

# **“We are oppressed because we are black”: Rethinking reparations from a Black Power perspective**

## **1. Introduction**

It is generally agreed that the Black Power Movement was born on June 16, 1966 in Greenwood Mississippi when Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Ture), shortly after taking the stage at a demonstration in Broad Street Park and declaring that African Americans would never achieve justice without the capacity for self-rule, surprised the nation (and perhaps the world) by asserting that what the black community needed was to start proclaiming: “We want Black Power!” Throughout his speech, Carmichael repeated the phrase five times, eliciting every time a resounding “Black Power!” reply from the audience (Joseph, 2016: 138-139). As is pointed out by historian Peniel E. Joseph, this was not the first time that the phrase “Black Power” was introduced. It had been previously used by Richard Wright as the title of his 1954 nonfiction treatise about the liberation of the West African Gold Coast, by the activist Paul Robeson during the 1950’s and by Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr. in early 1966. However, it was Carmichael’s urgent rhetoric, militant posture, and defiant tone during that hot summer day in Greenwood which ultimately led to the popularization of the term and the birth of a new social movement (Joseph, 2009: 755).

Over the years, the rhetoric, militancy, and defiance not just of Stokely Carmichael but of the many different figures of the Black Power movement would result in the movement becoming increasingly associated with a series of iconic but fleeting images, such as those of members of the Black Panther Party marching outside an Oakland, California courthouse, the FBI’s wanted poster for Angela Davis, or the black-gloved sprinters at the 1968 Mexico

City Olympics (Joseph, 2009: 751). And while this iconography certainly enhanced the movement's visibility, at the same time, it served to obfuscate its theoretical contribution. While some saw in the movement a critique of the middle-class focus of the civil rights movement, others saw in it a call for African Americans to seize their fair share of American capitalism, while still others saw in it a call to recover and celebrate the beauty and significance of black culture. This obfuscation was merely enhanced by the fact that the political projects of the different organizations that took up the call for Black Power were very diverse, ranging from efforts to establish an independent African-American nation state, to efforts that sought to guarantee that African Americans could defend themselves from the misconduct and abuses of police departments (Glaude, 2002: 4). As a result of the above, the Black Power movement became increasingly reduced to a mere catchphrase, while the writings of its main figures became derided as no more than mere pieces of political propaganda<sup>1</sup>.

Over the last few years, however, important efforts have been made, along a range of different academic disciplines, to demystify and complicate the traditional narrative surrounding the Black Power movement and, most importantly, to identify and intellectually engage with the theoretical contributions of the movement and its main figures (Joseph, 2009: 752). And while it is true that Political Theory has not been the exception,<sup>2</sup> it is also true that the discipline's efforts still lag considerably behind. In this sense, the present project seeks to contribute to the endeavor of recovering and engaging with the political thought that lies

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<sup>1</sup> As is pointed out by Lisa Beard (2023: 3), given that black radical thought tends to be heavily mediated by iconography and aestheticization, it is not uncommon for its content to become flattened and depoliticized in intellectual and popular culture. Thinkers and movements, argues Beard, become two-dimensional symbols that can be easily mobilized in favor of all kinds of political projects and commercial ventures.

<sup>2</sup> See (Beard, 2023), (Blanchard, 2021), (Valls, 2010)

behind the Black Power movement by exploring the ways in which the writings of one of the movement's most prominent figures, Stokely Carmichael, can help us rethink the terms of a debate that has enjoyed renewed interest in recent years: reparations for slavery.

Should the reader have a cursory familiarity with the concept of reparations as it has been popularized by Anglophone analytic liberal political philosophy, the aim of the present project might appear to be somewhat puzzling; if not downright contradictory. In what way could the writings of Stokely Carmichael, which emphasize traditional Black Power goals of self-emancipation, self-determination and self-defense for African Americans help us rethink the terms of the reparations debate which, in its analytic and liberal iteration, has been usually characterized by notions of atonement, forgiveness, and redress? My contention throughout the present paper will be that there are three different ways in which Carmichael's writings can contribute to this aim: 1) they can help liberal analytic political philosophers develop a deeper account of the legacy left behind slavery; 2) they can help transform reparations (in its analytic and liberal iteration) from an oppressor-centered practice into a victim-centered one and; 3) they can help liberal political philosophers arrive at the realization that true redress might require nothing short of a wholesale revolution of all existing structures.

