The Civil Rights Movement: How National Shaming Trumped Local Shamings

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Abstract

The Civil Rights movement partially succeeded for at least four reasons. The U.S. now had an international image to maintain, global capitalism required more tolerance for diversity, the new technology of TV exposed the national shame in provincial humiliations of black people, and presumptions of white group honor had became more shaky. The process suggests that newer media today -- the web, bloggers, a greater diversity of news sources -- can work for progressive as well as regressive shaming.

Why did the centuries-long intensity of white shamings seem to diminish so sharply in just the last 50 years? I suggest four reasons. First, after its victory in World War II, the United States reached what Benedict Anderson calls "centre court." As an imagined community as well as a world-class power, America became a primary Cold War contender, then the undisputed champion after the U.S.S.R. imploded in 1989. White racism no longer had to compensate for feelings of provincial inferiority.

Second, the double movement of expansion and consolidation that has characterized racism as well as capitalism and colonialism took a turn toward tolerance. Internationally as well as nationally, racialized humiliations had helped white colonists to mask feelings of inadequacy, while protecting structures of exploitation. But global capitalism threatened the provincial insularities that had consolidated quasi-colonial rule. People of darker colors were possible consumers as well as cheap labor. As Alexander Saxton points out, racism also became dysfunctional – at least for international consumption – because the U.S. was competing for the allegiance of non-whites.[1]

Third, the Civil Rights Movement succeeded in part because in the 1950s and especially 1960s, racists looked shameful on TV. The new technology of television forced white racism onto the national stage as an array of provincial bigotries that deserved national shaming. As Glenda Gilmore emphasizes, southern racism depended on localism as well as political control to construct the South as an imagined white community.[2] Now the conflict between the land of opportunity and the land of segregation became visible daily, in the headlines and especially on TV news reports. No longer could seemingly honorable white viewers ignore the blatantly dishonorable white representatives of the law, not just in the South. Still pervasive acts of white violence to keep black people in their place began to lose social legitimacy. A growing white awareness of the shamefulness of race-based shaming signaled a decreasing need to define whiteness collectively through honor.

In 1955, Emmett Till's mother used a haunting photo and the open casket at the

Chicago funeral service to force her son's Mississippi lynching into white people's awareness.[3] If white shaming was a performance to reinscribe black inferiority, African Americans now found public ways of reversing that dynamic. Jason Sokol and Jennifer Ritterhouse have detailed the intimate recoils, resistances, and self-shatterings in southern as well as northern white people during the Civil Rights movement. Now white people saw large groups of other white people as shameful, riddled with rage, hate, and fear. For the first time, they saw members of their own group as black people had sometimes seen white Americans for over 300 years, through shocked, amused, and contemptuous eyes.

Here the non-violent strategy of Martin Luther King, Jr., played a crucial role in getting the attention of the non-southern media. Day after day, white viewers saw black protestors as more civilized than their own kind, whether racist southern governors and sheriffs or the raging Chicago crowds in the 1966 riots. Many American liberals admired the principled bravery of black protestors.[4] Years after John Lewis was nearly beaten to death in Selma, Alabama, John McCain wrote an admiring chapter about Lewis in his 2004 book, Why Courage Matters. As McCain puts it, Lewis made many Americans "ashamed that they had not loved their country as much as the marchers; that they had not the courage to march into such injustice."[5]

In effect, King's strategy enacted a chiasmus, by reversing white stereotypes about who was honorable and who was shameful. This reversal undermined presumptions of whites' superiority and group cohesion, not least by sharply contrasting the brutality of

white law officers with the resolute non-violence of black protestors. National shaming slowly trumped local shamings, and forced progressive change.[6]

International shaming may also have had some influence. In 1963, musing on the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, James Baldwin wrote, "Most of the Negroes I know do not believe that this immense concession would ever have been made if it had not been for the competition of the Cold War . . ." African decolonization played a role too, he declared. "Africa was clearly liberating herself and therefore had, for political reasons, to be wooed by the descendants of her former masters." Baldwin's second assertion strikes me as wishful thinking. But he's astute in connecting "this immense concession" to Americans' new self-consciousness about their country's international status. As Baldwin implies, the Supreme Court's progressive attitude toward Civil Rights may have presented the U.S. as superior to the Soviets. But that stance didn't have much immediate effect on white Americans' attitude toward black people.[7]

