

Chapter 2

Disrupting Ignorance

The High Cotton restaurant in downtown Charleston, South Carolina was serving its popular weekend brunch on April 12, 2015, a week after the fatal shooting of Walter Scott in nearby North Charleston.¹ White women in brightly colored dresses and blazers and white men in “business casual”—khakis or dress pants with button-down shirts or polo shirts—dined at white linen-covered tables, surrounded by the High Cotton’s palm trees, paddle fans, and exposed brick walls.

It was time for Black Brunch.

Conceived in Oakland in late 2014, Black Brunch was a direct action tactic adopted by Black Lives Matter (BLM) activists in early 2015, first in Oakland and New York, then in San Francisco, Baltimore, Atlanta, St. Louis, and other cities and suburbs throughout the United States. The action, which targeted “white spaces”—upscale restaurants in gentrified neighborhoods and other predominantly white enclaves—aimed, in its organizers’ words, to

¹Walter Scott, an unarmed black man, was fatally shot in the back as he fled from white police officer Michael Slager, who had pulled him over for a routine, daytime traffic stop. Slager initially claimed to have shot Scott in self-defense, but the incident was caught on video by a passer-by. Scott’s shooting was one in a string of highly-publicized incidents of police violence against blacks over the course of the previous year. My description of the April, 2015 action at the High Cotton draws on the video “Black Brunch at High Cotton in Charleston, SC,” available at <https://youtu.be/10VxBT8x9fA>. Accessed June 4, 2016.

“help black people across the US to carry the weight of their pain to communities and to people who otherwise never have to think or feel for [them]” (Blackout Collective 2014).²

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

The diners looked visibly uncomfortable.

A second black woman read: “We the people, in order to form a more perfect union, demand that all those who believe in freedom fight back!” A third speaker intoned: “Police violence against the black community is a human rights violation of the highest regard! USA police officers kill unarmed black men, women, and children at the same rate that the Ku Klux Klan did at the height of their activity in the 1960s!” “This is apartheid,” the group chanted. “We charge genocide!” Another speaker shouted, “Every 28 hours!”

Black Brunch at the High Cotton lasted a total of four and a half minutes. It was timed, as were other Black Brunch actions, to recall the four and a half hours that the body of black teenager Michael Brown had lain on the street in Ferguson the previous summer.³ As the

²The phrase “white spaces” was used repeatedly in interviews and in media coverage of Black Brunch. See, for example, Moyer and Kirkpatrick (2015). However, in their written statement, organizers used the more precise phrase “space in areas that are predominantly non-Black” (Blackout Collective 2014).

³An unarmed black teenager, Michael Brown was fatally shot by white police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri (a suburb of St. Louis) in August 2014. Although the phrase and hashtag

protesters read the names and ages of black victims of state-enacted and state-enabled violence—“Michael Brown, 18 years old, Ferguson, Missouri,” “Travon Martin, 17 years old, Sanford, Florida,” “Rekia Boyd, 22, Chicago, Illinois,” “Tamir Rice, 12 years old, Cleveland, Ohio”—one diner, a white, middle-aged man, stood up from his table and walked away. The video recording of the action was briefly interrupted by a white hand, which waved in front of the lens, temporarily obstructing the field of view. Still, the video clearly shows most of the restaurant’s diners as they look around the room, away from the activists, or stare intently at their menus or their tables.

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

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

I argued in the previous chapter that moral suasion aimed at changing how privileged people understand their responsibilities is insufficient to induce political action that challenges structural injustice. My claim was that what I call “motivated ignorance” is often resilient in the

#BlackLivesMatter had been coined the previous year, following the acquittal of white civilian George Zimmerman for the shooting death of another unarmed black teen, Trayvon Martin, Brown’s death and the protests that followed are widely regarded as the starting-point of the Black Lives Matter Movement.

face of such moral argumentation. In the present chapter, I present an alternative answer to Iris Young's practical question ("How can we get from here to there?"): one that foregrounds, not moral arguments about political responsibility, but instead disruptive politics of the sort practiced by BLM activists at the High Cotton in Charleston.

By "disruptive politics," I mean the occupation of businesses, university buildings, parks, plazas, and other public and private spaces. I mean boycotts, strikes, highway shutdowns, sit-ins, kiss-ins, and die-ins: the kinds of unruly political action associated with the nineteenth century abolitionist movement in Western Europe and the Americas, with mass strikes by organized labor during the Great Depression, with the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights Movement, and in the early twenty-first century, with Occupy, BLM, and the Fight for 15 minimum wage campaign. Frances Fox Piven (2006, 23) defines political disruption as "withdrawing cooperation in social relations." My aim in the present chapter is to make the case for a link between, on the one hand, the coordinated withdrawal of such cooperation, and on the other, the suspension of motivated ignorance.

I begin, in the first section, by engaging Piven's account, according to which subordinated social actors can impose costs upon the dominant by coordinating to withdraw their contributions to power relationships that depend upon their cooperation. In the second section, I extend Piven's argument, making the case for the political significance of forms of disruption that are specifically *epistemic*. In the third and final section I develop my own account of a successful act of epistemic political disruption.