Before moving on to the following section and beginning with the analysis, however, I would like to make a brief point about what this paper is not. This paper is not a blueprint for a specific reparations scheme. The reader should not expect to find here a particular set of public policy recommendations, or a detailed description of the way in which reparations should be implemented. Rather than offer specific answers, this paper seeks to introduce new questions. By exploring the content of Carmichael's reflections on Black Power, the paper seeks to motivate liberal analytic political theorists to rethink the way in which they have so

far understood the concept of reparations and, hopefully, to motivate them to come up with new and better answers of their own.

## 2. “White Supremacy” and the legacy of slavery

Peniel E. Joseph opens his biography of Stokely Carmichael by describing him as intuitively possessing “an orator’s gift of speech and a showman’s sense of timing,” a powerful combination that, according to the author, was merely enhanced by Carmichael’s proverbial good looks: “tall, dark and handsome, with wide eyes that conveyed mischief” (Joseph, 2016: 18). Carmichael’s talents, however, were not limited to his skills as an orator, he was also a gifted intellectual who dealt with ideas with as much talent as he dealt with rhetoric and emotions (Joseph, 2016: 14). All of the above therefore conspired to transform Carmichael into a prolific writer and speaker, authoring and delivering countless speeches throughout his public life, and publishing a number of articles in diverse popular media outlets. The analysis of the present paper, however, will merely concentrate on the content of two of the books that Carmichael penned throughout his life: *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (1967), which was written in conjunction with Columbia University professor Charles Hamilton, and *Stokely Speaks: From Black Power to Pan-Africanism* (1971), a carefully curated collection of some of Carmichael’s most iconic and theoretically fertile letters, articles, and speeches<sup>3</sup>.

In *Black Power* and *Stokely Speaks*, Carmichael defended a vision of radical democracy where black men and women, but especially those that were poor and unlettered or semi-

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to clarify that given the US-centered nature of this paper, I will only concentrate on analyzing what could be considered as Carmichael’s “early writings;” that is, those that deal primarily with the African American experience. Carmichael’s turn to Pan-Africanism and the way in which this strategic and intellectual transformation interacted with his vision of Black Power will not be explored here. This particular focus is also the reason why I have chosen to refer to the author as Stokely Carmichael, rather than by his subsequently chosen name: Kwame Ture.

literate, would be responsible for ushering in a new era of democracy and racial justice by liberating themselves from the psychological, economic, and political bondage in which they were being held (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967: 75). Both texts are therefore inflected with multiple reflections on self-emancipation, self-control, self-defense, the retrieval of a shared sense of culture and history, and a staunch rejection of the principle of integration. Interestingly, however, Carmichael's vision of radical democracy never references the issue of reparations. This omission is especially telling if one considers that the concept of reparations was not foreign to the Black Power movement. In fact, the economic workshops of the Black Power Conferences of 1967 and 1968 were chaired by "Queen Mother" Audley Moore, a prominent reparations activist, who used her platform during both conferences to push younger activists (such as Carmichael) to include reparations as part of their Black Power agenda (Farmer, 2018: 120-121). Furthermore, in 1969 Jim Forman (who Carmichael knew well from his days in the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee), interrupted the Sunday morning service at Riverside church in New York City to introduce his *Black Manifesto*, which demanded \$500 million in reparations from white churches and Jewish synagogues (Verdun, 1992: 603-604). Be that as it may, it is nevertheless my belief that, intentionally or not, Carmichael developed a series of reflections that can help analytic political philosophers rethink their current understanding of the concept of reparations.

