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Black Movements Need Black Theorizing: Exposing Implicit Whiteness in Political Process Theory

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The history of racism in the United States has produced a paradox in social movement literature: blackness shaped the character and substance of black antiracist mobilization, but whiteness shapes most analysis of their efforts. Despite frequently using the black Civil Rights Movement for theory development and testing, leading theorists have yet to identify a specific theory of race undergirding their analysis or explaining how racism impacts the trajectory of antiracist social movements. Instead, theorists rely on common white-privileging notions of race that hinder analyses of black movements. I critically analyze political process theory (PPT) from a racial perspective, showing that the dominant critiques of PPT stem from PPT creators’ failure to critically theorize race while analyzing the Civil Rights Movement. Theorists implicitly adopted white-centered perspectives that ultimately undermined PPT’s development. I conclude with a call to simultaneously theorize collective action and the system of inequality with which a movement is engaged.

The history of racism in the United States has produced a paradox in social movement literature: blackness shaped the character and substance of the Civil Rights Movement (CRM), but whiteness shapes most of the analysis. Despite frequently using the black CRM as a source for theory development and testing (Andrews 1997; Andrews and Biggs 2006; Barkan 1984; Barnes and Connolly 1999; Button 1989; McAdam 1982, 1986, 1996; Meyer and Minkoff 2004; Platt and Fraser 1998), leading theorists have yet to identify a theory of race undergirding their analysis or explaining how racism impacts the emergence and trajectory of antiracist social movements. In the absence of an explicit theory of race, theorists rely on common white-privileging notions of race that hinder analyses of black movements. Fortunately, one of the lasting successes of the CRM is that it created opportunities for subsequent generations of scholars of color to put an explicit, critical theory of race into social movement theory (e.g., Bell 2014). Because much foundational social movement scholarship developed out of studies of the CRM, (re)positioning blackness in theory has the potential to improve movement scholarship generally.

This article contributes to that effort by examining political process theory (PPT) from a race-critical and explicitly black perspective. I focus on PPT because it enjoys paradigmatic status in social movement research (Almeida 2003; Goodwin and Jasper 2004). First articulated by

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1Although I question the “civil rights” label below, I use the term black Civil Rights Movement because that is its common moniker.

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McAdam (1982), the political process model\(^2\) (PPM) characterizes social movements as sustained political efforts that emerge, develop, and decline in concert with the expansion and contraction of political opportunities. This article examines the origins and trajectory of PPT in search of the basic assumptions that problematically influenced its development. I contend that the most fundamental limitations in PPT result from failure to sufficiently theorize race. Because McAdam and others used black mobilization as the basis for developing and testing the PPM, theorizing how racism operates in the United States was necessary for their project. However, political process theorists failed to explicitly engage race theory. Instead, PPT relied on the “white racial frame” (Feagin 2013)—a worldview that interprets normative white culture positively and phenomena associated with people of color negatively—to analyze the CRM. Therefore, a white racial bias is embedded in PPT. This bias precipitated issues in PPT by: (1) centering the state as the source of social inequality and the only institution that could create meaningful change; and (2) coloring scholars’ reading of black insurgency, thus compromising the utility of major concepts within PPT.\(^3\)

Specifically, I argue that a racially white interpretive lens led early political process theorists to tacitly employ an assimilation-based model of race. Despite it not being marked as such, a theory of race has always implicitly guided political process theory. Unfortunately, that implicit theory has been assimilationist and white-centered in orientation. There are, however, alternative theories of race that are not white-centered that could and should undergird PPT. Examining PPT from a race critical perspective that views race as a system of inequality that structures the political West exposes how building on a white framing of black mobilization impacted the development of PPT. This examination leaves scholars with lessons about the politics embedded in knowledge production and encourages scholars in other schools of social movement research to reconsider some of the assumptions shaping those schools’ development. A theory of race is inevitably embedded in any theoretical concepts that are developed from or applied to racial phenomena. PPT would benefit from explicitly selecting a critical theory of race and consciously developing concepts in light of a critical race theory.

**THEORIZING RACISM: ASSIMILATION- AND RACE-BASED PERSPECTIVES**

Despite persistent critiques (Bell 1987; Blauner 1972; Du Bois 2003; Feagin 2014; Omi and Winant 2014), assimilation theory continues to dominate popular and academic discussions of race in the United States. Developed at the Chicago school by Robert Park and furthered by Milton Gordon (1964), the assimilation paradigm presupposes a dominant culture into which other ethnic groups enter. Ethnic groups and dominant societies pass from initial stages of conflict and exclusion to either a culturally pluralistic or fully assimilated social equilibrium. Progress from conflict to relative harmony occurs as minority ethnic groups abandon aspects of their original culture and adopt those of the dominant ethnic group. As minority groups acculturate, the host

\(^2\) I use the terms political process theory (PPT) and political process model (PPM) interchangeably throughout this article because the analytical concepts—political opportunities, resource mobilization, and cognitive framing—that characterize PPM are the crux of PPT.

