**The Unbearable**

**Whiteness of the American Left**

**From education to gun control, progressive movements need to do a better job empowering the people whose interests they claim to serve.**

***Gary Younge*** *April 23, 2014* | *This article appeared in the May 12, 2014 edition of The Nation.*
*(Reuters/Joshua Lott)*

At a panel titled “Grassroots Organizing” at the Network for Public Education conference in Austin in March, an audience member asked the all-white panel for its definition of “grassroots.” The conference had been called to “give voice to those opposing privatization, school closings, and high-stakes testing.”

As the questioner pointed out, those disproportionately affected by these developments are poor and minority communities. Chicago, for example, a city that is one-third white, has a public school system in which 90 percent of the students are children of color and 87 percent come from low-income families. When the city schools shut down last year, 88 percent of the children affected were black; when Philadelphia did the same, the figure was 81 percent.

You’d think black people might have something to contribute to a discussion about that process and how it might be resisted. Yet on this exclusively white panel at this predominantly white conference, they had no voice.

One panelist said he found the question offensive. “I didn’t know it was a racial thing,” he said.

In the United States, campaigns for social justice are always “a racial thing.” That doesn’t mean they might not be about other “things,” too. Indeed, they invariably are. Race does not exist in a vacuum. But in a country that has never considered equality beyond its most abstract iterations and that has practiced slavery far longer than freedom, race is never entirely absent.

The problem is not exclusive to this issue or this conference. Similar criticisms can be made of the gun control movement, in which black people, who are the most likely to be affected by gun violence, generally have supporting roles as grieving parents but rarely take center stage as advocates for new legislation. Former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg’s decision to plow millions into the cause is welcome. But however large a check Bloomberg writes, the poster boy for stop-and-frisk is not going to get much traction in the urban areas where gun violence is most prevalent.

Nor is this a new problem. It’s a longstanding, endemic and entrenched feature of what purports to be the American left and the causes with which it identifies. It is difficult to imagine a progressive American movement that does not have the interests of minorities and the poor at its heart—whom else would it exist for? As Karl Marx noted in *Capital*: “Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded.” And yet the physical presence of those groups in the spaces created by the “left” all too often appear as an afterthought, if indeed they appear at all.

“However rebellious children may be, they have their parents’ genes,” wrote Andrew Kopkind in 1968. “American radicals are Americans. They cannot easily cross class lines to organize groups

above or below their own station. They are caught in the same status traps as everyone else, even if they react self-consciously."

This ought to be a civil conversation among friends. Those born white and wealthy should not be slammed for developing a social conscience, becoming activists and trying to make the world a better place. But neither should the nature of their involvement be above critique. When their aim is to fight alongside low-income people and people of color as brothers and sisters, real advances are possible. But when they look down on these people as younger stepbrothers and stepsisters to be brought along for the ride, precious few gains are made.

The point here is not that only minorities or the poor can run organizations that advocate on issues that primarily affect minorities and the poor. That way madness lies. There is nothing inherent in an identity or a circumstance that automatically makes someone a better leader. Michael Manley, John Brown, Joe Slovo—history is not teeming with examples of the wealthy and light providing leadership for the poor and dark, but they do exist. People have to be judged on what they do, not who they are. This is not simply about optics. What an organization looks like is relevant; but what it does is paramount.

The point is that for a healthy and organic relationship to develop between an organization and its base, the organization must be representative of and engaged with those whose needs it purports to serve. In other words, to do good work one should not speak on behalf of the people but empower them to speak for themselves. Once empowered, the people may exert pressure to change the organization's agenda in unexpected ways—and that's a good thing.



It's not as though there aren't examples out there. The Chicago teachers strike in 2012 was successful, in large part, because the union had done the hard work of building partnerships with black and Latino communities who responded with overwhelming support for its industrial action. From Oakland to New York, the education justice movement is full of people (parents, students, teachers, activists) rooted in their neighborhoods and cities and mobilizing significant numbers to challenge the "reform" agenda. The same is true for those campaigning for gun control. Speaking shortly after Sandy Hook, Carolyn Murray—who lost her son, Justin, in a shooting when she was organizing a gun buyback program in Evanston, Illinois—expressed frustration with what she correctly predicted would be a fleeting interest in the issue. "People tend to get in an uproar for a week or two and then go home," she said."Everybody's busy and working hard. But when it affects your life like this, you have to do something."

It's not that these people don't have a voice. It's that even when they're shouting at the top of their lungs, their voices are too rarely heard by those who would much rather speak for them than listen to them.

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