As has been pointed out by Katrina Forrester, during the 1970s Anglophone analytic political philosophers slowly but surely separated the concept of reparations from the question of how to repair the historical wrongs of slavery (Forrester, 2019: 35), replacing it instead with forward-looking justifications that argued that the normative wrong to be repaired should be the existence of current injustices, regardless of the fact that these injustices might have

causally derived from past injustices (Forrester, 2019: 42). And while it is true that this choice, as the author well notes, allowed for the development of a very demanding form of domestic, and later global, reparative egalitarianism, this scheme was bought at the expense of completely ignoring the relationship between reparations and historical and structural injustice. In the hands of analytic political philosophers, argues Forrester, black chattel slavery became nothing more than a historical fact with little normative force (Forrester, 2019: 50). Forrester's analysis leaves its readers with the sense that a new and "liberationist," as opposed to liberal, conception of reparations is required (Forrester, 2019: 28), and it is this paper's contention that Stokely Carmichael's thought could be the key to tracing a new path forward.

In this sense, I would like to begin my analysis by illustrating the way in which Carmichael's thought could help liberal political philosophers develop a deeper account of the legacy left behind by slavery. In the first chapter of *Black Power*, titled "White Power: The Colonial Situation," Carmichael attempts to set the foundation for his vision of Black Power by offering a diagnosis of the status enjoyed by African Americans, which he likens to that of "colonial subjects in relation to the white society":

[...] black people in this country form a colony, and it is not in the interest of the colonial power to liberate them. Black people are legal citizens of the United States with, for the most part, the same *legal* rights as other citizens. Yet they stand as colonial subjects in relation to the white society. Thus institutional racism has another name: colonialism (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967: 5).

In this sense, argues Carmichael, much like any other colonial subject, black Americans are unable to exercise direct control over their lives, given that all of the major decisions that

affect their lives are made for them by the white establishment in an effort to perpetuate their subordinated status (1967: xv). For Carmichael, therefore, the solution to this colonial status lies in the adoption of Black Power, which the author defines as a call for all black Americans to take back power and control over their own lives (as opposed to waiting for power and control to be given back to them). A task that entails, on the one hand, redefining their history and identity (1967: 34-35) and, on the other hand, consolidating behind their own in order to make and implement their own decisions and institutions (1967: 47):

The adoption of the concept of Black Power is one of the most legitimate and healthy developments in American politics and race relations in our time. [...] It is a call for black people in this country to unite, to recognize their heritage, to build a sense of community. It is a call for black people to begin to define their own goals, to lead their own organizations and to support those organizations. It is a call to reject the racist institutions and values of this society (1967: 44).

While the content of Carmichael's diagnosis of the race problem in America as well as the content of his proposed solution could be (and have been<sup>4</sup>), on their own, the subject of an entirely separate paper, in what follows, I would like to concentrate instead on what I believe is a somewhat unexplored aspect of this diagnosis and solution: the fact that in the course of developing these ideas, whether intentionally or not, Carmichael also develops a very particular interpretation of the legacy left behind by slavery; one that can offer interesting points of reflection for liberal political philosophers.

Carmichael introduces this interpretation in the first chapter of *Black Power*:

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<sup>4</sup> For more information see (Valls, 2010)

The fact of slavery had to have profound impact on the subsequent attitudes of the larger society toward the black man. The fact of slavery helped to fix the sense of superior group position [...] The emancipation of the slave by legal act could certainly not erase such notions from the minds of racists. They believed in their superior status, not in paper documents. And that belief has persisted [...] Even when the black man has participated in wars to defend this country, even when the black man has repeatedly demonstrated loyalty to this country, the embedded colonial mentality has continued to deny him equal status in the social order (1967: 25).

In this passage, Carmichael describes the legacy left behind by slavery as an ingrained belief, shared by those who enjoy the privilege of whiteness, that they, simply by dint of the color their skin, are inherently superior to all black men and women. A belief that originated as a consequence of the system of chattel slavery but did not disappear when this system was formally abolished by the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. And a belief the persistence of which has meant that while African Americans might enjoy the same legal rights as white Americans, they do not enjoy the same social standing (1967: 6).

Later on, while articulating his rejection of the principle of integration, Carmichael identifies this belief in the inherent superiority of whiteness by the name of “white supremacy:”

“Integration” as a goal today speaks to the problem of blackness not only in an unrealistic way but also in a despicable way. It is based on complete acceptance of the fact that in order to have a decent house or education, black people must move into a white neighborhood or send their children into a white school. This reinforces, among both black and white, the idea that “white” is automatically superior and “black” is by definition inferior. For this reason, “integration” is a subterfuge for the maintenance of white supremacy (1967: 54).



