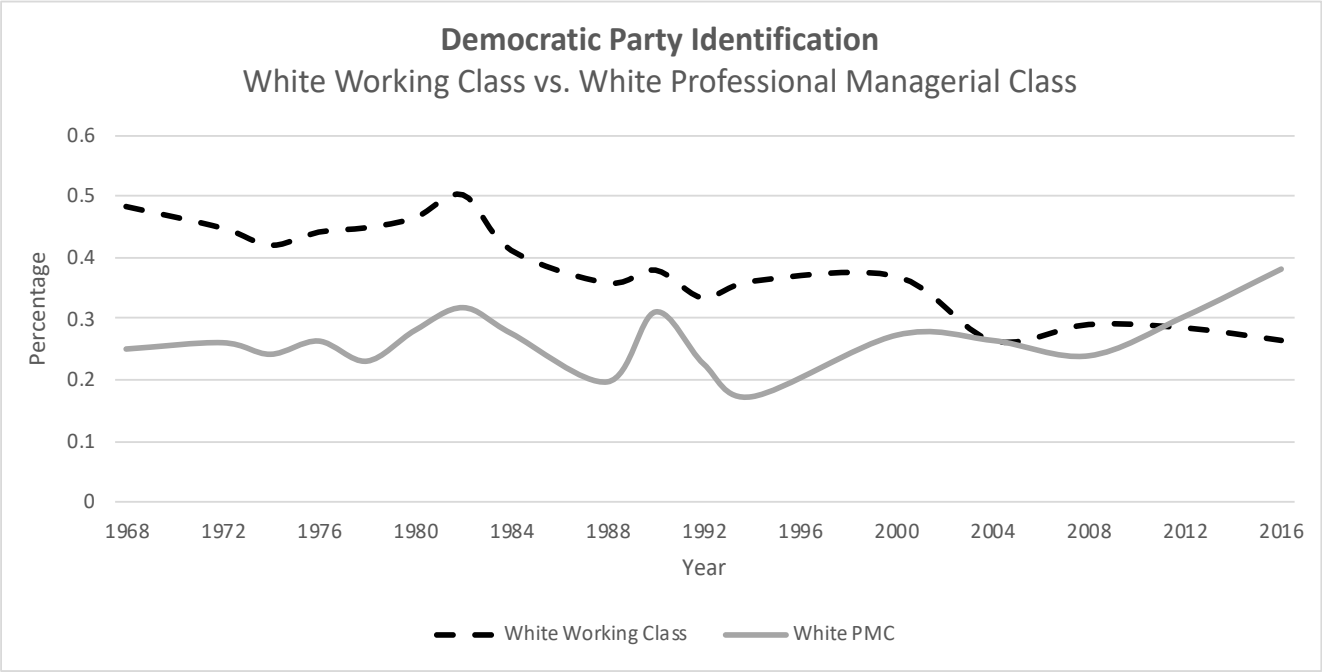
Although I am sympathetic to this perspective and believe that whites' behavior with respect to racial politics could very well stem from latent racial prejudice (Sears et al. 1979; Sears and

Kinder 1985; Kinder and Sanders 1996), a manifestation of racial group competition (Bobo 1983; Bobo and Hutchings 1996), an unwavering commitment to a color-blind 'meritocracy' (Bonilla-Silva 2003), crude economic self-interest (Green and Crowden 1992; Weeden and Kurzban 2018), or even a desire to maintain racial privilege (Jardina 2019), I want to argue that these perspectives do not engage with several key issues. First, they each take for granted the economic order under which we have been operating throughout the past half-century: neoliberal capitalism. Consequently, it becomes easy to overlook the profound structural changes that have taken place both within the realm of political economy and, as a result, the common-sense ideologies that pervade political and social life. For example, during this era, education is no longer deemed a social good but rather a commodity (Brown 2015; Giroux 2015; Warikoo 2016). It should come as no surprise, then, that issues over "access" to education have taken on such a caustic, racial flair. With education treated as fungible, individuals view access to education—both secondary and higher education—as a competitive enterprise wherein attending a "good school" is increasingly considered as a means of enhancing one's human capital, rather than a social good in and of itself. Of course, a chief reason why Americans treat education this way is that they believe it will protect them from capitalism's crossfires, at least to some degree. In a state where social welfare is hollow, human capital becomes a premium. Unsurprisingly, A society structured in this fashion tends to incite narrow, self-interested behavior while also undermining solidarity.

Second, this story tends to downplay the role of class within racial politics. More specifically, it tends to disregard (or at least overlook) how white people who comprise the professional-managerial class (PMC) differ from white individuals who do not. Acknowledging these differences is key to understanding white antiracism in the past, as well as today. Although many people believe that most white liberals have always been members of the PMC (or historically

equivalent class strata), I want to trouble this assumption. While it is true that an increasing number of white PMCs might now be considered liberal, this is a recent phenomenon, as we can see in Figure 1. Though many individuals tend to associate the white working class with Republicans, and the PMC with Democrats, only in the past two election cycles would such an interpretation have some degree of generalizability. Until very recently, most white PMCs voted Republican.

Figure 1.



Source: American National Election Survey (ANES)

Note: The 'White Working Class' is identified as those white respondents who, on the ANES, identified their social class as either average working, working, or upper working class. The 'White Professional Managerial Class' includes those whites who identified their social class as either middle or upper-middle-class and have attained a bachelor's degree or higher.