\(^3\) I am not alone in suggesting that socially grounded biases influenced the development of the PPM. Goodwin and Jasper (2004:ix–x) suggest the structural emphasis among political process theorists may be due to gender bias.
society gradually opens to them. These shifts in the dominant society may result from voluntary changes as members of the dominant group become increasingly comfortable with ethnic others. Shifts can also occur involuntarily as the dominant group’s formal (e.g., state) and informal means of exclusion break down due to minority group members learning to successfully navigate structural rules and/or becoming indistinguishable (physically and culturally) from dominant group members. In any case, sustained, public, interethnic struggles are unnecessary. Subordinate ethnic groups are assumed to have the power to overcome cultural obstacles by choosing to assimilate. Obstacles beyond ethnic minorities’ direct control (e.g., the state) are incapable of excluding fully assimilated groups over long periods of time.

A smaller school of sociologists rejects assimilation in favor of a race paradigm (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Feagin 2014; Omi and Winant 2014). Race theorists point out that assimilation theory is based on European immigrants’ assimilation process into white America. Therefore, the assimilation paradigm assumes the core society is white and that ethnic others can become culturally and phenotypically white. Race scholars contend that the patterns assumed by the assimilation framework do not hold true for people of color. For example, whites have largely retained the ability to formally and informally exclude people of color from white networks.

Racial theories and assimilation theories have very different predictions and explanations for social development. First, racial scholars do not view intergroup conflict as inevitably fading with time. Despite African Americans’ and Native Americans’ much longer residence in what is now the United States, white Americans have never granted them access to the material and social resources white immigrants attained (Brayboy 2005; Mueller 2013; Oliver and Shapiro 2006). High levels of acculturation, including adopting Christianity and the English language, did not help racialized others, including Latinos and Asian Americans, avoid racial oppression (Chou and Feagin 2008; Delgado 1997; Telles and Ortiz 2008). Second, race scholars argue that sustained group-based inequalities are not exclusively state-driven. Where assimilation theorists picture culture as largely independent from the state, racial scholars see culture and structure as inextricably linked. According to race scholars, dominant racial groups create racial meanings, which justify disparate access to material and social resources, and are encoded into social institutions—including the state (Bracey 2015; Mueller 2014; Omi and Winant 2014). Oppressed people’s resistance, therefore, necessarily involves ideological (i.e., rearticulating the meaning of race) and structural components (i.e., recreating formal—state—and informal patterns for resource distribution).

Importantly, race scholars also assert that racism determines how individuals and groups interpret (frame) social phenomena (Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick 2006; Christian 2013; Santa Ana 2002). Feagin (Feagin 2010, 2014; Wingfield and Feagin 2012) described how race shapes people’s perceptions around a “white racial frame,” defined as “an overarching worldview, one that encompasses important racial ideas, terms, images, emotions, and interpretations” (Feagin 2010:3), connecting ideology, structure, and individuals’ thoughts and actions. Through a white racial framing of the world, whites collectively interpret social phenomena—such as the legitimacy of social structures, relevance of racialized others’ resource deprivation, emotional distress, collective activities of people of color—in ways that reinforce the “sincere fiction” (Vera, Feagin, and Gordon 1995) that their superior social standing is due to merit.
Political Process Theory

Political process theory was a reaction to previous schools of thought that emphasized social strain and resource mobilization as the catalysts for social movements’ emergence (Buechler 2004; McAdam 1999). McAdam (1999:25) countered by defining social movements as “organized efforts, on the part of excluded groups, to promote or resist changes in the structure of society that involve recourse to non-institutional forms of political participation.” PPT identified political opportunities, mobilization structures, and framing processes as the primary determinants of movements’ emergence and trajectories.

Scholars in the PPT tradition have substantially developed each of these factors into core analytical concepts. The first factor, political opportunities, “refer[s] to constraints, possibilities and threats that originate outside the mobilizing group, but affect its chances of mobilizing and/or realizing its collective interests” (Koopmans 1999:96). Tarrow (1996) divided political opportunities into state-centered opportunities, which derive from the institutional organization of states and are relatively stable over time, and proximate opportunities, which are more volatile and depend on temporary alliances and particular framing strategies. Regardless of type, PPT argues that increased political opportunities improve the likelihood of movement emergence and positive outcomes. The second factor, mobilization structures, consists of “those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action” (McAdam 1999:x). Mobilizing structures, particularly social movement organizations (SMOs), coordinate resources, develop leaders (McAdam 1999), recruit participants, and are sites for frame development (Snow et al. 1986). However, the structural opportunities afforded by expanding political opportunities and active organizations do not automatically generate social movements. A final factor, cognitive framing, is necessary. Movement emergence and persistence depend on activists recognizing and interpreting the structural atmosphere and motivating people to act. Activists use collective action frames to identify social problems, define them as unjust, and suggest means for action (Benford 1993). Activists also use frames to manipulate non-participants’ responses, including limiting the likelihood of violent repression (Clemens 1996).