In this sense, for Carmichael, the legacy of slavery can be described as the ingraining of “white supremacy” (understood as the shared belief in the inherent superiority of whiteness and, by extension, in the inherent inferiority of blackness) in the structure of American society, which has resulted in the denial of equal social standing for all African Americans.

This assertion, however, requires certain unpacking. On the one hand, what exactly is, according to Carmichael, the mechanism whereby the system of chattel slavery resulted in the ingraining of “white supremacy”? While Carmichael does not address this point directly, I believe that part of the answer can be found in the following excerpt from his 1966 speech at the University of California, Berkely, which was subsequently reproduced in *Stokely Speaks*:

A man was picked as a slave for one reason—the color of his skin. Black was automatically inferior, inhuman, and therefore fit for slavery [...]. We are oppressed as a group because we are black, not because we are lazy or apathetic, not because we’re stupid or we stink, not because we eat watermelon or have good rhythm. We are oppressed because we are black (Carmichael, 1971: 56)

In this passage, I contend, Carmichael hints at an argument that is similar to the one defended by Saidiya Hartman in her book *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. There Hartman argues that by racializing rights and entitlements, the system of chattel slavery resulted in the designation of a superior and an inferior race (Hartman, 2022: 34-35). The system of chattel slavery, Hartman maintains, made whiteness synonymous with freedom, rights, and entitlements, while at the same time making blackness synonymous with slavery and, by extension, with a lack of rights and entitlements (2022: 207). As a consequence, the white race came to be perceived as superior

(precisely because it was the only race whose members could access proper rights and entitlements), and the black race came to be perceived as inferior (once again, precisely because its members were unable to access proper rights and entitlements) (2022: 34-35). In Hartman's words:

Friends and foes of the Negro alike assumed that the degradation of enslavement made blacks less than men; so this emergent manhood was anticipated, groomed, doubted, and feared. The infantile condition of the race both necessitated legislation on their behalf and justified black subordination (2022: 315).

On the other hand, what exactly does Carmichael's "denial of equal social standing for all African Americans" consist in? It is my contention that the answer to this question can be gleaned from the author's multiple discussions of the negative consequences of "white supremacy," which are interspersed throughout the content of *Black Power*. In these passages, Carmichael describes African Americans' denial of equal social standing as being made up of three major components: psychological, political, and economic (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967: 6). Psychologically, Carmichael argues, the widespread belief in the inferiority of blackness results in African Americans perpetually doubting themselves, their worth as human beings, their capacities, and their self-respect. (1967: 29). Politically, the belief that black Americans are not capable of doing the same things as white Americans prompts the white establishment to make decisions *for* them as opposed to *with* them. White reformers, says Carmichael, never feel compelled to ask whether the changes they are seeking to implement are consistent with the views and interests of black people, as perceived by those people (1967: 65). Economically, the belief in the inherent inferiority of black men and women results in black communities being saddled with unsteady forms of employment, low

incomes, exploitative credit, as well as with overpriced and low-quality merchandise (1967: 20).

Carmichael, therefore, has a very particular interpretation of the legacy left behind by slavery. In contrast, most liberal analytic accounts of reparations usually adhere to one of two possible interpretations of the legacy of slavery: 1) those that argue that the legacy of slavery consists in a loss of opportunities for African Americans, which has led, in turn, to a series of distributive inequalities between white and black Americans<sup>5</sup> (inequalities in income, inequalities in access to health, inequalities in education, etc.) and; 2) those that argue that the legacy of slavery consists in broken moral relationships between white and black Americans, which in turn have resulted in a divided society where reconciliation is impossible<sup>6</sup>. As a consequence, most liberal analytic accounts of reparations usually either call for a significant redistribution of resources or for a series of measures (such as public apologies, truth and reconciliation commissions, etc.) that can breed forgiveness and reconciliation between the interested parties.