1. "Withdrawing cooperation in social relations"

At first glance, it might seem like Black Brunch at the High Cotton was a failure. At just under five minutes, the disruption of business at the restaurant was fleeting. The action did not generate a positive—or for that matter, even a particularly strong—response from the diners. And although it got some coverage from traditional and new media, that coverage, along with the commentary from those who read or who viewed it, was mixed at best.⁴ This tepid response to the action in Charleston was more or less typical of responses to the Black Brunches of early 2015. Although at some, diners stood and joined the protesters, while at others, the protesters were forcibly ejected from the restaurants, as a whole, public reaction to the Black Brunches stood at some distance from the response to iconic acts of disruption like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)'s 1963 desegregation campaign in Birmingham or its 1965 voting rights campaign in Selma.

For Doug McAdam (1996), a successful act of political disruption is one that stages a confrontation between good and evil: between, on the one hand, morally worthy activists, like Martin Luther King, Jr. and the SCLC, and on the other, “bad guys,” like Bull Connor and the violent Southern racists who attacked the peaceful protesters in Alabama. Such actions are successful, on McAdam's view, because they garner sympathetic attention from what he calls

⁴Although comments to the YouTube video of the action have been disabled, negative (thumbs-down) responses outnumber positive (thumbs-up) responses by a ratio of three to one. The most notorious hostile response to a Black Brunch in 2015 was that of former New York police officer John Cardillo, who, following the actions in New York and California in early January, tweeted a photo of himself wearing a cap with an American flag and pointing a gun at the camera. The tweet read “I'm really enjoying these Eggs Benedict so move along now. #BlackBrunchNYC.” Even on the liberal Talking Points Memo, comments were mixed. “I'd probably express solidarity and all,” wrote one reader, “but this ‘tactic’ doesn't strike me as all that effective. This isn't a lunch counter sit-in, this is just acting like an ass to make sure your words get attention.” See “Discussion: The Latest Venue for Anti-Police Brutality Protests: Your Fav Brunch Spot.” Available at <http://forums.talkingpointsmemo.com/t/discussion-the-latest-venue-for-anti-police-brutality-protests-your-fav-brunch-spot/14966>. Accessed June 8, 2016.

“bystander publics.” Think of white Northern liberals watching television broadcasts of high-pressure fire hoses trained on black schoolchildren. On McAdam’s view, political disruption works through bystander publics by changing public opinion, and thus by pressuring democratically accountable state actors to institutionalize change. If so, then perhaps the action at the High Cotton (like the Black Brunch tactic more generally) *was* a failure. It would be a stretch to say that it “generat[ed] enormous sympathy” for BLM activists or staged a “stark, highly dramatic... ritualized confrontation between good and evil” (McAdam 1996, 349).

Before endorsing such a judgment, however, I want to return to Frances Fox Piven’s understanding of disruption as “withdrawing cooperation in social relations.” “I use the term disruption,” Piven writes, “to denote the leverage that results from the breakdown of institutionally regulated cooperation” (Piven 2006, 21). She underscores that social relations of power—that is, interdependent relationships in which participants’ actions affect each other’s fields of possible action—almost always run, not just top to bottom, but also bottom to top. In other words, it is not only the case that those who are subordinate depend upon, and hence are vulnerable to, the dominant; it is typically also the case that the dominant depend upon the subordinate to cooperate in an ongoing manner, and that they are therefore vulnerable to threats by the subordinate to act collectively to withdraw their cooperation. In Piven’s words, “Agricultural workers depend on landowners, but landowners also depend on agricultural workers, just as industrial capitalists depend on workers, the prince depends in some measure on the urban crowd, merchants depend on customers, husbands depend on wives, masters depend on slaves” and so on (Piven 2006, 20). Anyone who has taught students or supervised workers or even minded small children will recognize the insight, and should grant Piven her larger claim:

that relatively powerless people can impose costs on the relatively powerful by “withdraw[ing] contributions to interdependent relations” (Piven 2006, 25).

To see the difference that Piven’s view makes, compare it to McAdam’s model of a successful act of political disruption, which consists in three principal steps:

- (1) First, a group of activists stages a conflict, which they calculate will be widely perceived and read as a contest between good and evil.
- (2) Second, their calculation proves correct; the disruptive action wins the hearts and minds of a “bystander public.”
- (3) Third, the resulting shift in public opinion transforms the political calculus for those who hold or who aspire to hold elected office: actors who respond by changing their political platforms and/or their decisions and actions.