PPT enjoys paradigmatic status because of its many strengths. Unlike some of its predecessors, PPT views social movements as political efforts by rational and creative actors to pursue collective interests. Accordingly, PPT takes the entire political environment into account, including such ranging variables as demographic trends (McAdam 1999), state structures (Kriesi et al. 1995; Tarrow 1994, 1996), effects of other social movements (Meyer and Whittier 1994), and the effects of historical periods of state liberalization and protest waves (Almeida 2008). PPT also advanced scholarship by recognizing social movements as processes rather than singular events. In its ranging application, PPT has established itself as mobile and robust. Theorists have successfully employed the model’s concepts in a large variety of contexts: democracies in the global north (Smith 2006; Tilly and Wood 2009), autocratic states in the global south (Almeida 2008; Johnston and Almeida 2006), longitudinal cases (Almeida 2003; Tilly 2004; Voss 1993, 1996), from emergence through decline (McAdam 1999; Voss 1996).

Despite its remarkable utility, PPT draws sustained criticism. Scholars of “new social movements”—movements based on struggles for social values and identities rather than economic resources—argue that PPT is problematic because it: assumes economic class is the basis of group power, source of grievances, and primary identity of activists; assumes state targets;
assumes highly centralized organizational forms are necessary for mobilization; underemphasizes symbolic actions; and does not consider potential movement goals, such as autonomy or self-determination (Buechler 1993, 1995; Johnston, Larana, and Gusfield 2009). Despite notable attempts to harmonize critiques and PPT (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996), some scholars advocate new paradigms for research (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008; Buechler 1995). PPT adherents have addressed critics by giving much more attention to the relationship between culture and movements, particularly issues of agency (Goodwin and Jasper 2004; McAdam 1996), identity (Dickinson et al. 2005; Smith 2005), emotion (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001), and target selection (Taylor et al. 2009).

However, neither political process theorists nor new social movement scholars account for how a limited theory of race impacted the development of PPT. Consequently, the same issues that trouble PPT also plague its challengers. For example, PPT’s neo-Marxist theory of power centers class relations and the state in ways that do not map onto antiracist movements. Where the working class always has potential to disable the capitalist class by withdrawing labor power, no such direct dependency exists in race relations. Because PPT does not theorize racial power, its conceptualization of power is inadequate for analyzing racialized movements. New social movement theory has the same problem. Debates within new social movement theory revolve around the significance of class to movements (Buechler 1995), but there is no consensus around how power functions in other social structures (e.g., race, gender) that are equally relevant to movement development. Consequently, the literature is racially limited: “[new social movement] theory (in all its variants) only applies to a limited number of movements in Western societies with mobilization biases toward white, middle-class participants . . .” (Buechler 1995:460).

Whiteness and Assimilation Theory Effects on Political Process Theory

Criticisms of PPT derive from the influence of a faulty theory of race, namely assimilation theory, implicit in the model. Several assumptions of the assimilation paradigm are imported in the political process model: (1) the formal and informal structures of the United States, including a Western, democratic, and highly influential centralized state preexist movement emergence and shape movement trajectory; (2) assimilation is desirable, as it is obviously the least painful means of avoiding discrimination and accessing social and state resources; (3) dominant group prejudices fade with time and are, therefore, less consequential than potentially permanent structural impediments to resources; and (4) the state is unwilling and/or unable to maintain group segregation and associated discriminatory patterns of resource allocation over long periods of time. These assumptions are important to note because they preclude potential questions for PPT adherents. For instance, because the disconnection between culture and [state] structure is overstated in assimilation theory, PPT under-theorizes the relationship between culture and state. PPT follows assimilation theory by privileging the state as the site of lasting impediments to social equality. This assimilation theory-induced statist focus causes PPT to presuppose movements’ target, scope, and goals. As I argue below, PPT presumes movements must target states and center on formal institutional politics with the goal of social inclusion.

