On Not Logging Off: Bright and Political Indifference

For the materialist, Liam Kofi Bright’s excellent “White Psychodrama” (forthcoming) comes as a nice reminder that we should be wary of being drawn into (for want of a better phrase) *culture war bullshit*.[[1]](#footnote-2) If we care about racial justice, the debate between ‘repenters’ and ‘repressors’ over the number of Black people in the latest *Marvel* film should broadly be a topic of indifference. We should worry about police violence against Black people, mass incarceration, exploitation, impoverishment, and a variety of other material issues.

However, whilst this nice distinction between the issues we should adopt a stance of indifference towards (culture war bullshit) and those towards which we should adopt a stance of seeking to change (material issues) is not always so clear-cut. As Bright himself notes, police violence against Black men in the USA straddles both categories: it is a vitally important material issue that we should seek to end, but which also features at the centre of the very culture wars which he suggests we should adopt a stance of indifference towards.

How then, should the materialist approach material issues that have been swept up into the culture wars? The answer this question surely cannot be indifference towards police violence against Black men, nor can it be a simplistic rejection of one’s indifference towards the culture wars. One option might be this: let us maintain a stoic indifference to the stuff that is said in the culture wars (in the media, on social media and so on) whilst getting angry about and working to build movements to end police violence. However, the worry that I will press for the rest of this paper is that working to build such movements to end police violence and other material harms are (at least on occasion) impeded by an indifference to the culture wars.

Now there are a few different strategies that movements to end police violence and other material harms might take. However, drawing on an old Marxist distinction, we might talk of them broadly falling into two camps: revolutionary populist movements which take to the streets to gain political power, and reformist parliamentarian movements that operate within existing political institutions to gain political power. Whichever of these options one favours, I suggest that complete and total indifference to culture war bullshit is a tactical mistake.

First, let us think about revolutionary strategy. This generally involves trying to build popular support for one’s position, and mobilising that support, whether to the streets in protest, or to take up arms in insurrectionary violence. This is often a difficult task: not only does one have to persuade people of one’s views, but one also must motivate them to undertake an often costly and risky task. Even nonviolent protest, which is the least risky version of this strategy, imposes serious costs on the individual member of such a movement, especially in the context of government crackdowns on protest (c.f., the UK’s Policing, Crime, Sentencing, and Courts Act 2022). To take to the streets even in nonviolent protest, one risks a criminal record, the loss of one’s job, deportation, and violence from police.

So, how does the group seeking to undertake a revolutionary strategy overcome this difficult problem? It seems clear that mere abstract reasoning, a cool and disinterested weighing of costs and benefits is unlikely to bring many to the streets. Instead, the revolutionary will generally need to, and indeed find it profitable to appeal to emotion, to anger, to empathy, and to righteous fury (c.f., Cherry 2021, Lorde 1981).[[2]](#footnote-3) Bright himself advocates for the cultivation of a love for those whom we struggle with and on behalf of, affection for those who we stand in solidarity with, and anguish at the sufferings of the world (see Bright ms). Sometimes this emotional response will need to be developed: due to ideological obfuscation, lack of information, or otherwise, persons who should be angry at their situation or empathetic with the suffering of others are not. In such circumstances, the revolutionary will undertake a program of consciousness-raising, propaganda and so on to help develop the kinds of emotions that can productively be channeled into revolutionary mobilisation. However, there are times when people are *already* angry. Here, the revolutionary should take advantage of this righteous anger, and mobilise people taking advantage of the rage that people already feel, and the organic protest movements that have sprung up.

Here's the thing: a lot of the time, people are angry because of some feature of the culture wars. Think, for instance, of the statue of the slaver Edward Colston that once stood in the city of Bristol. Subject to years of culture war debates over its place in Bristol, protestors eventually took to the streets, toppled the statue, and threw it in the river Avon. Now, this mobilisation cannot be entirely put down to culture wars bullshit motivating people to get onto the streets – after all, this protest was one part of a global wave of anti-police and anti-racist protests motivated by the killing of George Floyd at the hands of US police. However, it does point to the idea that if and when people *are* motivated (even in part) by culture wars bullshit to take to the streets, revolutionaries should both understand the context which is making people angry enough to mobilise, and seek to work with this anger, taking advantage of it to make material gains where possible. Of course, the toppling of the statue of Colston is not (beyond some psychological boons) a direct material win for Black people in the UK. However, thousands of people were on the streets protesting – a mobilization that could have been taken advantage of as a part of a broader revolutionary strategy. The revolutionary might begin by mobilizing people thanks to their anger at the statue, then directing it onwards to achieve more direct material gains. Total indifference to the culture wars, then, can impede revolutionary strategy. Instead, the materialist should be aware of moments at which they can *take advantage* of culture wars bullshit to further their ends.