Note that, on this model, disruption is contained in the first step, which consists in a confrontation between activists (like the SCLC) and their immediate opponents (Bull Connor and the other racist whites in mid-century Alabama). In step two, that act of disruption has a communicative effect. It garners media attention that shapes how an uninvolved public perceives and understands the conflict between the parties in step one, ultimately winning that public’s sympathy and support. In step three, the shift in public opinion influences elected officials and other political elites in ways that accord with conventional social scientific models of democratic responsiveness.⁵

⁵Although there is disagreement about the extent to which public opinion shapes policy outcomes, and how skewed that influence is in the favor of more affluent members of the public, most scholars agree that public opinion shapes policy, at least to some extent and with respect to salient issues. For recent overviews of this literature, see (Burstein 2014) and (Barabas 2016).

Piven's understanding of disruption departs from McAdam's at each of these three steps. As far as the first is concerned, for Piven, a successful act of disruption need not involve the staging of a dramatic confrontation between good and evil. Indeed, it need not involve any overt conflict at all, or even any collective action that is disorderly in an obvious sense. Think of the act of divesting from a firm, which, Piven notes, can be highly disruptive and yet entirely calm, even businesslike (Piven 2006, 24). Similarly, a strike or a boycott might be effective in the sense that it wins major concessions, even if it is relatively quiet and attracts little public notice. No doubt, Piven would agree with McAdam that part of the success of the Birmingham and Selma campaigns was that they drew attention to the contrast between the peaceful protesters and the violent Southern whites. But she likely would underscore that, although that strategic choice was apt in that particular context, it is neither appropriate for every context nor a necessary condition for a successful act of disruption. To produce change, disruption need not be staged as a conflict between good and evil. Instead, what is crucial is that the subordinated—for example, black Americans in Alabama in the early 1960s—act together to withdraw their cooperation from some power relation or set of relations that, in order to remain stable, depends upon it: in this case, from the Jim Crow system through which Southern whites dominated Southern blacks.

What about steps two and three? On one plausible reading of Piven's argument, neither is strictly necessary. In at least some cases, when the subordinate "withdraw contributions to interdependent relations" that collective action, in and of itself, yields a win. Imagine a group of agricultural workers who are able to get concessions from a landowner simply by acting together to withhold their labor at planting time, or at harvest time.

Piven's principal focus, however, is what she refers to as "large-scale disruption" of "pattern[s] of ongoing and *institutionalized* cooperation," which, she argues, drives major, structural change: the end of slavery, for example, or the introduction of social welfare programs, or the passage of civil rights legislation (Piven 2006, 21, emphasis added). Her argument, as I understand it, suggests that, not infrequently, what may at first glance appear to be a simple and direct relationship involving only a discrete set of powerful agents (Bull Connor and the white racists of Birmingham) and the people they dominate (the protesters, or more generally, the city's black residents) in fact is embedded in a complex network of rules, norms, and institutions, which at once bolster it and give it form. To recall the language of the previous chapter, what may appear to be a simple and direct power relationship is often embedded in a larger network of social structures, which support and sustain it. If so, then the best leverage point may be one that targets key points in that network, along with the actors whose actions help produce and maintain it.

The racial order in the South at mid-century was backed by the power of the American state. It involved laws, policies, institutions, and political actors well beyond places like Birmingham and Selma. For example, it involved elected officials in Washington, D.C., as well as the voters, including liberal white Northerners, who elected and re-elected them. Northern whites may have seemed uninvolved in what happened in the South in the 1950s and 1960s (they may have appeared to have been no more than bystanders) if they did not explicitly take sides, for example, by voting to maintain or to dismantle Jim Crow, or by expressing opinions for or against voting rights legislation. But, if so, that was in significant part because political elites,

including political office-holders and the leaders of America's two major parties, exercised agenda-setting power to keep those potentially divisive issues off the table.

Agenda-setting power plays an important role in Piven's account of a successful act of political disruption, as does the structure of the two-party system in the United States, which, she argues, incentivizes political elites to suppress many latent conflicts. In particular, the two-party system incentivizes elites to suppress conflicts that, were they to rise to the surface, would threaten the parties' capacities to construct and maintain electoral majorities. Piven makes the case that, in such a political context, successful social movements are typically those that challenge the parties' agenda-setting power:

Protest movements raise the conflictual issues that party leaders avoid, and temporarily shatter the conservative tendencies of two-party politics... Where politicians seek to narrow the parameters of political discussion, of the range of issues that are properly considered political problems and of the sorts of remedies available, movements can expand the political universe by bringing entirely new issues to the fore and by forcing new remedies into consideration (Piven 2006, 104).

