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Andrea Dean
asdean@uwo.ca

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Racism, Oligarchy and Contentious Politics in Bermuda

by

Andrea S. Dean

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The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

Supervisor: Dr. Anton Allahar

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ABSTRACT

In 1959, ‘blacks’ in Bermuda boycotted the island’s movie theatres and held nightly protests over segregated seating practices. By all accounts the 1959 Theatre Boycott was one of the most significant episodes of contentious politics in contemporary Bermuda, challenging social norms that had been in existence for 350 years. While the trajectory and outcomes of ‘black’ Bermudians’ transgressive social protests could not have been predicted, this analysis uses racism, oligarchy and contentious politics as conceptual tools to illuminate the social mechanisms and processes that eventually led to the end of formal racial segregation in Bermuda after less than three weeks of limited and non-violent collective action. Content analyses of the documentary, *When Voices Rise*, and Bermuda’s two main newspapers in 1959 provide insight into the public discourse that informed Bermuda’s desegregation experience, and highlight the role of racist ideology, power and political contention in social inequality and social change.

Keywords: Bermuda, racism, oligarchy, contentious politics, social protest, (de)segregation

Racism, Oligarchy and Contentious Politics in Bermuda

For 17 days during the summer of 1959, ‘blacks’ in Bermuda boycotted and demonstrated at movie theatres in protest over racially segregated seating practices. At the time it was described as ‘a storm in a teacup’ (Williams 2002), but was in fact a seminal event in Bermudian history that altered social norms in existence for 350 years. The 1959 Theatre Boycott ultimately resulted in swift changes to segregationist policies for public spaces, and definitively marked the beginning of the end of formal racial segregation in Bermuda.

Bermuda is a tiny archipelago in the mid-Atlantic, with approximately 60,000 residents mainly descendant from ‘black’ African slaves and ‘white’ British slave owners (Bernhard 1999; Butland 1980; Tucker 1983). Originally settled in 1612, the island’s development is inextricably tied to its colonial history, its active role in Atlantic trade, and the development of a robust tourism industry. It has also been shaped by colonial slavery, and the economic, political and social subordination of ‘blacks’ enforced since its settlement. Surprisingly, Bermuda’s development is rarely mentioned in academic discourse relative to other former slave colonies, and there are few sociological analyses that explore the historical events and social forces that have shaped Bermudian society, and specifically the experience of ‘blacks’ in Bermuda.

By the twentieth century, Bermuda was considered an anomaly in the British colonial empire. The small country was economically prosperous with one of the highest standards of living in the world, and politically stable with a relatively unchanged oligarchic power structure over three centuries (Brown Jr. 2011; Butland 1980; Evans 2014; Strode 1932). Bermuda enjoyed an international reputation as an idyllic luxury destination for wealthy tourists, with reports of harmonious relations between ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’, and little evidence of poverty or violence (Strode 1932; Tucker 1983). Even though the ‘black’ and ‘white’ populations were

segregated in almost all spheres of life, ‘blacks’ in Bermuda were widely believed to be prosperous and content, and Bermudian society was often described as ‘polite’ (Evans 2014; Hodgson 1997; Strode 1932; Tucker 1983). By comparison, many of the colonies in the British West Indies were grappling with economic underdevelopment, political instability, and social issues informed by the legacy of plantation systems and ‘black’ slavery (Lewis 1969; Williams 1994). While scholars focused on problems in the West Indies and searched for sociological explanations, Bermuda remained largely ignored perhaps because its social issues remained well concealed. The 1959 Theatre Boycott shattered the illusion of harmony and publicly exposed Bermuda’s issues, bringing inequality, power and the politics of politeness to the fore.

This paper will examine the intersection of racism, oligarchy and contentious politics during the Theatre Boycott to understand how the end of formal segregation was achieved after less than three weeks of limited and non-violent collective action. The details of the protest and the rising voices of discontent over racial inequality were first documented by Bermuda’s two main newspapers at the time, namely *The Bermuda Recorder* and *The Royal Gazette*. Accordingly, a content analysis of both publications during the summer of 1959 provides insight into the public discourse that informed Bermuda’s desegregation experience. Additionally, an examination of the video documentary, *When Voices Rise*, provides important details about the boycott, including the perspectives of the ‘leaders’ of the desegregation effort.

While the scope of the paper is limited to the boycott and its most immediate results, the study of Bermuda’s social, economic and political development merits attention with the anticipation that future sociological research may augment our understanding of power, inequality and social change in racialized societies.