If we take seriously the notion that individuals will support candidates that align with their class interests, then little presented in this chart should be surprising. The Republican Party, with its emphasis on low taxes, a friendly business environment, and so forth, aligns more closely with the material concerns of the professional-managerial class than the working class. The

Democratic Party, on the other hand, has historically been considered the “party of labor," defending, in the process, the rights of workers against the excesses of capitalism. Until recently, anyway. As many scholars have forcefully argued, one of the central aspects of neoliberal capitalism has been the Democratic Party's capitulation to capital; in other words, they have effectively ceded the terms of the economic order to the capitalist class to Republicans (Harrison and Bluestone 1988; Frank 2017). This maneuver's key result has been the inclination among Democratic elites to take capitalism for granted, electing, instead, to focus on social representation. Some scholars have dichotomized this as redistribution versus recognition (Fraser and Honneth 2003), arguing that Democrats have opted to fight for symbolic acts of justice (recognition) rather than social democratic forms of justice (redistribution). One key consequence of this has been that politics begins and ends with debates over "social issues," creating, in the process, a clash over identities, racial or otherwise (Mason 2018a; Mason 2018b; Sides et al. 2019).

While no doubt a compelling debate, it is not one into which I intend to insert myself. However, I will corroborate the claim that Democrats did withdraw from social democratic ideals in favor of neoliberal ones (Frank 2017; Mudge 2018)—particularly when the Black Freedom Struggle was attempting to move from civic and legal justice to economic justice. This move profoundly affected the Black Freedom Struggle. First, it meant that Black people could no longer look to Washington to deliver economic justice. With Democrats moving to the right on macroeconomic issues, the Black Freedom Struggle lost its institutional bedrock. And since growing the social welfare state was now off the table, Black people had to fight for a piece of the economic pie that had grown stale. Thus, building a movement—which Martin Luther King, Jr. et al. believed needed to be interracial—proved difficult in a new era where "scarcity" was now a political "reality."

King believed that interracial coalitions were a necessary facet of the Black Freedom Struggle (King 1967; Honey 2018; Laurent 2018). Although he was committed to securing Black people's economic rights, he also thought that injustice for some was an injustice for all. Accordingly, King believed the best way to generate support for a political program that could secure Black people's economic rights was by advocating economic equality for everyone— including working and poor whites. While King knew that Black people remained overrepresented among the oppressed, he also knew that there were, in absolute terms, far more white Americans in an economically precarious position than were Black people. Thus, he believed that a successful political project would have to speak to the economic and material needs of Whites and Blacks alike.

I want to emphasize here the distinction between interracial solidarity and white allyship. King called attention to the difference between the two, as well (King 1967). While many whites have been sympathetic to many Black Americans' plight, this sympathy has been insufficient in arousing support for political programs that would disproportionately benefit Black Americans. As King wrote in *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community*, "A true alliance is based upon some self-interest of each component group and a common interest into which they merge." Thus, while King (1967) recognized that "within the white majority there exists a substantial group who cherish democratic principles above privilege and who have demonstrated a will to fight side by side with the Negroes against injustice," he also knew that "another and more substantial group is composed of those having common needs with the Negro and who will benefit equally with him in the achievement of social progress" (pp. 52-53). I argue that understanding whites' racial politics necessarily requires distinguishing between racial solidarity and allyship.

Thus, this project seeks to answer the question: *How do whites engage in antiracist behavior under*

neoliberal capitalism? By "antiracist," I mean political support for the rights of Black people—social, political, economic, or otherwise—ranging from the symbolic to the substantive. Although this conception of antiracism might seem underspecified, I purposely define it in broad terms. Let's take seriously King's formulation that some white individuals will occupy the role of ally, while others might find themselves in solidarity with Black people due to common material interests. A broader definition of antiracism makes room for both manifestations. Allowing for variation in antiracist behavior will enable us to typify then different expressions of antiracism across both time and space. If racism is not a static ideology, then neither is antiracism. Nor can it be.

I also seek to understand the types of antiracist behaviors that white individuals have engaged in throughout American history, considering, along the way, the class dynamics of white political behavior. Suppose we are willing to accept that one's class position influences one's political behavior. In that case, it should follow that class should figure into any theory I might have about white antiracism. To that end, I consider both the antiracist behaviors of poor and working-class white individuals and whites in the professional-managerial strata. I argue that, under neoliberal capitalism, white liberals—which I define as individuals who are at least principally invested in the notion of racial justice—are increasingly a part of the professional-managerial strata instead of the working class. As a result of their class position, whites who comprise the professional-managerial strata tend to engage in the kinds of antiracism that accord with (or do not come in conflict) their class interests. Thus, white antiracism now manifests chiefly as symbolic instead of coalitional politics.

In making my case, I build upon King's insights regarding what he believed needed to happen for the Black Freedom Struggle to transition from civil to economic rights. Cribbing generously from A. Philip Randolph's *Freedom Budget for All Americans*, King identified three critical components of a successful antiracist movement (Le Blanc and Yates 2013). First, it needed to be

interracial. Not only did he genuinely believe in the rights of all irrespective of racial classification, but he also knew that a program that focused exclusively on the needs of Black people would provide the opposition with easy political fodder. As such, King endeavored to build a political movement that spoke to poor and working people's needs and concerns. Second, King believed that political demands had to be positive-sum rather than zero-sum in nature. Stated differently, King did not advocate for redistributive programs because he knew that doing so would incite feelings of competition—attitudes that were anathema to solidarity in King's view (King and Washington 1991). While sympathetic to those who decried the elite classes' excesses, he believed that framing demands as expanding the economic pie, rather than dividing the existing pie more equally, was the more politically feasible route. Finally, and relatedly, King believed that demands had to be directed towards the federal government and not the hoi polloi. As Randolph explained in the *Freedom Budget*, addressing economic oppression was a task too large for individuals (Randolph 1966). This task would have to rest with the state.