On this view, although it may be true that the mid-century civil rights movement won the hearts and minds of some Northern voters, its more basic accomplishment was to force a set of political issues onto the public agenda that elites had worked to suppress. Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz famously argued that power has what they called a hidden "second face": that the dominant exercise power over the subordinate, not just by prevailing in conflict, but also by preventing conflicts from arising (Bachrach and Baratz 1962, 1963). Piven does not cite

Bachrach and Baratz. But if she did, she likely would underscore that even power's second face runs, not just top to bottom, but also bottom to top. In other words, elites depend upon the masses to cooperate in their agenda-setting schemes. Hence they are vulnerable to the withdrawal of that cooperation.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the SCLC and other civil rights activists “with[drew] contributions to interdependent relations” when they challenged the framework that defined the boundaries of American political discourse. This second form of disruption is the second step in Piven’s model. Its importance lies chiefly in its connection to the third and final step: the disruption of electoral coalitions. As is well-known, civil rights activists at mid-century did not win *everyone’s* “hearts and minds.” They won the support of many liberals in the North, but at the same time, they provoked strong opposition from many Southern whites, who began to defect from the Democratic party. Like McAdam, Piven notes that Democratic elites acted on civil rights during this period in part because they needed to, if they were to maintain the support of Northern white liberals and Northern blacks. But she also emphasizes that an important part of the shift in their political calculus was the exit of Southern whites from the party, which, by the mid-1960s, had lowered the electoral costs of voting to pass civil rights legislation (Piven 2006, ch. 5).

Her model of a successful act of political disruption, then, looks roughly like this:

- (1) First, a group of subordinated actors coordinate to withdraw cooperation from some (more or less direct) power relationship in which they participate.

- (2) Second (assuming that that relationship is embedded in larger social structures, which support and sustain it), the initial disruptive act disrupts elites' agenda-setting schemes, forcing onto the political agenda issues and problems that elites had worked to suppress.
- (3) Third, the resulting disruption of electoral coalitions transforms the political calculus for those who hold or who aspire to hold elected office: actors who respond by changing their political platforms and/or their decisions and actions.

Recall that, in McAdam's model, political disruption is contained in the initial step: the confrontation between a group of activists and their immediate opponents. When "bystander publics" enter the picture, they do so as the audience of the action's (verbal and/or nonverbal) message. For Piven, by contrast, withdrawing cooperation from elites' agenda-setting schemes and withdrawing cooperation from the maintenance of extant electoral coalitions are additional, critically important acts of political disruption. They are examples of the exercise of power from below, no less so than are strikes or boycotts or sit-ins.

To be sure, the forms of disruption that constitute Piven's second and third steps can be exceedingly difficult to effect. When people act to transform relations of power that are embedded in larger structural networks, they face the challenges of, first, identifying effective leverage points, and second, manipulating those leverage points in ways that yield system-level change. Nevertheless, Piven usefully underscores, "withdraw[ing] contributions to interdependent relations" at the levels of public discourse and electoral politics are crucial components of forms of disruption that produce major structural change.

2. Epistemic disruption

Perhaps the greatest virtue of Piven's account of political disruption is the pains that it takes to distinguish between, on the one hand, political *voice*, and on the other, political *power*. Of course, communicating messages (making claims, articulating demands, engaging in acts of symbolic expression) is an important part of what people do when they act collectively to influence political outcomes from below. And of course, political actors typically communicate messages, even as they exercise collective power. Thus, in Birmingham, the refusal to cooperate with Jim Crow by abiding by its rules communicated opposition to those rules, even as it withdrew contributions to the Jim Crow system. Still, as Piven argues, without at least a credible threat to exercise power, protesters who merely voice their positions (think of an officially sanctioned rally, replete with memorable slogans and visually striking banners) rarely effect significant change. By contrast, actors who "withdraw contributions to interdependent relations" can be politically efficacious even in cases in which their communicative influence is modest (think of urban riots, like those in Watts in 1965, or at the Stonewall in 1969).

What, then, of the Black Brunches of early 2015? It is far from clear that they "generat[ed] enormous sympathy" for BLM activists; staged "stark, highly dramatic... ritualized confrontation[s] between good and evil"; or even elicited favorable reactions from the median member of the public who read about them or watched videos of them. But if what matters is *power*, more so than voice, then perhaps, nevertheless, they were politically efficacious.

Or perhaps not: I can imagine an interlocutor who claims that actions like Black Brunch at the High Cotton are simply too fleeting to count as instances of "withdraw[ing] contributions

to interdependent relations.”⁶ Each of these actions, recall, lasted less than five minutes. Black Brunch did not stop anyone from finishing her restaurant meal, let alone from continuing to contribute, directly or indirectly, to the oppression of black Americans. On this view, the problem is not only, and it is not mostly, that Black Brunch failed to win hearts and minds; it is that it failed to affect important power relationships by withdrawing contributions to interdependent relations.

I disagree. To explain why, I want to return to the argument from the previous chapter about what, drawing on work by Charles Mills (1997, 1999, and 2007), Linda Alcoff (2007), and others, I call *motivated ignorance*.⁷ Motivated ignorance, recall, attaches principally to positions of social dominance. It is a cousin of motivated reasoning, in that it involves an end or a goal that motivates the relevant forms of not-knowing: namely, the goal of maintaining an understanding of the self as a good person (as a person who behaves ethically, that is, a person who acts in accordance with norms that, upon reflection, she endorses as right) while enjoying the unearned advantages that accompany social privilege. Motivated ignorance, like motivated reasoning, is the product of an unconscious tendency to seek out, to selectively attend to, and to disproportionately weight information and other forms of evidence that support the relevant goal, while avoiding exposure to, ignoring, or discounting information and other forms of evidence that interfere with it. But motivated ignorance differs from motivated reasoning in that it is not only or principally an individual-level, psychological phenomenon. Instead, it has an important social character. The mechanisms of its production include information gate-keeping by

⁶I am grateful to Joe Soss for helping me think about, and think through, this line of argument.