Racism: Ideology & Inequality

Miles (1989) explores the history of 'race' and the origin of racism in order to make the case that racism remains a useful concept in sociological analysis. He argues, as have many scholars, that racism is historically linked with the emergence and development of capitalism, and correlated with European, and more specifically British colonialism (Miles 1989). According to Miles, racism has been conceptually inflated to include not only its ideological content, but also to describe specific processes and practices. He defines racism as an ideological phenomenon that involves the process of racialization whereby "all of the people considered to make up a natural, biological collectivity are represented as possessing a range of (negatively evaluated) biological and/or cultural characteristics" (1989:79). Miles argues that racism must then be conceptually separated from 'exclusionary practices' that lead to social, economic and political inequality among collectivities (1989).

With respect to inequality, Miles admits the duality between ideology and action and uses the concept of exclusionary practice to "analyze all instances where a specified group is shown to be in unequal receipt of resources and services, or to be unequally represented in the hierarchy of class relations" (1989:77). In *Sociology and the Periphery*, Allahaar (1995) combines ideology and practice in his definition of racism, but otherwise aligns with Miles with respect to the content of both concepts. For both scholars, the connection between beliefs and social practice is the dialectical notion of inclusion and exclusion, whereby the ideological process of racialization can be used to inform which groups will be included or excluded in practice (Allahaar 1995; Miles 1989). Throughout their work, Allahaar and Miles make the expected and necessary connections between racism, slavery and capitalism, and apply a class orientation to explore exclusionary practices. However, prior to integrating the class perspective, Miles conceptually

separates and defines racism as a “representational phenomenon [that] is analytically distinguishable from exclusionary practices” (1989:84). He warns against the dangers of assuming a single cause for group disadvantage, and suggests that exclusionary practices are likely have more than one determinant. For this reason, Miles argues for a narrow definition of racism based solely on its ideological content (1989).

In *Critical Race Theory*, Cole (2016) argues against a narrow definition of racism to accommodate what he views as the multifaceted nature of contemporary racism. Cole considers different forms of racism such as intentional and unintentional, indirect and direct, covert and overt. In some cases he appears to reference ideology, while in others he seems concerned with the expression of racism in practice. Cole also refers to what Gillborn calls the “hidden operations of power that have the effect of disadvantaging one or more minority ethnic groups” (Gillborn 2006 as cited in Cole 2016:3). Without the separation between ideology and practice that Miles’ provides, Cole’s definition of racism seems to broaden further with each historically specific example or new contemporary situation encountered.

Like Miles and Allahar, Cole’s neo-Marxist orientation leads him to see racism as a ‘relation of production’ best understood in terms of class interests (2016). However, in *Racism and Colonialism*, Ross (1982) warns against the assumption that racism is simply a reflex of labour relations, and makes clear “the extent to which the ideology of racism maintains its power, even when the initial circumstances under which it developed have disappeared” (p. 9). Rex (1982) also argues, “that while relation to the basic means of production is an important source of differentiation and class position, there are also other aspects of the total economic, political and legal systems which differentiate men from one another...” (p. 209).

With respect to ideology in general, Allahar suggests that “Marx emphasizes an almost one-to-one correspondence between ideas and [material] interests” (1995:19), whereas Weber acknowledged the possibility that ideas and interests are not always fused together. The separation of ideas and interests could be considered analogous to the analytical separation of ideology and practice that Miles (1989) suggests, allowing for investigation of ideology and its impacts without confining the outcomes to class analysis. As a set of ideas, racism may appear as a logical and consistent theory as well as a simplified collection of images, stereotypes and explanations used to understand and navigate everyday life (Miles 1989). In this way, racism as ideology can become ‘common sense’, helping people to explain the way the(ir) world appears, and justify the practices that conform to that view (Allahar 1995). Miles points to the historical idea of ‘whites’ as a superior group, evidenced by their real and material differences from other groups (1989). However, he stops short of suggesting that a ruling group always derives material or political benefit from the expression of racism, and it follows that exclusionary practices may also have non-material yet significant social consequences.

At a theoretical level, both racism and exclusionary practices are associated with inequality of power; however, it should not be assumed that the presence of both adequately explains *how* patterns of inequality are consistently reinforced and reproduced over time. The explanation lies in the analysis of reinforcement and reproduction as social processes that are informed by ideological dispositions and strengthened by real and consequential interactions between social actors. In *Identities, Boundaries and Social Ties*, Tilly (2005) explores both transactional and dispositional explanations of social processes, and argues that disposition alone, whether individual or collective, cannot sufficiently explain social processes. Tilly posits that interpersonal transactions are the basic elements of social processes that “compound into

identities, create and transform social boundaries, and accumulate into durable social ties” (2005:6). He further suggests that durable inequality is the result of ongoing social processes involving closure, control and exclusion based on categorical differences such as ‘black’ and ‘white’, and that such categories are reinforced by ideology, comprehensive social organization, and various methods of enforced compliance (Tilly 2005). Instead of assuming that ideas are sufficient to explain social interactions that produce inequality, Tilly suggests that sociological analysis should identify underlying mechanisms, processes and “...recurrent causal sequences of general scope - that lock categorical inequality into place” (2005:72). He goes on to argue that categories such as ‘black’ and ‘white’ represent social boundaries that inform interpersonal and intergroup relations. When ongoing interactions across the boundary routinely deliver advantages to one group over another, and also reproduce or reinforce the boundary, durable inequality is the result (Tilly 2005).