As previously described, however, for Carmichael, the legacy of slavery consists in something bigger than a mere loss of opportunities or broken moral relationships, it consists in a deeply ingrained, almost unshakable, sometimes conscious but generally unconscious, belief that, as Killian and Grigg put it, being a black citizen will never be “just as good” as being a white one. A belief the persistence of which has important psychological, political, and economic consequences for black Americans. Carmichael’s interpretation of the legacy

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<sup>5</sup> For more information see (Balfour, 2005), (Corlett, 2003), (McCarthy, 2004), (Ogletree, 2003), (Táiwò, 2021) and (Verdun, 1992)

<sup>6</sup> For more information see (Brooks, 2006), (Minow, 1999), (Thompson, 2002), (von Platz & Reidy, 2006) and (Walker, 2006)

of slavery is thus quite different from those of most liberal analytic political philosophers. While the former focus on issues of redistribution and reconciliation, Carmichael questions the very working of American society by questioning the kinds of beliefs that lie at its foundation. It is thus my contention that Carmichael's interpretation of the legacy of slavery can function as a challenge for liberal analytic political philosophers to deepen their analyses and to ask more complicated questions; to dare to excavate the legacy of slavery beyond its surface-level components and, as a consequence, to reconsider whether lost opportunities or broken moral relationships truly constitute the only, or most important, legacies of slavery. Above all, however, it is my contention that Carmichael's interpretation can function as a challenge for liberal analytic political philosophers to seriously investigate the claim that the most encompassing legacy of slavery consists in a deeply ingrained belief in the superiority of whiteness, and to carefully consider what this might imply not just for notions of redress or for the concept of reparations itself, but for the very functioning of American society.

### **3. Reparations as a victim-centered practice**

Upon its publication on October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1967 *Black Power* received wide popular acclaim. The book's critics, however, were not as generous. While willing to concede that *Black Power* contained a powerful and insightful diagnosis of the systematic race problem in America, critics still faulted both Carmichael and the book for what Christopher Lasch in *The New York Review of Books* described as "a failure to forge concrete proposals." A sentiment that was echoed by authors such as Fred Powledge, Albert Murray and Ralph Ellison (Joseph, 2016: 270-271). More than a year later, on December 9, 1968 Carmichael delivered a speech at A&T University in Greensboro, North Carolina, the content of which seemed to have been written as a direct response to these criticisms, given that in it, Carmichael introduced, for

the first time, a more detailed description of the strategy that black Americans should follow in order to liberate themselves from their colonial status:

If we start with the fact that black people are colonized people, we have to branch from there and see what other problems we have. We must try and pose some of the solutions to those problems. There are basically two levels on which a colonized people move for their liberation: one is called, for lack of a better term, entertainment, and the second is called education. Both of them are necessary. The entertainment stage is very necessary. The entertainment is what's happening when black people say, "We're going to burn this city down. We can get Whitey. He ain't that bad." It's a sort of entertainment—we're entertaining ourselves because, for the first time, we are publicly saying what we always privately felt but were afraid to say. And while we're saying it—even though we're not powerful enough to do what we say—it's a sort of catharsis, a necessity, because, until we get to the entertainment stage, we are psychologically unequal to our oppressor. After that stage, after we begin to feel psychologically equal to the oppressor, then comes the stage of strategic planning, working out a correct ideology for a cohesive force, and moving on to victory (Carmichael, 1971: 129).

In this speech, Carmichael describes a two-stage strategy of liberation. The first stage entails achieving psychological equality with the white oppressor through a cathartic process of expression where black Americans finally dare to "speak the unspoken." As is hinted at by Carmichael, "speaking the unspoken" consists in "black people using, for once, the words they want to use, not just the words whites want to hear" (1971: 34). In this sense, for Carmichael, an important part of liberating black Americans from their colonial status requires them finally standing up to their white oppressors. An idea that the author echoes in

multiple other writings and speeches, such as his February 17, 1968 speech at the “Free Huey” rally in honor of Huey P. Newton’s birthday:

We have been so colonized that we are ashamed to say we hate, and that is the best example of a person who’s colonized. You sit in your house, a honky walks in your house, beats you up, rapes your wife, beats up your child, and you don’t have the humanity to say, “I hate you.” You don’t have it. That is how dehumanized we are. We are so dehumanized we cannot say, “Yes, we hate you for what you have done to us”—can’t say it (1971: 111).