⁷The term Mills uses is “willful ignorance.” I use “motivated” rather than willful, both to highlight the connection to motivated reasoning and to avoid any suggestion that the process is a conscious one.

powerfully positioned members of dominant social groups, as well as dominant background beliefs and assumptions that many people, especially (but not only) members of dominant groups internalize.⁸

Dominant social actors' motivated ignorance, I now want to suggest, is very often supported and sustained, at least to some extent, by the ongoing cooperation of subordinate actors. In other words (to recall Piven's language), there is an important social interdependency that is *epistemic*. If I am right on this count, then well-leveraged acts of epistemic disruption can be politically efficacious.⁹

How do the subordinated cooperate in supporting dominant social actors' motivated ignorance? To explain, I want to introduce a hypothetical that I suspect will be familiar to many readers of this text. Imagine, if you will, an anti-racist, feminist scholar who works in a marginalized field within her discipline. Let's say she is a political theorist who works in a predominantly or an all-white, male-dominated Political Science department. Let's specify that, in this particular department, intellectual biases, along with implicit racism and sexism, often shape discussions among the faculty and influence decision-making. Let's imagine, further, that when such biases are revealed—for example, when department members criticize a black female job applicant for failing to conform to racial and/or gendered stereotypes, or when they criticize an untenured faculty member who uses normative theoretical or interpretive methods, on the grounds that her research is not “real Political Science”—the scholar in question routinely self-

⁸See Hayward (forthcoming, 2017), on which this paragraph draws.

⁹This claim marks a point of departure from Piven's account. She emphasizes that crucially important cooperative activities, and hence key leverage points for political disruption, are the processes through which people create “the material bases for social life” (that is, produce and distribute material goods) and institutionalize “the force and authority of the state” (Piven 2006, 22).

censors. That is, she very often fails to voice her objections to her colleagues' judgments and to articulate challenges to their evaluations.

It is not difficult to imagine why such a scholar might behave this way. First, and perhaps most obviously, to speak up would make her vulnerable to retribution from dominant members of the department. Second, she might reason that she needs to pick her battles: to preserve capital, in order to spend it on those departmental debates in which she has some chance of influencing outcomes. Third, she might self-censor in part to avoid being cast in her colleagues' imaginations as an "angry feminist," or worse. Fourth, were she continuously to work to challenge her colleagues' motivated ignorance, that work would be both cognitively and emotionally exhausting; this person has other goals and priorities, other pursuits to which she wants to devote her energy. Fifth and finally, perhaps she has, at least to some extent, internalized social norms that check and limit her willingness to confront her colleagues: norms of politeness, for example, or norms of collegiality.

The list is not meant to be exhaustive. There may be other reasons that a person in a situation like this one would behave in such a manner. And, of course, there are many other social contexts in which similar dynamics are in play: non-academic workplaces, for example, family and other social gatherings, civic associational meetings, public events, and even commercial settings, like the upscale restaurants in which well-off people pay to sit and eat brunches that have been prepared and served by others. The larger point is that when motivated ignorance is at work—in the case at hand, a "white ignorance" (Mills 2007) that takes the form of a failure to see and to maintain conscious awareness of deep and enduring racial injustice—then there may be good reason why even some actors who are *not* ignorant allow it to persist.

There may be good reason for not interrupting what the Charleston activists referred to as “business as usual”: that is, for maintaining a form of silence that enables and supports motivated ignorance.

At the High Cotton in April, 2015 BLM activists coordinated to withdraw the support that such silence affords. Acting together, they overcame the five obstacles that stand in the way of the hypothetical academic doing the same: fear of retribution, fear of the loss of influence, fear of the loss of reputation, the need to preserve limited time and energy, and the force of internalized social norms. To begin at the end of this list, they made a conscious choice to act together to violate a series of social norms, perhaps most obviously the norm of not directing political speech at strangers in commercial spaces like restaurants. Indeed, the activists explicitly challenged this norm near the start of the action, when they announced to the diners at the High Cotton that “The time is now, and every space is appropriate!”

As far as the fourth obstacle is concerned, they planned their action in a way that was calculated to garner attention through traditional and new media, rendering relatively effective this particular expenditure of their time and their energy.

What is more, unlike the hypothetical academic, the BLM activists had relatively little stake in the power relationships that they disrupted. They derived no benefit from the business of serving or consuming Brunch at the High Cotton. They had no ongoing relationships with the diners, the owners of the restaurant, or the people who worked there. Hence fear of the loss of future influence and fear of possible damage to their reputations (obstacles two and three) were minimized.