At our current juncture, the conditions required for successful antiracist politics, as articulated by King, are no longer prevalent. Black-white alliances are not necessarily predicated upon similar class needs. Elites often frame demands to expand the social welfare state as pollyannaish. Consequently, those who allege to be antiracists—namely white individuals—are expected to "give up" their privilege, lest they be deemed hypocritical. All of this is transpiring while many, particularly in the professional-managerial class, have a (real or imagined) "fear of falling," as Ehrenreich (1989) notes. What are the terms of antiracism under these political conditions?

I contend that in the era of neoliberal capitalism, Black-white alliances premised upon similar class interests are weak (if not entirely nonexistent), and state efforts to secure racial justice (which King equated with economic justice) continue to be inadequate. Meanwhile, the common-sense interpretation of American remains one of a "zero-sum society," as Lester Thurow (1980) once

described. Racial oppression, however, persists. But so, too, does white antiracism—under conditions markedly different from those under which King was writing. It is these conditions that I will now assess.

Partisanship, Class, and Race: Whites' Political Transformation Under Neoliberal Capitalism

Class is, admittedly, a complex concept to operationalize within a positive framework. As Vanneman and Cannon (1987) explain in their text *The American Perception of Class*, class's relational nature renders difficult its empirical assessment. Case in point, the category *middle class*. Though many often operationalize class as some interaction between income and educational status and, thus, derive their working definition of the middle class from such a maneuver, doing so can disguise or at least obscure how individuals experience class both socially and politically. And subjective views of class are neither time nor space invariant. Stated differently, who "counts" as middle-class is highly contingent. All of this is to say that class "categories" are highly arbitrary and always contestable. To the extent that I can, however, I want to show that white individuals' class position has and continues to play a significant role in shaping their antiracist commitments.

Accordingly, I argue that though the white liberals are perceived as more likely than poor and working whites to engage in antiracist behavior, this has not always been the case. Instead, when white individuals have joined Black people in the fight for equality, it has often been poor and working white people—rather than those of upper strata—who have fought in solidarity. Indeed, as Aptheker (1993) reminds us, whites who have been in a higher class position have been far more likely to side with the capitalist class over the needs of Black workers. King (1967) discovered as much during the final years of his life, where he had spent much of his time

organizing and deploying the Poor People's Campaign. To wit, King had observed that:

> The paths of Negro-white unity that had been converging crossed at Selma, and like a giant X began to diverge. Up to Selma, there had been unity to eliminate barbaric conduct. Beyond it the unity had to be based on the fulfillment of equality, and in the absence of agreement the paths began inexorably to move apart.

I argue that one reason that "white allies had quietly disappeared," as King noted, is because many of them were a part of an emerging professional-managerial class. The interests of the PMC were, in many ways, antithetical to the demands of Black Freedom Struggle and King's nascent Poor People's Campaign. One key aim of the Poor People's Campaign—expanded unionization—provides a case in point (Honey 1998; Laurent 2018). King believed that unionization was the sine qua non of any project attempting to secure economic justice for Black folks, a vast majority of whom were poor or working people. For many whites, particularly those in the upper strata, unionization was not a foremost concern. As Lily Geismer (2017) explains, during this era—often considered the genesis of the so-called "information economy"—a growing number of jobs were being created outside of industries in which unionization had been prevalent (manufacturing, for instance). Capital argued that, because these jobs were not unionized, individuals could—through their creativity and hard work—ascend the corporate ladder and achieve the American dream more quickly than if they held unionized jobs, where compensation was often determined collectively and with an emphasis on seniority. Unionization, then, was not of political interest to many members of this growing class (Geismer 2017; Honey 2018).

Neoliberal capitalism was not only changing many white PMCs relationship with work, however. It was also changing their relationship to education—both their own and their children's—and, by extension, where they chose to reside given the historical interconnectedness of property and schooling. Under neoliberal capitalism, individuals understand that their best