Now, there is still space for a degree of indifference here – as Bright has remarked in correspondence, one might be aware of the culture war driven emotion that motivates others to action without sharing that emotion oneself. Indeed, it may at times be useful to avoid being drawn into advocating for actions that merely provide catharsis rather than actions that build towards material gains. However, I worry that (at least in some contexts) we should be reticent to act like this. There’s a couple of reasons to be wary of this ‘at a remove’ strategy: one epistemic, and the other pragmatic. The epistemic issue is that, not experiencing the emotion oneself, one is in a worse position to know about the motivations of those who are experiencing that emotion, and it may make it harder to predict and plan to build on the actions of such people. The pragmatic issue is that one risks violating trust that one might have built with others who have mobilized on the basis of that emotion, placing one at risk of being accused of not really caring about the cause, and impeding any chance that one had of helping to guide such a mobilization towards action in pursuit of material gain.

To think about how the reformist cannot be indifferent to culture war bullshit, let us turn to a slightly different culture war in a different context: the moral panic over trans people in the United Kingdom. Increasing transphobic hate crimes, huge barriers to accessing gender-affirming healthcare, and massive levels of poverty have left trans people in a terrible material position in the United Kingdom. In this context we have seen a vast array of *culture war bullshit*. The UK has seen a massive growth in transphobic media coverage over the past 8 years, a growing ‘gender-critical’ or ‘trans-exclusionary radical feminist’ movement, and seemingly endless government consultations on gender, self-identification, and trans healthcare from both Westminster and Holyrood.

Whilst it might be nice to simply log off *twitter*, ignore these consultations, and remain indifferent to the culture war reaction over the public existence of trans people, we simply cannot afford to cede such ground. Trans people in the UK and our allies have repeatedly responded to consultations and given evidence to select committees. Failure to do so would cede all influence over the institutions that set the laws by which we live and govern the healthcare systems which help us to survive. Responding to culture war bullshit in such contexts, rectifying falsehoods about trans people spread in the culture wars and calling for legal changes for the benefit of trans people is a vital part of any reformist program. Indifference to the culture war is not an option in this context. To be sure, it would be nice if we could focus on the material issues that trans people face directly, however, in a political context where a central pole of many of the leadership campaigns of Tory leadership hopefuls was a hostile position on ‘the trans question’, we must, in order to defend what little political rights we do have, repudiate myths that we are groomers, creeps, and/or manipulated children. As Pearce et al put it, “We have not sought out the TERF wars; rather, the TERF wars have found us” (Pearce et al 2020 678).

Now we should of course note that the UK ‘TERF Wars’ are a rather different context to the conflicts over race in the United States. The chances of increased *de jure* transphobia as a result of the mainstreaming of transphobic culture war bullshit seem to distinguish the conditions of this conflict from the one that was at the centre of Bright’s discussion.[[3]](#footnote-4) As Bright has remarked in correspondence, this difference in the material conditions of a conflict *should* lead us to reconsider the implementation of any strategy that we advocate for in some other context: and in the UK context he is in agreement with me that we will probably have to continue fighting a culture war for the time being.

The materialist cannot, therefore, always adopt a pure stance of indifference towards the culture wars. We must be pragmatic: fighting the culture wars where we must, or where it would be to our advantage. Bright’s invocation of indifference provides a useful heuristic: generally, we should not involve ourselves in the culture wars, and should not waste time and energy by becoming invested in them. But as with all heuristics, there are times when they do not apply; there are times where we must attend to the culture war.[[4]](#footnote-5)

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1. I mean this in the traditional Frankfurtian sense – see Frankfurt 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Lorde also offers us another role that anger might play in revolutionary strategy: shaking what Bright calls ‘repenters’ out of a narcissistic guilt and into action. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. This is not to say that *de jure* racism against African Americans is completely dead, but as Bright notes, it certainly suffered a crushing defeat in the second half of the last century. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Many thanks to Liam Bright for his thoughtful, sharp-eyed comments on a draft of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)