As far as the first obstacle (fear of retribution) is concerned, there was a real possibility that the activists could have been arrested, or even physically harmed during the course of the Black Brunch action. In addition, they risked reprisal from employers or from others who have power over them, were such people to read articles about the action or to watch videos of it. But this is the type of risk that activists regularly assume when they coordinate to act together to exercise disruptive power. The small scale and brief duration of Black Brunch meant that this particular action involved a *lower* risk of arrest and violence than is typical of large-scale acts of political disruption.¹⁰

Black Brunch was a tactic used nationwide. It targeted restaurants in dozens of cities. And, of course, BLM activists did not only interrupt restaurant brunches in gentrified neighborhoods. They also shut down major retail establishments, like Walmart stores and shopping malls; forced the temporary closure of highways, airports, and major public transit systems; and disrupted church services, holiday celebrations, even state legislative and other political meetings. BLM garnered national and international media attention, and BLM activists skillfully deployed social media to extend the reach of their actions. Naila Keleta-Mae (2016), writing in the *Globe and Mail*, notes that actions like Black Brunch were “intended to unsettle the majority and empower minorities. In the space opened by [BLM] activism,” she writes, “different groups of people are emboldened and different groups of people are silenced.”

If, as Keleta-Mae suggests, emboldening the subordinate and silencing the dominant “unsettle[s] the majority,” it is worth underscoring that that is the case in significant part because

¹⁰To my knowledge, no activists were arrested at any of the Black Brunch actions of 2015.

dominant social actors depend upon the subordinate to sustain their motivated ignorance.

Hence coordinating to interrupt motivated ignorance can be a politically powerful act.

But it is worlds away from winning over a “bystander public,” by persuading them intellectually, or by moving them emotionally. The word “bystander” captures the difference. If my argument in the previous chapter is right—if people who are systematically advantaged by structural injustice are also motivated to *not know* this is the case—then the diners in the High Cotton are hardly disinterested bystanders. Instead, they are political actors with a vested interest in not fully comprehending that “Black boys are dying! Black girls are dying! Black bodies are falling every 28 hours!”

3. Which side are you on?

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

Justice for Mike Brown is justice for us all,

Justice for Mike Brown is justice for us all,

Which side are you on, friend? Which side are you on?

Which side are you on, friend? Which side are you on?¹¹

The SLSO action, like Black Brunch, was short; the singing lasted only a couple minutes. After they sang, the protesters unfurled from the balcony of the symphony hall a series of banners with

¹¹The activists sang to the tune of “Which Side Are You On?” a song associated with the US labor movement in the 1930s. “Which Side Are You On?” was written by Florence Reece, the wife of an organizer for the United Mine Workers’ strike in Harlan County, Kentucky. For a detailed description of the SLSO action and a link to a video recording, see Rivas (2014).

messages including “Racism Lives Here” and “Requiem for Mike Brown, 1996-2016,” and then filed out of the hall, chanting “Black lives matter.” The response this action elicited was largely positive. Although a video published in local and national news outlets and circulated on social media zooms in on a white male symphony-goer, who grins and states that Mike Brown was “a thug,” it also shows the symphony audience erupting in applause, the SLSO conductor watching the singers attentively, and several symphony and chorus members joining the audience to applaud (see Rivas 2014).

Recall that, for Frances Fox Piven, political disruption begins when a group of subordinated actors coordinate to withdraw cooperation from a power relation in which they participate. My argument in the previous section suggests that one potentially efficacious form such disruption can take is epistemic: that political disruption can work by compelling privileged people to attend to instances of structural injustice they are motivated to ignore. To put this claim in a form consistent with that used in this chapter’s first section:

- (1) *First, a group of subordinated actors coordinate to withdraw cooperation from a relation of epistemic power that enables motivated ignorance.*¹²

What then? Clearly, it is not the case that epistemic disruption always, or even often, “wins hearts and minds.” To the contrary, privileged people frequently respond to disruptive tactics with disapproval, even aversion. Not only opponents, but also some people who support the relevant activists’ aims and ends often criticize the confrontational means that they adopt. What is more, epistemic disruption, not unlike other forms of disruptive politics, can generate backlash. In the case of disruptive politics that take an epistemic form, one important reason they

¹²To be clear, I mean this statement as an extension of, rather than a departure from, what I characterize as the first step in Piven’s model.

create this effect is that they do a better job challenging the first mechanism sketched in the previous chapter—information gate-keeping—than the second—internalized dominant background beliefs. By late 2014, when activists staged the action at the SLSO, it had become difficult for white Americans to remain entirely ignorant of their claims about systematic racial oppression and state violence against blacks. But whites still could, and many did, view those claims through the lens of racialized concepts like “thug.”

That said, sometimes some people whose motivated ignorance is challenged by political disruption reach a tipping point. The desire to see the self as an ethical person, even while enjoying unearned privilege, interacts with the loss of ignorance to produce a shift in disposition. Motivated ignorance, recall, is most tenacious when it is the case, not only that a person does not know, but also does not know *that she does not know*. Political disruption can upset this equilibrium. Thus it can push even (some) privileged people to abandon their passive acceptance of an unjust status quo.