The second stage consists in a process of “strategic planning and organizing.” Unlike the first stage, Carmichael tells us, in this second stage, action takes precedence over expression. The author, however, does not actually specify what it is that this process of “strategic planning and organizing” might entail. Nevertheless, the following excerpt from *Black Power* can provide us with an idea of what Carmichael might have had in mind:

The next step is what we shall call the process of political modernization – a process which must take place if the society is to be rid of racism. “Political modernization” includes many things, but we mean by it three major concepts: (1) questioning old values and institutions of the society; (2) searching for new and different forms of political structure to solve political and economic problems; and (3) broadening the base of political participation to include more people in the decision-making process (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967: 39).

As the reader might have noticed, a notable aspect of Carmichael’s strategy of liberation is its victim-centered character. One of the central assumptions of this strategy is that black Americans must be the agents of their own liberation or, in other words, that black Americans

must be the ones to free *themselves* from the colonial status in which they find themselves. This is a consequence, I believe, of the fact that Carmichael is aware that there are certain elements of the process of liberation that only black Americans can enact, for and by themselves. Such is the case, for example, with the psychological oppression inflicted on them by the white establishment, liberation from which requires that black Americans finally express, to themselves and to the world, the anger, pain, and humiliation that this colonial and subordinated status has supposed for them. At the same time, it is my belief that this victim-centered character is also a consequence of the fact that Carmichael is convinced that processes of *self*-liberation yield larger and more empowering benefits for their agents than processes of liberation that are simply bestowed upon them.

In contrast, unlike Carmichael, most liberal analytic accounts of reparations generally assume that the only role that former victims, such as black Americans, can occupy during processes of redress is one of recipients<sup>7</sup>. That is, recipients of the apologies, redistributions, benefits, etc. that are offered by their former oppressors in an effort to atone for their past wrongdoings. This is a product, I believe, of the fact that most existing liberal analytic accounts of reparations conceive of processes of redress as a one-way street, where the most pressing consideration is to determine what former oppressors must do in order to *atone* for the harm they have inflicted, rather than to determine what former victims actually *need* in order to fully redress the harms that have been inflicted on them.

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<sup>7</sup> While it is true that liberal reparations arguments that focus on restorative justice envision a slightly more active role for former victims, it is also true that this role is generally circumscribed to “a willingness to venture forgiveness or at least reconciliation in response to a wrongdoer’s reparative efforts” (von Platz & Reidy, 2006: 362).

In this sense, the victim-centered character of Carmichael's strategy of liberation can help us pose some important challenges to liberal political philosophers and their accounts of reparations: first and foremost, why should former victims be excluded from participating in the process of redressing the injuries that have been inflicted on them? Or, in other words, why should redress be considered as something that can only be *given* to former victims, as opposed to something that can be actively constructed by them? Second, could it be possible that certain elements of the process of redress can *only* be enacted by former victims? And even if this were not the case, could it be possible that a process of *self*-redress could lead to better and more empowering results for former victims? Third and finally, should processes of redress always be synonymous with processes of atonement? That is, should expiating the guilt of former oppressors be considered as important (and at times even more so) as doing whatever might be necessary to redress the injuries that have been inflicted on former victims (part of which might require, as described in the previous points, accepting that former oppressors are not always the most suited agents to enact all aspects of the process of redress)?