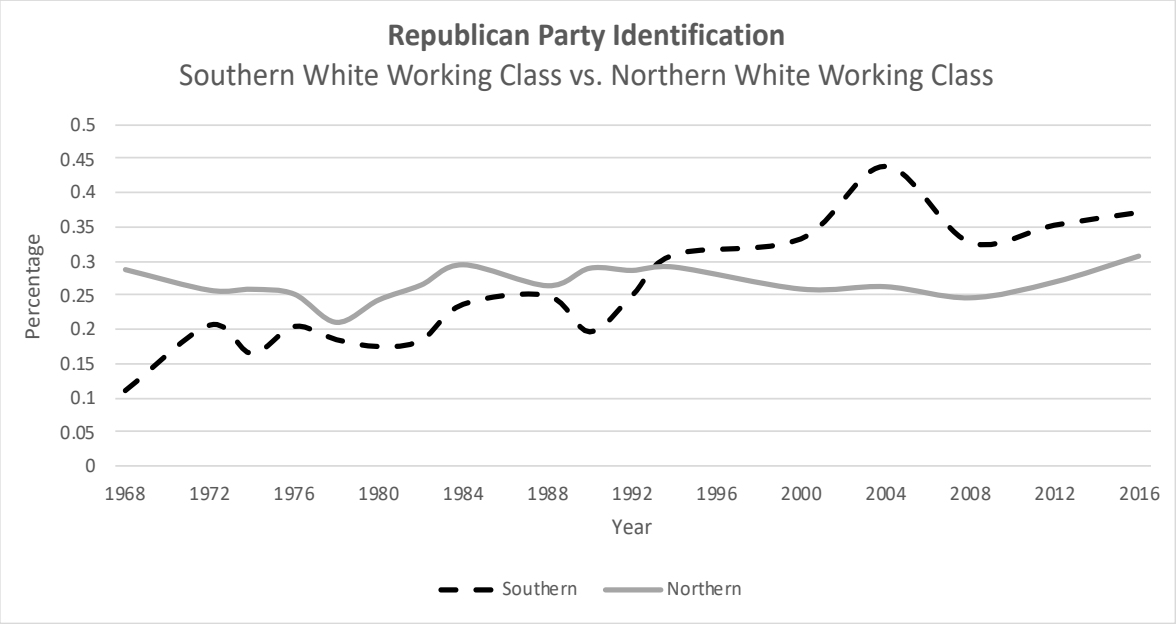
chance at the "American dream" is through their hard work, investment in themselves and their families (i.e., the development of their so-called "human capital"), and owning their home (asset-building) (Eicher 2020). Moreover, under neoliberal capitalism, it is one's ability on "the market" that will serve as their safety valve, not the federal government (Brown 2015; Cooper 2017). In short, we might aptly describe neoliberal capitalism as a political-economic order where the state has increasingly institutionalized the ideology of classic liberalism (individuality, hard work, the importance of "the market," and so forth). At the same time, it has also evacuated critical facets of modern liberalism (a healthy welfare state, social justice, and so on). And perhaps most consequential of all, neoliberal rationality has altered individuals' understanding of the concept of "responsibility" altogether (Brewer and Stonecash 2015; Mounk 2017). Thus, while it may have at a point in time been taken for granted that the federal government existed to provide social goods while also addressing social ills, most people now understand that it is up to *them* to perform these tasks (Hall et al. 2015). These are the terms of the social order under neoliberal capitalism and the conditions under which the Black Freedom Struggle and antiracist politics must now operate.

What consequences do these changes to the American political-economic order have for whites' political behavior with respect to racial politics*?* Moreover, what does it mean that an increasing number of "white liberals" now comprise the professional-managerial stratum and, as a consequence, do not share similar class interests with most Black people—a majority of whom are working folks? Still more, if many "white liberals" do have principled commitments to social justice—and, by extension, racial justice—but now live within a state where social and racial justice questions are outside the state's purview, then how do they express those commitments? Or do they engage in antiracist behavior at all?

On the other hand, what about white working people? Of course, it has become

commonplace by many to identify working white people as irredeemably racist—captured by the racist ideologies which have been part and parcel of American conservatism, particularly in this "post-Civil Rights Era" (Mason 2018; Sides et al. 2019). It is true that white working-class people—particularly in the South—have, since that period, transitioned their partisan affiliation from Democrat to Republican. The chart below is suggestive of as much. Unsurprisingly, in 1968, only about 10 percent of white working people in the South identified as Republican. By 2016, however, that figure was just shy of 40 percent—a four-fold increase over a half-century. In the north, however, Republican identification has remained virtually unchanged.

Figure 2.



Source: American National Election Survey (ANES)

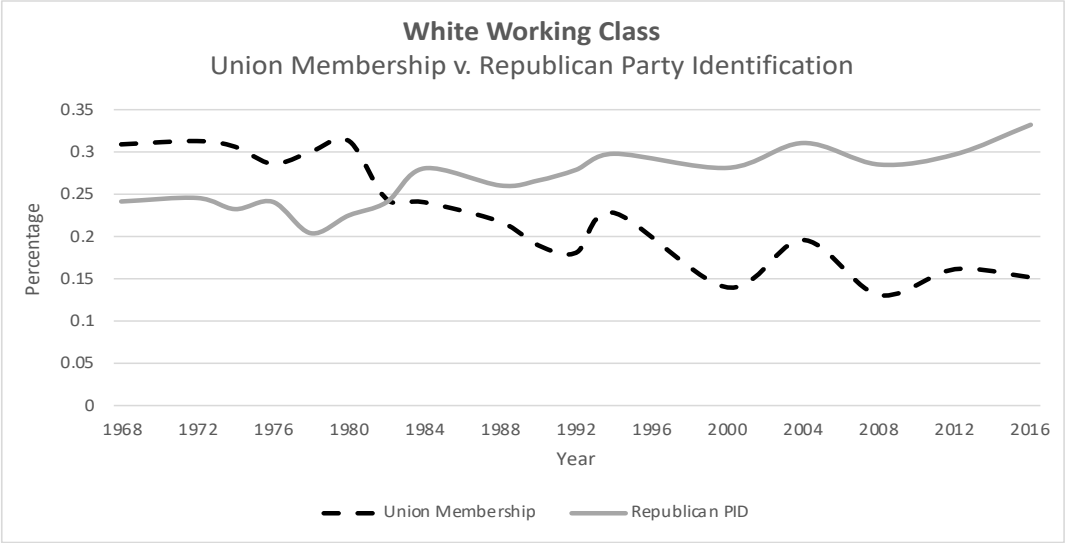
Note: The 'White Working Class' is identified as those white respondents who, on the ANES, identified their social class as either average working, working, or upper working class. 'South' includes the 11 secession states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. The 'Northern' states comprise the remainder.