4I define “racialized social movements” as movements in which racially subordinate people are the intended beneficiaries of mobilization and compose the majority of activists.
STATE TARGETS, INCLUSION AS GOAL, AND IDENTITY
OUTSIDE MOVEMENTS’ SCOPE

The assimilation theory-induced assumption of state centrality is embedded in the political process model’s definition of social movements—“rational attempts by excluded groups to mobilize sufficient political leverage to advance collective interests through non-institutional means” (McAdam 1982:20). Here the definitions of “excluded,” “political,” and “non-institutional” are all relative to one’s position vis-à-vis the state (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008). The presumption that social movements are always in opposition to the state produces a host of subsequent methodological and substantive issues, some of which are persuasively enumerated elsewhere (see Armstrong and Bernstein 2008). Most important for the present argument is that assimilation theory assumes incorporation into a pluralistic state is both possible and preferable for ethnic newcomers. PPT echoes this assumption by defining mobilized populations as “excluded” groups for whom institutional means are not available. The clear implication is that social movements target states in hopes of gaining inclusion to the polity and access to institutional politics. The presumption that movements are struggles for inclusion is clearly a product of PPT’s implicit assimilation theory. PPT’s explicit theory of power and identity (i.e., class status) turns on issues of exploitation, not questions of inclusion. The language of exclusion mirrors pre-CRM Jim Crow politics and reveals the effect of assimilation theory on PPT’s definition of a social movement. In this way, movement targets and goals are predetermined by the racial theory undergirding PPT. Movement targets and aims should be open questions for researchers. However, PPT presumes the state as target and assimilation as the ultimate goal.

In addition to viewing the state as the ultimate cause of enduring ethnic conflict, the assimilation paradigm also generates problems in the PPM by removing the formation of collective identities from the realm of social movements. Assimilation theory assumes disparate ethnic cultures exist prior to group contact and subsequent conflict (Omi and Winant 2014). As a result, collective identities are preexisting, essential parts of society. Collective identities may consolidate, but they do not proliferate. Identities are thus available as bases for social movement mobilization, but are not produced by social movements. That this assumption influenced the development of political process literature is evinced by the relative dearth of attention paid to identity formation before cultural critiques gained traction in the late 1990s (e.g., Jasper 1997).

This point brings us back to assimilation theory’s inducement to overemphasize the state’s relevance to social movements. In the assimilation paradigm, conflict essentially revolves around two axes of discrimination—public attitudes and state structure. The first axis, namely attitudes and informal exclusions, depends upon the maintenance of cultural differentiation, which decreases as ethnic groups assimilate. To the extent that cultural differences impede integration into the larger society, ethnic newcomers have the power to overcome these impediments by simply adopting the cultural norms of the host society. Therefore, no social movement is necessary for either the formation of collective identities or overcoming cultural obstacles to integrating into the dominant group. Excluded ethnic groups need only to decide to assimilate into the host society. Mounting dangerous and costly oppositional campaigns is entirely unnecessary. Consequently, cultural projects—including collective identity formation and other expressive framing efforts—are beyond the scope of social movement research. They are relevant only so far as they are in conversation with state actions (i.e., the second axis), which constitute the real source of discrimination. Thus, even after recognizing culturalists’ critiques, McAdam,
Tarrow, and Tilly (2001:5) insisted that, by definition, contentious politics involve “at least one government [as] a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims.” This requirement of the state as a party to social movements is inescapable, because it follows from assimilation theory’s assumptions about state and culture, which are imported into PPT. Had PPT scholars utilized a race-critical theory rather than assimilation theory, they would have theorized culture and state as intertwined, coequal sources of sustained discrimination. Consequently, the PPT would have viewed black mobilization, and social movements generally, as phenomena that seek cultural and institutional changes.

Whiteness and PPT’s Reading of Black Mobilization

Political process theorists acknowledge the centrality of the black resistance movement to the development and empirical testing of the PPM. Adherents frequently center their defenses of PPT on the black CRM precisely because “there is an extensive literature” (Meyer and Minkoff 2004:1464) and most scholars are familiar with the movement. The centrality of the black resistance movement to popular and academic notions of social movements produced a dominant understanding of the black movement. This dominant reading is also based in assimilation theory and colors the analysis of political process scholars. The assimilation paradigm pictures the black resistance struggle as a “Civil Rights Movement” as opposed to a movement for self-determination or any other goal (Bell 1987, 2004). The civil rights framing flows easily from assimilation theory because that frame emphasizes the primacy of state structure with public prejudices situated as secondary.