If we overlay Tilly’s work on inequality with the ideology of racism, it becomes clearer how racism may inform social interactions, and why repeated interactions based on categorical difference might create inequality between groups; however, there is still something missing. How do attitudes and interactions combine to form stable patterns that reinforce inequality? James and Redding (2005) suggest that the answer is politics, which has been intimately intertwined with the social [and political] construction of ‘race’ since the emergence of racism and the association of ‘blacks’ with slavery. According to Redding, James and Klugman (2005), racial attitudes alone cannot explain historical events. Instead, attitudes and beliefs about ‘race’ inform social boundaries that are politically managed by those with power, and the resulting inequalities are locked into place by informal and formal social mechanisms that are often more resistant to change than the attitudes and beliefs themselves (Redding et al. 2005; Tilly 2005).

Thus, after a brief analytical separation, the relationship between ideas and interests resurfaces as central for understanding racism and durable inequality, yet incomplete until politics enters as a third partner.

The Politics of Oligarchy

Oligarchy is often mentioned in the literature focused on post-colonial societies, yet Winters (2011) laments that it remains among the most poorly theorized concepts in the social sciences. In the *International Encyclopedia of Political Science*, oligarchy is loosely defined as “the rule of the few in their own interests” (Melville 2011; 1739), and acknowledges the word as more of a descriptor than an analytical concept. According to Winters (2011), the concept has become conflated with the study of minority power and elite theory such that any social structure, process or institution that is ‘ruled by the few’ can be described as oligarchic. In this way, oligarchy becomes functionally useless as an analytic concept, in part because the relative number of ‘rulers’ is a descriptive element, but not predictive of oligarchy or its outcomes. Winters (2011) notes that minority power exists in most areas of society, but that not all forms are the same or produce the same outcomes. He argues that a more precise definition must focus on how the outcomes of oligarchy are differentiated from other forms of minority power (Winters 2011).

Winters advances a materialist perspective that differentiates types of minority power based on the kinds of power resources available to ‘rulers’. He emphasizes the material foundation of oligarchy and posits that the basis of oligarchic power is concentrated material wealth, which is historically resistant to redistribution (Winters 2011). According to Winters, oligarchs are defined as “actors who command and control massive concentrations of material

resources that can be deployed to defend or enhance personal wealth and exclusive social position” (2011:6), and who “share a basic ideological and practical commitment to the defense of wealth and property” (2011:9). By extension, oligarchy is defined as “the politics of wealth defense by materially endowed actors” (2011:7).

Winters explains that, in Marxist theory, an examination of the capitalist bourgeoisie focuses on the use of economic power by capitalists, and the resultant political and social impacts. An economic analysis of the outcomes of oligarchy may help to explain persistent patterns of economic disparity, but for Winters (2011) the more important outcome of extreme material imbalance in any society is extreme political imbalance. As such, he believes the development of oligarchic theory should focus on the use of political power by oligarchs, with significant material impacts. “This emphasis on the political implications of material disparities – on the “inequality of conditions” – makes oligarchic forms of minority power and exclusion different from all others” (Winters 2011:5).

Winters’ development of oligarchic theory rests on several important premises including the inherently conflictual nature of economic stratification, the role of coercion with respect to property rights and claims, and the self-sustaining power resource of wealth concentration (2011). He details four ideal types of oligarchy – warring, ruling, sultanistic and civil – with each exhibiting a particular manner of wealth defense designed to maintain and enforce economic stratification, and separated from other types by the extent to which oligarchs are armed and directly participate in coercion, the level and mode of law as a system of rule and property defense, and the relative absence or presence of collective arrangements that support wealth defense and threat management (Winters 2011). Each type is illustrated by a series of case studies that illuminate its unique features, and the multiple ways in which extreme wealth

concentration is maintained. Although wide historical variations exist in the pursuit of oligarchic objectives, Winters (2011) is careful to note that oligarchy is not a particular type of government or system of organization, and is instead a material undertaking in its essence, with political power as its core driver, and the maintenance of extreme stratification as its main outcome. As a result, oligarchy can exist with various forms of government, including democracy, as long as avenues for property and income defense remain (Winters 2011).