Much has been written about partisan realignment in the South or, more to the point, how white workers have, in the "post-Civil Rights Era," shifted their partisan allegiance from the Democratic to the Republican party. But while the 1968 Presidential election—featuring Nixon's

now-infamous "Southern Strategy"—is often treated as *the* critical inflection point during this process, the data imply a far more complicated story. As the chart above suggests, while Nixon did double his support from white workers in the South between 1968 and 1972, it was not until the 1984 election that Republicans increased their support among white workers. That is the point at which white workers began to shift their partisan allegiance quite decisively in favor of Republicans.

What might be said about the sharp rightward turn from the 80s onward? Though racism was undoubtedly at play, so, too, was political-economic restructuring. As I have already mentioned, one of the critical characteristics of neoliberal capitalism has been the growing prevalence of non-union jobs. Unsurprisingly, then, a central feature of neoliberal capitalism has been declining union membership across the board, *especially* within the white working class. The figure below calls attention to this fact. Here, we can observe the declining union membership of white workers during the neoliberal era. We can also see an inverse relationship between union membership rates among the white working class and their affiliation with the Republican party. This finding should not be surprising. As political scientists Paul Frymer and Jake Grumbach (2020) have shown, union membership moderates white prejudice and heightens class consciousness. In the absence of unions or similar institutions that can articulate a class program around which white workers can coalesce, they are likely to be drawn to racist appeals of Republican elites.

Figure 3.



Source: American National Election Survey (ANES)

Note: The 'White Working Class' is identified as those white respondents who, on the ANES, identified their social class as either average working, working, or upper working class.

We cannot understand the realignment of the white working-class without also reckoning with the transformation of the Democratic Party during this same period. As many have convincingly argued, Democrats, post-Johnson, abandoned many of the initiatives that had been part and parcel of the era of modern liberalism (Harrison and Bluestone 1988; Frank 2017; Mudge 2018). As I have alluded, modern liberalism was predicated upon a healthy social democratic state to curb against capital's excesses. This era of regimented capitalism began with the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt and came to an unofficial end around the late 1960s/early 1970s (Harvey 2011; Mudge 2018). It was at this time that the state transitioned from regimented capitalism to neoliberal capitalism. Though many debate the exact "endpoint" of regimented (or Keynesian) capitalism, the point remains that there was a marked shift in the state's political-economic structuring. The changes were profound. Driven mainly by a growing inflation "crisis" and stalled economic "growth," many political elites responded by arguing that the welfare state—and social democratic tendencies more broadly—had to be minimized

(Gilmore 2007; Cooper 2017). This "crisis" set up an apparent battle between capital and labor, with the former prevailing. As many have argued, one key reason that capital won out over labor was that one of labor's chief allies, the Democratic Party, capitulated to the notion that the era of social democracy was over. The Democratic Party, in effect, became a party committed to neoliberal capitalism—joining Republicans in the process.

Much can, and much has been written, about the rightward turn of the Democratic Party, particularly on macroeconomic policy. Consequently, I do not aim to offer a new perspective on how or why the Democratic party made that turn, nor whether this "crisis" warranted such a recalibration. Instead, I am interested in how this transition from regimented capitalism to neoliberalism capitalism has affected the Black Freedom Struggle in the "post-Civil Rights Era." More specifically, for those white individuals committed to racial equality, I want to understand how neoliberal capitalism shapes the types of antiracist behaviors they are likely to engage in and why. Suppose we are to accept, as Barbara Fields (1982) suggests, that interracial coalitions form within the political-economic order under which individuals must make choices. In that case, it follows that we must include in our analysis the terms of neoliberal capitalism in any theories of contemporary antiracism.

The Privatization of Racial Responsibility: A Theoretical Framework for Contemporary Antiracism

While I accept the notion that whites' opposition to racial justice could, in many cases, be a reflection of their anti-black attitudes, the belief that black gains necessarily means white losses, or even the growing hegemony of laissez-faire social policy, I contend that these theories are limited in helping us make sense of the political behaviors of those individuals who have both been the most ardent supporters and opponents of racial politics in the post-Civil Rights era:

white liberals. Many notable instances of reactionary racial politics have taken place in areas that many deem as racially progressive. And yet, many of these so-called liberal bastions—Boston, Los Angeles, Detroit, Philadelphia, Washington, and so forth—have, over the past half-century, experienced some of the most virulent rejections of racial justice among members of the white liberal class. In my view, the fact that these liberal areas are home to some of the most supportive *and* antagonistic whites means that any examination of contemporary racial politics must necessarily give due attention to this class of individuals. And as Geismer rightfully notes, although the liberal class is "a small portion of the electorate and an even smaller percentage of the national population, this group of people has come to hold a tremendous amount of political power at the national, state, and local levels" (Geismer 2017, p. 2). I will argue that this power is rooted in the displacement of the New Deal order in favor of a new, competitive neoliberal state—which fundamentally altered the trajectory of the black freedom struggle and white liberals' antiracist tendencies.

Thus, my framework evaluates white liberal behavior. The reasons are twofold. First, there is no a priori reason to expect White conservatives—most of whom eschew egalitarian policies and typically reject most state-sponsored efforts to address inequality of any kind—to support any forms of racial justice, radical or otherwise. At least not at this current political juncture. Thus, white conservatives ostensibly do not face much (if any) tension between their political attitudes and behaviors and, in fact, likely have ideological (or symbolic) reasons to reject racial justice altogether. The same is not valid for white liberals, which brings me to my second point: white liberals, unlike white conservatives, express principled commitments to racial justice and, in recent years, appear to be moving sharply to the left on several racial issues—a point that has not been lost on many social scientists and political observers alike (Brooks, 2019; Leonhardt, 2019; Yglesias, 2019; Engelhardt, 2020). We know that white liberals do not uniformly support

all racial policies, however. Consequently, there will likely be many situations in which White liberals' principled and material commitments to racial justice will not cohere.