Framing black resistance as a Civil Rights Movement not only emphasizes the state, it also influences how theorists read black activists. Defining black mobilization solely in terms of a push for civil rights is in keeping with an assimilation paradigm in that it presumes participants’ major grievance is that they are excluded from the state-recognized dominant society. Limiting analysis to civil rights efforts also leads scholars to assume that black activists and participants favored the white assimilation frame, rather than a more critical race frame. Presuming black activists used a race-critical frame leaves open the possibility for recognizing a broader range of movement tactics and goals. A racial frame facilitates goals ranging from separatism to complete integration and reparations. Assimilation, on the other hand, can only consider integration. Having adopted an assimilation perspective, political process scholars see the black “insurgency” as a move for inclusion into the state. Thus, the presumptive purpose of the movement is to hasten African Americans’ assimilation into the state, the success of which can be measured only by changes in state structure. Conversely, any activism that decreases likelihood of inclusion into white society constitutes a mistake on the part of mobilized African Americans.

That a racially white reading of black mobilization undergirds PPT is clear when one considers that the Civil Rights Movement was only one aspect of black mobilization. The movement had three overlapping phases—cultural nationalism (e.g., black aesthetics movement), reformism (i.e., CRM), and revolutionary nationalism (Jalata 2012). Each phase was part of a very long tradition of African American resistance. Black aesthetics, for example, was a revival and extension of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s. Revolutionary nationalism, embodied by 1960s radicals such as Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party, continued the tradition of militant resistance begun during slavery and continued into the twentieth century by organizations
such as Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association. However, as efforts to retain a racial character apart from whiteness, black cultural and revolutionary nationalism do not fit the assimilation paradigm. Consequently, political process theorists define the reformist CRM as the entire movement and either ignore or demonize those aspects of black mobilization that clearly contradict assimilation theory, as has occurred with cultural nationalism and revolutionary nationalism, respectively.

Indeed, political process theorists routinely exclude the most radical elements of 1960s black resistance from their analysis. For example, most social movement theorists do not include race riots as aspects of social movements. Political process theorists argue that riots are too brief to satisfy the requirement that movements be sustained over time. However, such an argument is shortsighted. Race riots require precisely the same micro-mobilization contexts—“defined as any small group setting in which processes of collective attribution are combined with rudimentary forms of organization to produce mobilization for collective action” (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1998:709)—that political process theorists credit for powering recognized movements. Riots also reflect very effective framing, because they evince a shared sense among geographically proximate people (e.g., neighborhoods or entire inner cities) that common problems result from racism. Indeed, riots that do property damage are among the most useful tactics in blacks’ repertoire, because they bypass moral appeals, which whites often ignore, in favor of attacking whites’ financial interests in black communities. In so doing, black rioters do what all movement participants must do—act disruptively at the point where structural oppression concretely touches their lives (Piven and Cloward 1977).

Where other scholars view increasingly violent urban actions, such as rioting, as essential to the production of favorable changes in state structure (Feagin and Hahn 1973), political process theorists interpret this period of remarkably intense resistance in urban communities as characteristic of the “decline of black insurgency” (McAdam 1999:182). McAdam (1999:205–208) codifies substantive arguments for black self-determination (i.e., separatism as opposed to assimilation) and tactical shifts away from nonviolence as precipitating a contraction of political opportunities because these changes increased the threat to political elites and whites generally. Whites responded by withdrawing support and increasing political opposition on numerous fronts (McAdam 1999:208–229). Negative reactions from whites, however, do not mean rioting was not an essential part of black mobilization. In terms of micro-organization, framing, and use of political structure (e.g., residential segregation), race riots are similar to recognized forms of social movement protest. Theorists’ exclusion of riots from the definition of movements is a consequence of PPT’s implicit assimilation theory rather than a substantive difference between riots and other forms of collective action.

Abandoning assimilation theory reopens the question of targets and goals for investigation. Was civil rights attainment the actual goal of black mobilization or ingenious discursive framing designed to decrease white opposition? Was integration really participants’ goal, or was racial self-determination always the ultimate hope (Bell 1976; Jalata 2003; Shakur 2001)? Was the state really the target of black insurgency or were participants fundamentally attempting to defeat white supremacy? Is the surge in white opposition during the late 1960s indicative of declining political opportunities as McAdam claimed or does it expose the intransigence of white supremacy and whites’ unyielding dedication to it (Bell 1976, 2004; Moore and Bell 2011)?

No matter where one comes down on these questions, it is clear that the assimilation theory undergirding PPT precludes them. Consequently, the PPM excluded from consideration all of
the culture-centered and separatist mobilization that occurred during the period of study, creating problematic blind spots in PPT’s development. Subsequent culturalist studies highlight the significance of such omissions (Goodwin and Jasper 2004). Movement tactics and the scope of the movement itself are potentially mischaracterized when viewed through an assimilation-based political process theory.