When it does, even backlash can further disruptive activists’ ends. Think of the effects of an outspoken extremist, like, in the 1960s, Alabama Governor George Wallace, or in the present case, Jeff Roorda, the notorious business manager of the St. Louis Police Officers’ Association.¹³ Although political actors like these can galvanize devotees, they often alienate moderates, including some who previously were sympathetic to their views. Discussing ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), which, starting in the late 1980s, used disruptive tactics to influence state policies for approving and distributing AIDS medication, Mark and Paul Engler

¹³Roorda gained national attention for, among other things, publicly dismissing the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) Ferguson report as a “flimsy tortilla of accusations” and, after the fatal shooting of four Dallas police officers in July, 2016, tweeting a photo of blood-soaked hands with a statement alleging that Barack Obama was responsible for their deaths. See [add cites.]

(2016, 200) argue that “fueling a short-term backlash [can] isolat[e] reactionaries from the public in the long run.” The Englers quote Gene Sharp (1973, 523), for whom disruptive politics bring “basic, often latent, conflicts... to the surface,” cause “conflicting... groups to become more sharply delineated, and stimulate previously uncommitted people to take sides.”

Sharp’s insight helps answer the question posed above (“What then?”). To state the answer in a form consistent with that used in this chapter’s first section:

*(2) Second, this act of epistemic disruption brings latent conflicts to the surface and forces members of dominant groups to take sides.*¹⁴

To be sure, political disruption does not always yield a win for those who perform it. But at least in some cases, it helps reshape public discourse.

This was clearly the case in the mid-century Civil Rights Movement, as McAdam and others have noted. Polling at the time showed that, by the mid-1960s, most Americans named civil rights issues as among the most pressing problems confronting the country. In more than half of polls conducted between 1962 and 1965, most respondents said that “civil rights” or “the Racial problem” was *the* most important problem facing the United States (McAdam 1996, 350). Amalgamating data from these polls, McAdam (1996, 351) finds that the two highest spikes in the salience of civil rights came just after the Birmingham and Selma campaigns.

It is far from obvious that BLM will have an impact of comparable magnitude. Yet it does appear to have contributed to nontrivial shifts in public opinion. According to the Pew Research Center, in the spring of 2014, just months before the fatal shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, 57% of white Americans agreed with the statement “Our country has made the

¹⁴Again, I see this statement more as an extension of than a departure from what I characterize as the second step in Piven’s model.

changes needed to give blacks equal rights with whites” (Pew Research Center 2016, 89).¹⁵ By the spring of 2016, just 38% of white Americans agreed. At that time, a majority of whites—53%, compared with 36, 38, and 39% in 2009, 2011, and 2014—agreed that “Our country needs to continue making changes to give blacks equal rights with whites” (Pew Research Center 2016, 89).¹⁶ To be sure, data like these do not support simple causal claims along the lines of “Black Lives Matter activism changed white public opinion,” since multiple variables, in addition to BLM actions, were in play. These include media coverage of both actions like the Black Brunches of 2015 and the events that triggered those actions—that is, coverage of specific incidents of state violence against blacks—as well as public discourse, including discourse conducted through social media. Still, an important part of what happened between 2014 and 2016 is that disruptive politics, broadly conceived, worked directly and indirectly to disturb the forms of motivated ignorance that were the focus of the previous chapter.

Disruptive politics are not a matter of “winning hearts and minds.” Their aim is, less to persuade a “bystander public,” than to make it all but impossible for the privileged to not hear the voices of, to *not know* the political claims of the oppressed. Pew’s 2016 poll results showed that, by that spring, a full 76% of white Americans “had heard about the Black Lives Matter Movement,” and that almost half (48%) had heard “a lot” about it (Pew Research Center 2016, 102). If the argument in the previous chapter is right—if conscious awareness of the need to act

¹⁵Pew includes only those who identify as non-Hispanic in the categories “White” and “Blac,Pew asked the same question in 2009 and 2001 and the response rate was similar; 54% (2009) and 56% (2011) of white respondents agreed.

¹⁶The CBS News - New York Times “State of Race Relations in the U.S” poll shows similar shifts. For example, in 2013, only 30% of whites said they believed the American criminal justice system was biased against blacks, compared with 44% in 2015 (CBS News - New York Times 2015).

is an almost always necessary condition for people to “do the right thing”—then political disruption of the sort BLM exemplifies is critically important.

That said, I want to underscore that disruptive politics disturb motivated ignorance only partially, and that even that partial achievement is impermanent. Recall that, in 2016, 38% of white Americans agreed with the statement “Our country has made the changes needed to give blacks equal rights with whites.” The corresponding figure for black Americans was just 8% (Pew Research Center 2016). Similarly, while 53% of whites agreed that “Our country needs to continue making changes to give blacks equal rights with whites,” a full 88% of black Americans agreed with this statement (Pew Research Center 2016). Even after the politically powerful BLM actions of 2014-2016, then, there remained an enormous racial divide in the perception of whether the U.S. had achieved justice.