In addition to limiting my analysis to white liberals, I also construct a top-down theoretical framework that centers the structural, political-economic forces which enable and constrain human behavior, rather than a bottom-up framework whose explanatory power derives from the examination of racial attitudes. Studying the conditions of the political-economic order and how it shapes human behavior, in my view, provides many advantages for those seeking to understand why racial inequality persists, even when changing "racial attitudes" might predict otherwise. First, most research within political science that seeks to explain racial disparities' persistence locates the source of the problem in White attitudes towards Black Americans. While I by no means believe that such studies are inconsequential, I argue that they are limited in their ability to understand the *causes* of racial inequality. After all, as Barbara and Karen Fields (2012) remind us, "Racism is not an emotion or state of mind, such as intolerance, bigotry, hatred, or malevolence. If it were that, it would easily be overwhelmed, because most people mean well, most of the time, and in any case are usually busy pursuing other purposes" (p. 17). This project zeroes in on the "other purposes" that individuals might pursue which, while seemingly benign, might further racial inequality.

Second, while some scholars have examined the degree to which self-interested behavior drives racial politics, it has, admittedly, taken a backseat to other theories that explain white political behavior—namely symbolic racism and group competition. Because the predominant paradigm in political science largely embraces the notion that racism is a manifestation of Whites' prejudice towards Black Americans—either at the level of the individual or the group—many often argue that when Whites behave in ways that are not "racially progressive," so to speak, then negative racial attitudes must be to blame. While many White Americans may feel racial animus

towards Black Americans, *I contend that prejudice is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for perpetuating racial inequality in America.* Indeed, I might even go so far as to say that prejudice, defined as a "dislike, hostility, or unjust behavior deriving from unfounded opinions" (Tilly 1998) is not even central to its perpetuation. Rather, I contend that *the maintenance* of racial inequality is, in many ways, a function of the personal considerations that individuals make (particularly White Americans given that they comprise the overwhelming majority of the American populace)—decisions that, while seemingly benign, are part and parcel of the neoliberal capitalist order which is racially stratified (Leiman 2010). Hence, our political-economic order can turn even well-intended actors into passive perpetrators of racial inequality.

Finally, while we should likely not expect individuals to always behave in ways that comport neatly with their morals or principles, we know that there are many situations in which people act in ways that align with their principles, even when those principles conflict with their self-interest. This is certainly true for individuals who express support for racially egalitarian ideals. In other words, there are often circumstances under which people's attitudes and behaviors are *actually* in lockstep with one another. But why is this the case? Why is it sometimes the case that one's racially egalitarian principles can sufficiently motivate them to behave in ways that are commensurate with their principles but, in other cases, do not act according to their stated ideals? I argue that in considering the political-economic dynamics in which individuals are behaving, we can make better sense of the forms that antiracism—and, more specifically, antiracist actions of the white liberal class—can take within the neoliberal racial order.

My overall thesis is as follows. While conventional wisdom holds that the white individuals who have been most likely to engage in political struggle alongside Black Americans have occupied the middle and upper-class strata, I argue that this view does not gel with political history. Or, perhaps more to the point, I contend that the story is far more complicated than

such an interpretation would suggest. Instead, it has historically been poor and working white people (the proletariat) who have been more likely to partner with Black people in the Black Freedom Struggle. Only recently has the inverse been somewhat true. I argue that the reason why is because the two major parties today differ little on questions of political economy—or, more specifically, macroeconomic policy. Both parties are amenable to capital, as scholars have noted. Neither party is a forceful ally of labor. Both parties accept the view that America should be the world's chief, if not the sole superpower. Slight variations notwithstanding, this has been the trend. The two parties have, however, staked decidedly different positions on social issues.[2] During this period, the Democratic Party came to be known as the party of racial equality. The Republican Party has, on the other hand, endorsed a racial hierarchy with whites atop it, both through implicit and explicit means. But while the debate about racial equality has remained despite this neoliberal turn, the economic components are often muted. Thus, antiracism no longer requires an economic dimension.

If both parties take neoliberal capitalism for granted—preferring, instead, to distinguish themselves according to their stances on so-called "social" issues—then it is easy to see why white PMCs might find the Democratic Party appealing. Under this political-economic epoch, their class interests are no longer antithetical to the pro-labor tendencies that were once customary of the Democratic Party. But as members of the party which espouses racial equality, many of these same white individuals still allege a commitment to racial equality. But consonant with neoliberal capitalism, the responsibility for racial justice no longer rests with the state. Instead, as is the case with most political and social issues of this era, the state no longer considers legitimate sweeping

[2] While I do think there are many limitations to the 'economic vs. social' dichotomy that some use to characterize American politics, for the purposes of this project, I use this distinction only to call attention to the fact that the two major parties have differed little on matter of macroeconomic policy since the 1960s. In other words, while the two might differ on questions of public policy or how politics should function *within* the capitalist order, neither party questions the legitimacy of the capitalist order tout court.

programs that could combat persistent social ills (in this case, racial inequality), opting to push individual solutions to structural problems. And it is against this political arrangement that I offer my theory of *the privatization of racial responsibility.*