Carmichael's strategy of liberation, however, is not the only place in the author's writings where it is possible to find support for the idea that former victims should play an active role in redressing the injuries that have been inflicted on them. In the preface to *Black Power*, while discussing the content and purpose of the book, Carmichael introduces, somewhat inadvertently, another important reason why former victims (black Americans) should play an active role in processes of redress: the fact that former oppressors (white Americans), do not always have the capacity to fully and properly condemn themselves for their past wrongdoings



Camus and Sartre have asked: Can a man condemn himself? Can whites, particularly liberal whites, condemn themselves? Can they stop blaming blacks and start blaming their own system? Are they capable of the shame which might become a revolutionary emotion? We –black people– have found that they usually cannot condemn themselves; therefore black Americans must do it (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967: xvii)

For Carmichael, I believe, this incapacity derives from two separate sources. On the one hand, it derives from the fact that most white Americans are direct beneficiaries of the status quo, and thus do not have the incentive to either carry out a proper diagnosis of the harms that have been inflicted on black Americans, or to develop and implement strategies or policies that could ensure a full and proper redressal of these harms:

The groups which have access to the necessary resources and the ability to effect change benefit politically and economically from the continued subordinate status of the black community. This is not to say that every single white American consciously oppresses black people. He does not need to. Institutional racism has been maintained deliberately by the power structure [...] (1967: 22).

On the other hand, for Carmichael, this incapacity derives from the fact that grasping the entirety of the harm inflicted on black Americans and developing strategies or policies that might be able to fully redress this harm requires being able to access a point of view that is largely unavailable to white Americans:

But how fully can white people free themselves from the tug of the group position— free themselves not so much from overt racist attitudes in themselves as from a more subtle paternalism bred into the society [...]? (1967: 28).

In sum, the content of Carmichael's writings can help us challenge the widely held notion among liberal analytic accounts of reparations that former victims can never play an active role in processes of redress. This, by pointing to the fact that: 1) there might be certain elements of these processes that only former victims can enact; 2) processes of *self*-redress might yield better and more empowering results for former victims and; 3) former oppressors can never be fully trusted to successfully carry out processes of redress, either because they have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, or because they lack the epistemic capacity that is required to properly carry out all aspects of these processes.

#### **4. Redress as the seed of revolutionary transformations**

On September 10, 1966 *The Saturday Evening Post* published an editorial titled "A New White Backlash?" which sought to expose the racism, hypocrisy and prejudice that permeated white America:

We are all, let us face it, Mississippians. We all fervently wish that the Negro problem did not exist, or that, if it must exist, it could be ignored. Confronted with the howling need for decent schools, jobs, housing, and all the other minimum rights of the American system, we will do our best, in a half-hearted way, to correct old wrongs. The hand may be extended grudgingly and patronizingly, but anyone who rejects that hand rejects his own best interests. For minimum rights are the only rights that we are willing to guarantee, and above those minimum rights there is and will continue to be a vast area of discrimination and inequity and unfairness, the area in which we claim the most basic right of all –the right to be stupid and prejudiced, the right to make mistakes, the right to be less and worse than we pretend, the right to be ourselves. When this majority right is threatened, the majority will react accordingly –with results that could be disastrous for all of us (cited in Joseph, 2016: 169-170).

In this editorial, as is pointed out by historian Peniel E. Joseph, “white supremacy” is portrayed as part of white America’s birthright; and one which will be defended by any means necessary (2016: 170). Almost at the same time, as if attempting to complement the content of this editorial, Carmichael published, in the Autumn-Winter volume of *The Massachusetts Review*, an essay titled “Toward Black Liberation” where he offered, among other things, his own scathing indictment of “white supremacy:”

The history of every institution of this society indicates that a major concern in the ordering and structuring of the society has been the maintaining of the Negro community in its condition of dependence and oppression. This has not been on the level of individual acts of discrimination –individual whites against individual Negroes– but total acts by the white community against the Negro community. This fact cannot be too strongly emphasized –that racist assumptions of white superiority have been so deeply ingrained in the structure of society that it infuses its entire functioning, and is so much a part of the national subconscious that it is taken for granted and it is frequently not even recognized. It is more than a figure of speech to say that the Negro community in America is the victim of white imperialism and colonial exploitation (Carmichael, 1971: 46-47).