Whiteness and PPT in Practice

Thus far I have discussed the role that a tacit assimilation theory played in the formation of the PPM. The seemingly unconscious selection of assimilation theory belies the founding theorists’ white racial framing of American racism and social movements. Viewing social movements, including black resistance struggles, through the white racial frame resulted in the intrusion of assimilation theory into the PPM. The influence of whiteness on the model’s formation, however, has additional implications for PPT. The limitations imposed on PPT by the absence of a critical racial theory create significant methodological problems for political process adherents. Among those problems are: limited applicability to western nation states; compromising the integrity of core concepts such as political opportunity; and problematic assessment of movement outcomes.

Western emphasis. The white racial frame privileges the thoughts and actions of whites over those of people of color. Founding PPT theorists’ reliance on the white racial frame manifests not only in the structure of the model itself (i.e., state centeredness), but also in the range of cases analysts select for empirical studies. Political process scholars have been criticized for focusing almost exclusively on movements in Western states (Wiktorowicz 2004). The global West consists of white-dominated nations with extensive and powerful states. Theorists’ over-selection of Western states masks the significance of race to the structure of the PPM because targeted elites and institutions, if not always challengers, are likely to be white in each case.

Ironically, these Western states are disproportionately powerful and their elites relatively similar precisely because of their histories of racist domination and colonialism (Goldberg 2002; Jung, Vargas, and Bonilla-Silva 2011). That history is consequential for PPT because it shaped and continues to shape the logic and structure of Western nations. White nation states, including the United States, are what Moore (2008) called “white institutional spaces.” White institutional spaces occur when whites create institutions while prohibiting people of color from influencing their formation. In segregated white spaces, whites set organizational structures, policies, and norms that assume and privilege whiteness. Consequently, the regular operation of white institutional spaces reproduces racial inequality in many ways, including favoring white-serving precedents, perpetuating white institutional culture, and empowering whites with positional power. Through institutional inertia and positional authority, white institutional spaces continue to privilege whiteness well after formal rules excluding people of color are no longer in effect. As white institutional space, the U.S. government is also organized around whiteness. Therefore, mid-twentieth-century black activists were not targeting the race-neutral state assumed by the assimilation paradigm; they were confronting a white culture that used instrumental control of the state to oppose racial equality (Bracey 2015). This is important because once the state is conceptualized as a tool of the white population rather than a race-neutral entity apart from whiteness, it is clear that black activism was always a cultural and structural challenge to whiteness. The connection between black cultural and revolutionary nationalism and reformism as part of
a black liberation movement comes into relief. Most importantly, recognizing the state as white institutional space that serves as the white population’s primary tool against African Americans explains the primacy of the state in twentieth-century activism. Black mobilization needed a reformist wing (not an entire project)—not because blacks sought formal inclusion, but because the state was a racially-biased tool whites used against them. Without accounting for the racist nature of the state, over selection of Western cases only strengthens the myopia of PPT’s statism because theorists continue confusing whites’ use of the state for an autonomously resistant state (Bracey 2015).

**Political opportunity concept compromised.** Political process scholars’ failure to theorize race and their subsequent default to an assimilation paradigm compromises the range of cases the PPM can explain. The influence of assimilation theory on the PPM’s formulation and the influence of the white racial frame on most political process scholars’ analysis also compromise the analytical utility of core concepts in the model. Perhaps the most critical of these concepts, and certainly one that has been the basis of much subsequent research, is political opportunity. Political process scholars have defined political opportunities differently, but each emphasizes state structures and actors as the sources of opportunities (Tarrow 1996, 1998) and/or the most significant targets for political opportunities that emerged exogenous to the state or social movements (McAdam 1999; Tilly 2004). In either circumstance, “the [political opportunity] approach emphasized the interaction of activist efforts and more mainstream institutional politics” (Meyer 2004:127). Theorists defined political opportunities according to the perceived possibilities afforded by the structure of institutional politics.

A close reading of one of the most influential political process scholars, Sidney Tarrow, helps elucidate how the white racial frame compromises the usefulness of political opportunity as an analytical tool. While asserting the utility of political opportunity analysis in studies of transnational social movements, Tarrow (1996:52) gave the following example: “The [transatlantic] antislavery movement, which had its origins in Britain, made progress by diffusion—through newspapers, agents, and missionaries, and eventually through British policy itself” [emphasis added]. Tarrow’s proximate point that social movements have had a transnational aspect from their inception stands. However, of all the possible examples, he cites antislavery as quintessential. In so doing, he further underscores the centrality of race in the development of social movements and movement scholarship. Relying on white racial framing leads scholars to develop explanations that place all power in whites’ hands, as Tarrow has done here, stifling his reading of the abolition movement. Cursory reflection—not to mention myriad historical examples of revolts on slave ships on the middle passage and in “the new world” (Behrendt, Eltis, and Richardson 2001; Taylor 2000)—reveals that effective, organized, multinational resistance to slavery as a nation state wealth-building enterprise originated among African peoples. Diffusion of the antislavery movement was the natural precipitate of Africans’ sustained resistance throughout Western nations’ empires. All subsequent aspects, including eventual sympathies among Brits and the manifestations of those sympathies in media and among white immigrants, sprang from organized black resistance.