Under my theoretical framework, I argue that antiracism's predominant form is racial sympathy (Chudy 2021) rather than solidarity.[3] This outcome is partly due to the professional-managerial class now occupy a larger segment of the Democratic Party. As a result, most whites who engage in antiracist behavior today will likely only do so to the extent that it is not antithetical to their class interests. Put another way, because members of the white professional-managerial strata are beholden to the structures of neoliberal capitalism by virtue of their class position, the antiracist choices they make will remain secondary to their material interests (or, put more crudely, their human capital). And since neoliberal capitalism is necessarily antagonistic towards most working people's needs—a disproportionate number of whom are Black—its preservation will, as a matter of course, mean that racial inequality will mainly continue unabated. This is the predictable consequence of relying on individuals to rectify a structural issue, racial oppression, which only the state can remedy. A. Philip Randolph (1966) made this point forcefully in the *Freedom Budget for All Americans*, stating that:

> Theoretically, the first objectives of the civil rights movement proper could be achieved without Federal action, if the hearts and minds of 200 million Americans were fully attuned to these objectives. But even if everyone wanted to get rid of unemployment and poverty — and practically everyone does — the specific actions toward these ends cannot be formulated, nor fully executed, by 200 million Americans in their separate and individual capacities. This is what our national union and our Federal government are for, and we must act accordingly.

Principles alone, in other words, cannot remedy racial inequality. In many respects, only

[3] Chudy defines "racial sympathy" as "white distress over black suffering." In her theoretical formulation, Chudy argues that "racial sympathy" is a form of affect whereby whites, because of their discontent with the plight of Black Americans, will be inclined to support explicitly racialized policies that allege to improve Black people's material condition. Racial sympathy, in social psychological terms, is an "in-group member's distress over out-group misfortune" (Chudy 2021, p. 124)

principles remain, given that the state is no longer committed to the sweeping structural transformations that Randolph and others articulated. Under this framework, I argue that white liberals, particularly those within the professional-managerial strata, will only feel responsible for addressing racial inequality so long as the cost of the antiracist behavior does not come at the expense of their material interests. Stated differently, racial sympathy can only go but so far. And by material, I do not mean merely financial interests. Instead, I mean that white liberal PMCs will likely express ambivalence towards policies or initiatives that they perceive as potentially undermining their class position and, by extension, their children's future class position. For, as Kinder and Sanders (1996) remind us, "it is the family, not the community and certainly not politics, that occupies the energy and attention of most Americans" (p. 51). Seen through this lens, we should expect that white liberal PMC's racial commitments will be highly symbolic if they view a policy or initiative as undermining their family's material or social position.

Taken together, how might we expect white liberals' antiracist commitments to look? I argue that *white liberals' commitments to racial justice depend upon the degree to which they believe an initiative or policy will threaten their human (familial) capital.* This formulation requires us to not just the costliness of a policy or act but also the cost of an initiative *relative* to one's familial capital. Figure 4 provides a rough assessment of how white PMCs might perform antiracism under neoliberal capitalism. As the matrix suggests, there are two clear circumstances under which we might expect which liberals to support an act of racial justice: when it is viewed as being relatively low-cost, as well as when white liberals do not expect to benefit materially. We might imagine that such a scenario might take the form of a white liberal family electing to place a "Black Lives Matter" sign on their front lawn, tweeting positively about the Movement for Black Lives, or even making a small donation to local civil rights organization. Both reflect a principled act but do not at all implicate

one's familial capital. We might term this *symbolic antiracism.* But while these might be principled acts, they do not get at the core of durable racial inequalities.

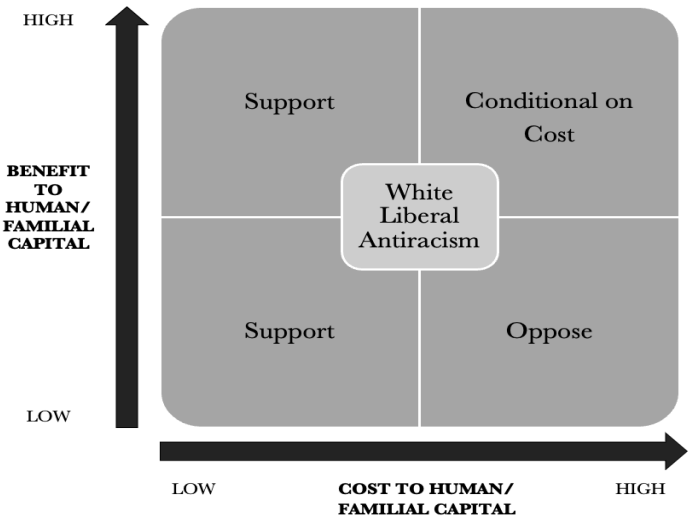
The top-left quadrant reflects situations in which a white liberal family might support a political act that will provide a clear material benefit but at little-to-no cost. An example of this might be voting for a progressive candidate who includes addressing racial inequality as one of their campaign commitments, along with other social issues that are important to the politically important to the family (such as increasing school funding, for instance). Under such a scenario, they can satisfy their own material needs and their principled commitments to racial justice without necessarily having to shoulder any material costs directly. This might adequately be termed *universal antiracism* and is fully compatible with the existing interesting-convergence theory (Bell 1980). In other words, these are circumstances under which black people might be inadvertent beneficiaries of an act or policy, even if they are not the foremost consideration. Warikoo (2016) also explains that many whites support diversity initiatives, particularly within higher education, because they believe it will allow them to relate better with different "racial groups," making them more appealing on the job market. In such cases, whites view "diversity" as beneficial (so long as it does not come at their expense). Under each of these scenarios, durable racial inequalities might be alleviated, though the extent to which racial gaps might be closed is questionable.