My claim is not that epistemic disruption eliminates motivated ignorance. To the contrary, I suspect such ignorance is a perennial feature of human social relations, and hence of the political landscape: one to which those who aim to dismantle structural injustice must always attend. Hence the endgame involves exploiting *partial* and *temporary* interruptions of motivated ignorance, with a view to institutionalizing structural change. One possible path is through sympathetic actors, who are positioned to enact change, and whom epistemic disruption enables politically. An example is the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), which in April, 2016 entered a consent decree with the city of Ferguson, implementing major revisions to the city’s municipal code, police policies and practices, and municipal court policies and procedures: changes that, when in place, will likely make progress toward dismantling structural injustice in Ferguson (*United States v. City of Ferguson* 2016).

But the most common path is through reluctant actors, whom the discursive shift constrains politically. Think of the two main contenders for the 2016 Democratic presidential nomination, Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, each of whom, following confrontational exchanges with BLM activists, unveiled comprehensive racial justice platforms. BLM's influence was apparent during the July 2016 Democratic Convention, as well, from the presentation by the "Mothers of the Movement," to major, prime-time speeches by President Obama, vice presidential candidate Kaine, and presidential candidate Clinton, each of whom highlighted the problem of systemic racism and underscored the need to enact criminal justice reform: indeed, the need to reform the very policies that Democrats had put in place in the 1990s. And BLM's influence was apparent in the 2016 Democratic Party platform, which included a section titled "Ending Systemic Racism" that specifically invoked the phrase "black lives matter."¹⁷

McAdam and Piven are correct, I think, when they argue that, in representative democracies, one important effect disruptive politics can have is to transform the political calculus for people who hold or who aspire to hold elective office. Consider that, although, by 2016, just a bare majority (53%) of whites agreed that "Our country needs to continue making changes to give blacks equal rights with whites," a full 78% of white *Democrats* agreed with this statement (Pew Research Center 2016, 7). No doubt, party elites were attentive to this shift in their base, and no doubt they took it into account when designing their platform and planning their convention. Nevertheless, I want to characterize the final step of a successful act of political

¹⁷"2016 Democratic Party Platform," 14. Available at <https://www.demconvention.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Democratic-Party-Platform-7.21.16-no-lines.pdf>. Accessed August 2, 2016.

disruption in broader terms. To state my claim in a form consistent with that used in this chapter's first section:

(3) *Third, the resulting change in the political agenda enables subordinated actors to negotiate with the politically powerful, with a view to enacting structural change.*

This formulation seems appropriate for two principal reasons. First, the relevant leverage point is not always electoral pressure. Consider that, in the case of ACT UP, important power holders whom activists brought to the negotiating table included administrative agencies like the National Institutes of Health, the Centers for Disease Control, and the Food and Drug Administration, as well as nongovernmental actors, like major pharmaceutical companies. Although competitive elections are very often key leverage points for those who aim to enact structural change, epistemic political disruption can work to pressure *any* political actor who depends upon a relatively widespread sense of legitimacy.

Second, the language of “enabl[ing] subordinated actors to negotiate with the politically powerful” highlights the agency of the oppressed. Recall Martin Luther King, Jr.’s famous “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (King 1963), which he wrote in April, 1963, just two weeks after the start of the Birmingham campaign and four days after being arrested for his participation.¹⁸ A public response to white clergymen who had criticized the campaign’s disruptive tactics, urging in their place the “honest and open negotiation of racial issues,” King’s letter acknowledged the need for negotiation and underscored that “this is the very purpose of

¹⁸The quotes that follow are from the online version made available through the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford. See https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/letterfrombirmingham_wwcw_0.pdf, accessed August 4, 2016.

direct action.”¹⁹ “Nonviolent direct action,” he wrote, “seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue” (King 1963). King noted that, prior to the campaign, multiple attempts at negotiation with white political elites and white business leaders in Birmingham had proven fruitless. When it comes to transforming relations of oppression, he stressed, “it is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily” (King 1963).

Nor do they come to the table ready and willing to negotiate. Instead, the subordinated *bring them to the table*, compelling the dominant to address the latent conflicts they prefer to suppress. Were Martin Luther King, Jr. alive today, I imagine that he would see the Black Brunches of 2015, less as efforts to persuade the racially privileged that “black lives matter,” or to win their hearts and minds, than as disruptive acts, which that impel negotiation. BLM’s success, he likely would argue, hinges on the negotiations it makes possible.

[Note: at this point there will be an additional several sentences or paragraph, which will serve as a transition to the next, not-yet-written chapter.]

¹⁹For the full text of the white clergymen’s statement, see “Public Statement by Eight Alabama Clergymen,” April 12, 1963, available at http://www.massresistance.org/docs/gen/09a/mlk_day/statement.html. Accessed August 4, 2016.

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