Fourth, the surprisingly swift turn toward toleration for some forms of racial equality and race mixing suggests that presumptions of white group honor were already on shaky ground. During the Civil Rights years, the persistence of personal aspirations to honor helped many white people to gain some peer respect, and to brave intense race-based disapproval, for venturing into social activism, or at least into active sympathy for black protesters.

Not that giving up white chivalry came easily. Shortly before the Supreme Court's *Brown* decision in 1954, President Eisenhower told Warren that all the white

southerners wanted was to protect their daughters from being "required to sit in school alongside some big overgrown Negroes." Almost twenty years later another non-southern president, Richard Nixon, was taped talking to an aide about the Supreme Court's Roe v. Wade decision, which made abortion legal. Nixon was ambivalent. "There are times when an abortion is necessary. I know that. When you have a black and a white. Or a rape."[8]

Much more than with personal honor, racialized *group* honor is intrinsically hollow, as Orwell had discovered two decades earlier. In the long, strained fusion between honor and the large-scale category of whiteness, shame rather than shaming had at last come to greater prominence.

Notes

1. Alexander Saxton, The Rise and Fall of the White Republic, 5. Saxton situates Gunnar Myrdal's An American Dilemma (1944) in that context. In Cold War Orientalism, Christina Klein argues that after World War II, American "middlebrow" culture aids the expansion of U.S. power in Asia by using "sentimental education" to foster emotional bonds between Americans and Asians. That "integration" complemented political attempts to contain the Soviet threat. Among Klein's topics: South Pacific, The King and I, James Michener's Hawaii, and President Eisenhower's people to people program.

2. Glenda Gilmore, Defying Dixie, 3-5.

3. Emmett Till's mother "staged a counter-spectacle in a new, national, real time" (Hale, Making Whiteness, 290). See also Goldsby, A Spectacular Secret, 294-305. As an NAACP field representative, the black man identified as "Howard Spence" in Bob Blauner's Black Lives, White Lives played a crucial role in exposing the murder, and Medgar Evers got the story into national circulation. As Medgar Evers told him, "never before has a case of this kind been able to escape the borders of Mississippi" (34-35). Soon Evers was also murdered, and Spence says he would have been if he hadn't left. In 1980 Spence was elected mayor of his Mississippi town (181).

4. In Making Whiteness, Hale notes that protestors wore masks of "stoic" and "willed passivity" that "paradoxically belied whites' assumptions of their 'natural' deference" (292). As Branch puts it, even liberals "grossly underestimated the complexity, the restraint, and the grounding respect for opponents that had sustained King, [Robert] Moses, and countless others through the difficult years . . . of lifting a despised minority from oblivion" (Parting, 920).

5. McCain qtd. by David Grann, "The Fall: McCain's Choices," The New Yorker (November 17, 2008), 60.

6. Branch's three-volume history of the Civil Rights movement recounts the media's role in vivid detail. Sokol's There Goes My Everything focuses on the Civil Rights movement as the major cause of social change, along with farm mechanization and migrations from rural to urban and suburban settings (282). Many historians note white presumptions of their good relations with black people, e.g., Greene, Praying for Sheetrock, 188.

7. Baldwin, The Fire Next Time, 86. Cf. Melani McAlister, Epic Encounters, 72.

8. Eisenhower qtd. by David Nichols, A Matter of Justice, 278. The occasion was a stag dinner. Nixon qtd. by Charlie Savage, "On Nixon Tapes, Ambivalence Over Abortion, Not Watergate," The New York Times, (June 24, 2009), A1. Nixon was recorded on January 23, 1973. See also John A. Kirk, "Bigger than Little Rock? New Histories of the 1957 Central High Crisis," 627.