When white liberals perceive an act of antiracism as being costly to their familial capital, while rendering few or no material benefits, we should expect the initiative to be met with opposition. The battle of residential zoning laws encapsulates this phenomenon. Many white liberal enclaves are often antagonistic towards changing zoning laws in a way that might lead to greater neighborhood density (Geismer 2017; Trounstine 2018). On the one hand, this maneuver tends to preserve individuals' social status (and thus, familial capital) but, on the other hand,

perpetuates racial inequality. Therefore, while supporting greater density might be the principled thing to do, embracing such an initiative is often perceived as requiring an undue degree of material sacrifice. This situation leaves racial inequality firmly entrenched.

What happens, however, when an initiative might be interpreted as both costly *and* beneficial? Here, I argue that whether white liberals will engage in antiracist behavior is heavily conditioned by the act's cost. Let us imagine that a local school district is proposing a $200 million bond issue to pay for technology and infrastructure improvements. Passage of the bond will mean an increase in property tax, with higher-earning families being asked to shoulder a higher burden of cost. Although white liberal families with children in local public schools stand to benefit from the bond's passage, they may not feel as though the effort is worth the increase in property taxes. Thus, under this scenario, they might opt for the status quo—in this case, a rejection of the bond issue. If, on the other hand, they believe that the proposed benefits of the bond vis-a-vis an improvement to their child(ren)'s education (and, by extension, their familial capital), then they might very well be inclined to support it. Therefore, we might label a high cost, high benefit act as a form of *conditional antiracism*.

Figure 4. Relationship Between White Liberals' Human Capital and Antiracist Commitments



In sum, we might then derive a handful of propositions regarding when white liberals might engage in antiracist behavior under neoliberal capitalism:

- *If an antiracist act comes at a small or no cost to one's human (familial) capital, then they will engage in antiracist behavior.*
- *If an antiracist act comes at a high cost while offering no benefit to one's human (familial) capital, then they will not engage in antiracist behavior.*
- *If an antiracist act comes at a high cost but also offers a high degree of benefits to one's human (familial) capital, then they will engage in antiracist behavior if the cost does not outweigh the benefit.*
- *If an antiracist act provides benefits to one's human (familial) capital, but is low cost, then they will engage in antiracist behavior.*

Conclusion

On July 9, 2020, Betsy Hodges, the former mayor of Minneapolis, penned an op-ed in the *New York Times* questioning white liberals' willingness to make sacrifices on behalf of historically marginalized communities. Writing in the wake of George Floyd's murder and ensuing protests, Hodges (2020) stated that "white liberals, despite believing we are saying and doing the right things, have resisted the systemic changes our cities have needed for decades." She also indicted white liberals for "preserving white comfort at the expense of others." She went on to describe Minneapolis' politics in zero-sum terms, claiming that white liberals' preferences for symbolic rather than structural changes to the status quo disadvantages "communities of color" through "the hoarding of advantage by mostly white neighborhoods." Accordingly, Hodges located the solution to racial inequality in white liberals' ability to "find ways to make our actions match our beliefs this time around," rather than settling for symbolic gestures. In Hodges's view, the fate of racial equality rests in the hands of the white liberal class.

I maintain, however, that there are limitations to such an arrangement. While a growing number of white PMCs may be identifying as liberal and, as a result, aligning themselves with the Democratic Party, the terms of our political-economic order will likely render radical politics

unattainable. Given the precarity of even middle-class life, expecting individuals to sacrifice their material assets for principled causes does not seem politically realistic. As Harrison and Bluestone (1988) state, “few of us will bet our homes, our cars, or our jobs. We are all gamblers to some extent, but we value basic security even more” (p. 175). Simply put, a neoliberal political-economic order that is relentlessly competitive and zero-sum in nature undermines the potentiality of interracial, solidaristic racial politics.

I have no desire to quarrel over whether white liberals are *genuinely* committed to racial equality or if their leftward turn is primarily "expressive," as some are wont to proclaim (Huddy et al 2015; Huddy and Bankert 2017; Mason 2018). I, nor anyone else for that matter, can make such a claim. I do want to argue that their class interests are often incompatible with the radical demands of the Black Freedom Struggle and, as a result, can serve as a barrier to more substantive change.[4] For if an alliance is to have "permanence and loyal commitment from various elements," as King once wrote, "each of them must have a goal from which it benefits and none must have an outlook in basic conflict with the others” (King 1967, p. 159).

And what about the white working class? How do they figure into contemporary antiracist politics? Per my earlier review of Democratic realignment, as the Democratic Party's commitment to neoliberal capitalism has strengthened, it has been offset by a winnowing white working-class constituency. Given the overdetermined nature of partisan realignment, I do not want to argue that the Democrats' neoliberal turn *caused* white working-class individuals to change their partisan affiliations from Democratic to Republican. I do want to say that it is at least *one* primary reason for the migration. This development means that a growing segment of

[4] To be sure, I do not think such a perspective is limited to just whites who comprise the professional-managerial class. As Reed (1999) argues, Black members of the professional-managerial class have also been conservative in their politics regarding their class position. However, given that there are far more white members of the PMC (relative to Black people), I focus my analysis accordingly.

the white working class is no longer available for the kinds of solidaristic politics that King and other Black leaders envisioned. If people engaged in the Black Freedom Struggle today hope for support from white individuals, it will likely be in the form of racial sympathy and not political solidarity.

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