This point is methodologically consequential. For Tarrow’s immediate purposes, locating the origins of the antislavery movement in African resistance leaves him in need of an 18th century example to buttress his argument for dynamic, rather than cross-sectional, statist political
opportunity scholarship. But in a larger sense, Tarrow’s errant attribution indicates the role racial theory has in the development of political opportunity as a concept. In his example, Tarrow’s white racial framing of transatlantic slavery shifts the analytical focus from the aggrieved population to the unjustly enriched population as the source of social movement origins. In the process, his analysis emphasizes the resources of the oppressing group, rather than those of the oppressed, as the relevant resources in movement development. Ultimately, the political opportunities of white oppressors—an open English political structure, varieties of media, mode of wealth accumulation, contemporary elites, and migration of social movement leaders—are the focus of his analysis and the de facto definition of political opportunities. If, however, the political opportunity concept implicitly shifts analysis from the resources of oppressed populations to those of dominant ones, the utility of political opportunity as an explanatory variable for movement emergence among aggrieved populations is dubious at best. Looking to Western states, particularly white-controlled Western states, as the sources of political opportunities leaves scholars in the perverse position of concluding that what creates political opportunities for social movement emergence among oppressed nonwhite populations are the positive characteristics—political openness, technical ingenuity, moral economy—of white oppressors. Such a conclusion is unacceptable, but inevitable when political opportunity is defined through analysis of white states.

An analysis derived from a black standpoint, rather than the white racial frame, produces completely counter findings concerning the political opportunities available to resistors of transatlantic slavery. Where Tarrow represents the British political system as open and opportune, an African perspective reveals the English system to be completely closed. Subsequent British anti-slavery mobilization can be understood, therefore, as a reaction to African mobilization. Whether this reaction represents an emergent political opportunity or an early example of whites’ collective effort to limit costs while extending their racial dominance is debatable and depends on one’s racial frame (Bell 2004; Moore 2013). What is clear is that Africans’ ability to quickly organize, collectively diagnose (frame) their situation, and avail themselves of temporal opportunities and scant physical resources are the key causes of the emergence of resistance to transatlantic slavery. The role of political opportunities relative to the state appears extremely slight, if it exists at all.

Ultimately, political opportunity is not the only aspect of the political process model that comes into question once the white racial frame is removed. Again, considering Tarrow’s example of resistance to the transatlantic slave trade, the centrality of the state as the sole target of resistance movements is challenged. For much of the colonial era, enslavers represented corporate, not state interests. Thus, the possibility of non-state elites and structures as targets comes into view. An analysis unfettered by whiteness would have aided the development of PPT generally, instead of clouding one of its conceptual pillars.

Assessing outcomes. Finally, political process theorists’ white racial framing of black mobilization creates methodological problems regarding the assessment of movement outcomes. These problems are multiple and related to issues discussed above. First, the structural focus of PPT directs scholars to consider only changes in state structure and practices as potential movement outcomes. Cultural changes are excluded from the scope of analysis, despite black

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Tarrow’s larger point that state-building creates the relevant social positions that generate collective interests and subsequent collective action remains, given that transatlantic slavery created an immediate need for a pan-African identity among the many enslaved ethnic groups who united in revolts and ignited the antislavery movement.
activists successfully struggling for change in a range of social contexts (Bell 2014). Second, scholars’ reading of structural changes is racially influenced. Consequently, where some leading black activists interpreted changes in state institutions to be of very little consequence in and of themselves, white political process theorists treat them as the definition of victory.

Exemplary of the impact of social movement scholars’ tacit reliance on a white racial frame is Meyer and Minkoff’s (2004) evaluation of the relationship between blacks’ protest frequencies and activists’ perceived political opportunities. Attempting to empirically demonstrate the utility of political opportunity structure (i.e., opportunities created by state policies) as an explanatory variable, the authors find “... it appears that the probability of protest diminished after the passage of the critical civil rights legislation that shifted the balance of power in favor of blacks” (Meyer and Minkoff 2004:1474; emphasis added). The assertion that blacks now hold more power than whites is a common white reading of the post-CRM legal climate (Eibach and Keegan 2006; Moore 2014; Norton and Norton 2011). Whites hold this view despite dominating nearly every measure of life chances (Feagin 2014), decades of functional nullifications of civil rights era legislation (Bell 1987, 1992; Crenshaw 1988), and continuing discrimination against people of color (Alexander 2010; Pager 2007). PPT’s implicit assimilation-theory and white racial frame lead Meyer and Minkoff to conclude that mid-1960s legislative accomplishments represent penultimate successes that made blacks the most powerful racial group.

