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Kristopher B. Burrell

*CUNY Hostos Community College*

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RACE

## When It Comes to Racial Justice, Why Is It Wrong to Demand the "Impossible"?

Because when white comfort matters most, Black lives are not a priority

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Kristopher Burrell

Assistant Professor of History at CUNY- Hostos Community College.



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On a recent episode of *The Open Mind*, Alexander Heffner asked his guest, activist minister and scholar Nyle Fort, about the connections between the Covid-19 pandemic and the reemergence of social justice protests across America. Referencing Arundhati Roy’s recent essay “The Pandemic is a Portal,” Fort meditated on the potential for remaking our world in more equitable ways, particularly in terms of racial justice. Heffner then posed a second question: Was social transformation “politically realistic” in this moment?

The unstated assumption is that for the mass protests to have “value,” they must have clearly articulated legislative or policy goals. But why must politics and activism be “realistic”?

Asking “is what is being demanded politically realistic?” or “politically possible?” is a persistent problem with the ways many liberals who imagine themselves as progressive still think about ending systemic racial discrimination, and about protests against racism. Such questions ask us to measure “the realistic” and “the possible” prior to making political demands, and presume that the efficacy of social protest movements correlates with a tacit agreement between activists and those in power about what politics should look like. The demand for realism also betrays a particular racial and class privilege on the part of the person asking the question: they assume that everyone can be heard and understood as they are.

If you have always been listened to, it might make sense to confine your imagination and actions to what might be politically realistic. If you are middle-class or of a higher socioeconomic status, and if you are white, you have probably lived your life this way with great success. Those “politically realistic” outcomes tend to be designed to work to your benefit. You are mostly insulated from the structural disparities built into government. If you do not depend on politicians to escape housing and food insecurity or to educate your children, you can believe that your life does not immediately depend on whatever compromises will eventually be brokered – and whether you will be left out of them.

But what if the systems you are protesting have been thoroughly designed in ways to disfranchise, segregate, exclude, and otherwise marginalize you? Can you then afford to be content with what is “politically realistic” or “possible”? Can you defer your needs to some point in the indefinite future and wait for incremental change?

Radical activists on the left are not the only constituency who are skeptical about

moderation. In many ways, conservatives came to power in the United States by aspiring to what did not seem realistic: destroying unions, voiding the principles of the Voting Rights Act, capturing whole state legislatures and redistricting voters to retain supermajorities, to name a few of them. But for liberals, the warning to be “realistic” often seeks to discipline activists and more radical thinkers into “not asking for too much” or “not trying to go too fast.” This is particularly true when radicals are pursuing racial equality issues like police reform that might make other white people anxious.

The unspoken subtext for moderating radical demands is that white people’s comfort with the pace of social change is important for legitimating what are often questions of life or death for Black people and other people, or even the ideals that this country espouses rhetorically. White comfort matters; Black Lives matter less or not at all.

We might even ask: has being politically realistic ever resulted in structural change? Perhaps, but successful campaigns for racial justice have often pointedly ignored demands for moderation. Black activists and intellectuals such as James Baldwin, Ella Baker, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mae Mallory, and Malcolm X did not listen to the voices constantly asking them to tamp down demands for human rights in order to placate an unjust society that politics created. As Baldwin wrote in *The Fire Next Time* (1963): “I know what I’m asking is impossible [talking to white Americans]. But in our time, as in every time, the impossible is the least that one can demand—and one is, after all, emboldened by the spectacle of human history in general, and the American Negro history in particular, for it testifies to nothing less than the perpetual achievement of the impossible.”

Baldwin sought redemptive change “not on the surface—change in the sense of renewal.” Because that renewal had to be achieved in the context of racism, it could only occur by going beyond what liberal whites, and the broader white society, was comfortable with or able to agree to. This redemptive change was the “tension” that Martin Luther King, Jr. called for in his “[Letter from Birmingham City Jail](#) (1963), a tension that was required to usher in “the presence of justice.”

A critique of white moderate clergymen, and their characterization of the non-violent movement as “extreme,” was at the heart of King’s argument. Like Baldwin, King understood that power was never voluntarily conceded, and that the call for Blacks to “wait” until a more opportune time to protest “has almost always meant ‘Never.’” But he also urged his white critics to reconsider their own radical tradition. Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, and Jesus Christ among his examples, King argued, were all “creative extremists.” King continued, “I hoped

that the white moderate would see this. Maybe I was too optimistic. Maybe I expected too much. I guess I should have realized that few members of a race that has oppressed another race can understand or appreciate the deep groans and passionate yearnings of those that have been oppressed and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action.”

The Movement for Black Lives follows in the tradition of skepticism and hope collectively established by King, a tradition that draws on the feminism of organizers close to him. In the 1960s, Ella Baker organized poor Black and Latinx communities, helping parents and community leaders to cultivate the political and organizational tools necessary to challenge white power structures on behalf of themselves, their children, and their communities. Baker, who labored within governmental commissions, established civil rights organizations including the NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and in grassroots organizations, understood that the “politically realistic” had to be shifted and enlarged to encompass real justice. While she had a “deep appreciation for practical outcomes,” [as I have written elsewhere](#), “in her battle against Jim Crow in New York, Ella Baker worked hard to get close to the levers of political power without compromising her activist idealism.”