In this passage Carmichael expresses with scintillating clarity (perhaps even more so than in other of his writings) his conviction that “white supremacy” should not be thought of as an individual belief that exists only in the minds of individual whites; but rather, as a structural belief, one that permeates all existing structures of American society. *Redressing* “white supremacy,” therefore, cannot require anything less than a complete revamping of all existing structures, a point that Carmichael makes very clear in the third chapter of *Black Power*, when discussing the viability of interracial political coalitions:

The major mistake made by exponents of the coalition theory is that they advocate alliances with groups which have never had as their central goal the necessarily total revamping of the society. At bottom, those groups accept the American system and want only –if at all– to make peripheral, marginal reforms in it. Such reforms are inadequate to rid the society of racism. [...] the overriding sense of superiority that pervades white America (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967: 60-61).

In the chapter, Carmichael concludes that “allying with [white] forces is clearly not consistent with the long-term progress of blacks (1967: 72),” given that black Americans are always seeking to revamp and revolutionize society’s structures so as to rid them of the belief in the inherent superiority of whiteness, while white Americans are, at best, only willing to implement marginal reforms to the status quo. In this sense, it is my belief that Carmichael’s discussion of the structural character of “white supremacy” should prompt liberal analytic reparations scholars to investigate the structural implications of the legacy left behind by slavery and to confront the fact that fully redressing this legacy might require nothing short of a complete revolution of all existing structures.

Saidiya Hartman defends a similar idea in the second chapter of *Scenes of Subjection*, titled “Redressing the Pained Body.” While never actually using the label “structural,” Hartman nevertheless argues that slavery constituted a breach of such vast proportions that it can never be fully redressed: the bodies that were broken and the lives that were lost in the Middle Passage, the auction block, and the plantation grounds can never really be made whole again. At the same time, however, the magnitude of the breach also supposes that any effort to redress it, however incomplete, can harbor the seeds of revolutionary transformations:

While the breach can never be fully repaired or compensated, at the very least, the efforts to set things right would entail a revolution of the social order, an entirely new set of arrangements [...]. Certainly, the body broken by the regime of work, the regularity of punishment, the persistence of torture and the violence of rape and sexual exploitation is in dire need of restitution. Yet the very conditions that have produced the broken and depleted body and the body as object, instrument, and commodity ensure that the work of restoration and recompense is necessarily incomplete. [...] The incompleteness of redress is related to the magnitude of the breach –the millions lost in the Middle Passage and the fifteen million and more captured and enslaved in the Americas– and to the inadequacy of remedy (Hartman, 2022: 129-131).

Much like Hartman’s argument, Carmichael’s discussion of the structural character of “white supremacy” can prompt reparations scholars to grapple with the structural dimension of both the breach constituted by slavery and of its legacy. And, by extension, prompt them, on the one hand, to seriously investigate which might be the structural implications of this legacy (among which Carmichael’s “white supremacy” could be counted) and, on the other hand, to seriously investigate what kinds of revolutionary transformations would be required to redress each of these implications.

Before closing this section, however, I would like to note that a number of liberal analytic political philosophers<sup>8</sup> have already begun to take up the task of investigating the structural implications of the legacy of slavery. In this sense, the content of the present section could be seen as an encouragement for other scholars to continue along this path.

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<sup>8</sup> For more information see (McKeown, 2021), (Nutti, 2019)

## 5. Conclusion

The present paper has attempted to make two central contributions. First, to further the endeavor of recovering and engaging with the political thought that lies behind the Black Power movement by exploring the writings of one of the movement's most prominent figures: Stokely Carmichael. Second, to use the content of these writings as a starting point to rethink the terms of a debate that has enjoyed renewed interest in liberal political philosophy in recent years: reparations for slavery. As a consequence, the present paper has sought to argue that Carmichael's reflections on Black Power can pose three main challenges to the existing liberal analytic accounts of reparations: 1) they can prompt liberal political philosophers to develop a deeper account of the legacy left behind slavery; 2) they can help transform liberal analytic accounts of reparations into a victim-centered practice (as opposed to an oppressor-centered one) and; 3) they can help liberal political philosophers realize the structural dimension of both the breach constituted by slavery and of its legacy.

As is pointed out by Forrester, any hope to transform reparations into a "liberationist," as opposed to liberal, practice will require making liberal political philosophy come to terms with the fact that it has ignored the historical and structural dimensions of slavery for far too long (Forrester, 2019: 50). This task is merely just beginning.

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