Particularly astonishing is that Meyer and Minkoff locate blacks’ ascent to power before the assassinations of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Fred Hampton, to name only a few. Their analysis is even harder to accept when one considers that previously moderate organizations, such as the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, exchanged nonviolence for self-defense advocacy after 1964 (Umoja 2003). In this case, white racially framed academic assessments are clearly out of step with those of African American activists and everyday people. The extreme divergence in opinions suggests political process theorists’ tools of measurement, which appear here to ultimately boil down to a decidedly white view of the social implications of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, are in need of reconstruction.

Meyer and Minkoff (2004) concisely exemplified the crux of my analysis. Because the PPM is embedded in an implicit assimilation paradigm of race, theorists focus on structural phenomena to the virtual exclusion of culture. The failure to fully conceptualize race in an American context crippled the development and analytical utility of core concepts in the political process model. This example reveals the inextricable relationship between racial theory and operationalization of PPT variables. Ultimately, although Meyer and Minkoff claim to offer an empirical account of the power of political opportunity structure, their analysis rests on the white racial frame more than the full history of the movement.

CONCLUSION

Political process theory is the primary theoretical lens through which scholars study social movements because it provides theorists with essential concepts and tools to guide their investigations.

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6See the incomparable Bayard Rustin’s rhetorical question, “What is the value of winning access to public accommodations for those who lack money to use them?” (quoted in McAdam 1999:206). Williams (1991) and Bell (1976, 2004) also make the point.
of an inconceivable range of questions. For more than three decades, scholars have relied on PPT to provide the common language, methodologies, and concepts for empirical studies. The tremendous advancements in social movements scholarship owe much to Tilly, McAdam, McCarthy, Zald, and many other early developers of PPT, who redefined social movements as strategic collective actions shaped by a host of internal and external factors. Likewise, social movement scholars owe everything to the activists who orchestrated the black CRM, giving them both inspiration and material on which to base entire careers.

As with all paradigms, generations of extensive use and stretching exposed limitations and weaknesses within PPT. As the analysis here demonstrates, those limitations largely stem from PPT’s implicit use of assimilation theory and the white racial frame to analyze black mobilization. The assumptions of the assimilation paradigm led PPT to focus on the state as the target of social movements and blinded theorists to the importance of culture. Likewise, in the absence of an explicitly race-based theory of inequality, scholars used the white racial frame to define and operationalize PPT’s core concepts. Consequently, essential concepts, such as political opportunities, remain ambiguous. As Tarrow’s analysis of the emergence of resistance to the transatlantic slave trade illustrates, white racial framing of political opportunities can misdirect scholars away from the most important set of resources and opportunities. Similarly, Meyer and Minkoff’s analysis of political opportunity structure suffers from a racially white assessment of civil rights law.

Because PPT is so influential in social movements scholarship, identifying and addressing the source of its limitations can have tremendous impact for the entire field. As the analysis developed here urges, social movement scholars must simultaneously theorize social movements as phenomena and whatever system of inequality a particular movement confronts. Scholars currently use PPT as though it is readily applicable to movements of all kinds, but accounting for the type of movement is necessary, because it prepares scholars to be reflexive, both about how their social position impacts their analysis as well as how effective operationalization of PPT’s concepts is influenced by power dynamics between aggrieved and targeted populations. To be clear, there should be a racial theory embedded in PPT—a racial theory is inevitable and necessary for analyzing social actions in a world built on white supremacy. However, that racial theory should be explicit and guided by race critical assumptions derived from oppressed peoples’ perspectives rather than those of oppressors.

Fully theorizing systems of inequality will require scholars to embrace specificity in model construction. The problems with PPT stem from its failure to recognize the degree to which its original formulation is grounded in the black resistance of white racism in the United States. Because scholars and their movements of study are both embedded in particular social relations, theories are inescapably less generic than they appear. Rather than deny this reality and mask the specificity inherent in any model, researchers should embrace specificity. By not marking the problematic racial theory embedded in the PPM, political process theory normalizes a white perspective in a way that is very consequential. Social movement theory has the potential to empower communities of color as they struggle against racism. However, theories that center whiteness foreclose that possibility. Indeed, theories based on tacit white-centered assumptions are Trojan horses that reinforce the very hegemonic whiteness antiracist movements resist. Only by recognizing how the social relations particular to movements under study impact concepts and variables can scholars produce sound and socially useful explanations of any social movement.
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