Around the same time, civil rights activist Mae Mallory also thought expansively about the need for Harlem’s children to have access to good schools. After Mallory’s fifth-grade son was given a homework assignment to count the pipes underneath their kitchen sink, she not only challenged the teacher, but decided that the entire school curriculum needed to change. She recognized that only transforming the entire New York City system would rectify the widespread miseducation of black children. Mallory did not confine herself to what was “politically realistic.” She thought first about what her children and other Black and Puerto Rican children in Harlem needed, suing the NYC Board of Education twice in the 1960s in order to compel the city to enact reforms that would improve the quality of education for children in Harlem.

Malcolm X also understood that political realism, in the context of white supremacy, was inadequate to the task of dismantling anti-Black racism. In his 1964 “The Ballot or the Bullet” speech, Malcolm argued that, “it is the government itself, the government of America, that is responsible for the oppression and degradation of Black people in this country. And you should drop it in their lap.” Working within the system was pointless because “This government has failed the Negro. This so-called democracy has failed the Negro. And these white liberals have definitely failed the Negro.”

Black liberation, Malcolm X believed, would come from seeking “new allies” and a

“new interpretation, a broader interpretation” of the entire civil rights movement and the political system itself. Transformation would come from internationalizing the struggle for rights, starting a Black nationalist political party, and figuring out how Black Americans could use their voting power most effectively to control the economic resources and institutions in their communities.

These are only a few examples, but none of these radical leaders limited their imaginations and policy solutions to what was “politically possible” within a racist system. They sought to change the terms of what was politically possible by challenging it in unconventional ways and with novel ideas. And they called out those people or institutions that attempted to circumscribe or blunt their movements by claiming their agendas did not contain “realistic” policies. For these Black radicals—and many others—Black liberation would not be tempered, or slowed, or made less important, by the desire to make white Americans and politicians more comfortable with the pace, or the content, of transformation.

Fortunately, contemporary activists such as Tamika Mallory, Opal Tometti, Alicia Garza, Patrice Cullors, Rev. Dr. William Barber, and Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis are also largely refusing to think and act in terms of what is “politically realistic” or “politically possible.” Like their forebears, they refuse to be “disciplined” into moderating their demands for equal rights to assuage the fears of the white majority or prioritize the social comfort of propertied Americans. The marches and protests since the murder of George Floyd, and the calls to defund or abolish the police, all of which have brought radical demands into a national policy discussion, bear this out.

Questioning the power of the police and the size of police budgets is crucial to this strategy. It directly confronts white discomfort by analyzing how funds directed towards policing Black communities can be redeployed to pay for care. The Movement for Black Lives has articulated why it is necessary to reexamine police and city budgets in order to demilitarize police departments; take power away from police unions; and deal with social problems in nonviolent, constructive, and least costly ways. The Movement is broader than ending state-sanctioned police violence, however. Its [six-part policy program for Black liberation](#), published on October 17 2020, includes agendas for reparations, economic justice, and political power. And M4BL [has pledged not to stop](#) “until ALL Black people can live and thrive without fear of harm from the state.”

The [Poor People’s Campaign](#), now led by Dr. William Barber, also continues to press the government and citizens to address the needs of low income and working people who not only make up a large proportion of our society, but also have suffered disproportionately from Covid-19. As Dr. King’s original vision for

this movement did, the campaign brings people from all over the country “together to confront the interlocking evils of systemic racism, poverty, ecological devastation, militarism and the war economy, and the distorted moral narrative of religious nationalism.” Barber’s movement is far from “realistic;” rather, it attempts to “shift the moral narrative, impact policies and elections at every level of government, and build lasting power for poor and impacted people.” As a result, the Poor People’s Campaign empowers communities with knowledge and other tangible tools to organize themselves, raising their voices in unison for policies and representatives that will ultimately make the “impossible” possible and finish the work begun under Dr. King.

Large parts of America are comfortable with racial inequality and social injustice. The concrete walls of Jim Crow segregation that have been chipped away at for over a century will hopefully soon be knocked down faster than new walls can be erected. It’s possible. But knocking walls down doesn’t just make noise: it makes mess and dust, and it forces those in charge to reorganize their lives around new realities.

It’s uncomfortable. And that’s a good thing.

*Kristopher Bryan Burrell is an Associate Professor of History at Hostos Community College–CUNY in the Bronx, NY. He writes on the Black Freedom Struggle in NYC during the 1950s and 1960s.*

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Related Names: [Alicia Garza](#), [Ella Baker](#), [James Baldwin](#), [Liz Theoharis](#), [Mae Mallory](#), [Martin Luther King Jr.](#), [Nyle Fort](#), [Rev. Dr. William Barber II](#), [Tamika Mallory](#)

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