While a full review of oligarchic types is not possible here, a brief outline of civil oligarchy is useful for the present analysis. According to Winters (2011), civil oligarchy has great relevance for the analysis of contemporary society, as it is associated with economic and political stability, can easily exist within democracy, and is the most compatible with capitalism. In civil oligarchies, oligarchs do not directly participate in violence or coercion to advance their interests; instead, the defense of concentrated material wealth is performed by the state using bureaucratic institutions for governance and enforcement (Winters 2011). Oligarchs may hold office, but do not overtly appear to do so in their own interests; however, they do possess the power resources to influence political outcomes. “In civil oligarchies where existing property and fortunes are secure...oligarchs for the first time devote virtually all of their material power resources to the political challenges of income defense” (Winters 2011:208).

The politics of oligarchy is relevant for understanding how material inequality is maintained, and has significant implications for the social and political tensions that arise in civil societies. When such tensions involve threats to wealth and income, oligarchs are able to mobilize their wealth power to defend their material interests, and do so through state enforcement (Winters 2011). In most cases, the implicit threat of violence or coercion is sufficient because the state has historically demonstrated that it can and will resort to force under

certain circumstances. “During periods of peace, marked by economic and political institutions that structure transactions and clearly embody elements of cooperation and trust, the credible threat of violence is what bounds and informs behaviours” (Winters 2011:284).

As a political project, the oligarchic defense of wealth and income has obvious and significant implications for the reproduction of inequality, and the social tensions that result. It is also relevant to the study of political contention, which poses perhaps the greatest threat to oligarchic objectives in civil society. Accordingly, it is toward the study of contentious politics that we now turn our attention.

Contentious Politics

In his extensive study of contentious politics, Tilly highlights the relational and interactive dynamics of political contention, and explores the mechanisms and processes at work in contentious interactions and episodes. (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001; Tilly 2002; Tilly 2005; Tilly and Tarrow 2007). Aminzade et al. (2001) and Tilly and Tarrow (2007) contend that contentious politics involves “public, collective, episodic interactions among makers of claims when (a) at least some of the interaction adopts non-institutional forms, b) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and c) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants” (Aminzade et al. 2001:7).

Although a full review of the study of contentious politics is beyond the scope of this paper, there are a number of related concepts advanced by Tilly and his colleagues that prove helpful in understanding the general nature of political contention. Tilly and Tarrow (2007) argue that contention and collective action are regular features of ordinary social life, but it is their convergence with politics in public interactions that produces contentious politics. Further,

the definition of contentious politics includes the condition that one of the parties involved is a government, its agents or any formal system of institutionalized power. As a result, contentious claims usually threaten the established order to some degree, and challenge the state's ability to control public displays (Tilly and Tarrow 2007). Accordingly, the perception of social or political stability over time cannot be equated to social harmony or the absence of contention, and may instead be the result of successful containment of contention in the public sphere.

McAdam et al. (2001) suggest a relationship between subcategories of *contained* and *transgressive* contention with important distinctions and parallels between the two. The concept of contained contention augments the earlier definition of contentious politics with the proviso that all parties involved are recognized political actors. Transgressive contention occurs when some of the parties involved self-identify as new political actors, and/or utilize novel or unprecedented approaches to collective action, including those strongly discouraged within the established political order. McAdam et al. (2001) note that transgressive contention often grows out of episodes of contained contention, but should not be confused with an artificial distinction between conventional and unconventional politics. Furthermore, the authors argue that transgressive contention is more likely to result in substantial political and social change, whereas contained contention tends to reproduce the conventional or existing political order (Aminzade et al. 2001; McAdam et al. 2001).

In both subcategories of political contention, the dynamics of contentious interactions take on a conversational character much like that of a public argument, whereby the nature of conversation can be improvisational, yet occurs within constraints designed to produce order (McAdam et al. 2001; Tilly 2002). The public nature of the conversation also draws in parties other than the claim-makers and their objects, including sympathizers, objectors, bystanders,

interested third parties and the media (Tilly and Tarrow 2007), and renders the outcome of such interaction dependent on the participants, the conversation, the stories retold about the interaction, the responses to the interaction, fears about further interactions and so on (McAdam et al. 2001). Contentious politics, therefore, involves a number of observable mechanisms and processes that combine to create unpredictable results, especially when the nature of contention is transgressive (McAdam et al. 2001).

One of the most useful examples of contentious politics is the modern version of the protest demonstration, involving the making of a claim, designed to temporarily upset routine social life and alter the long-term behaviour of the targets of the claim (Aminzade et al. 2001; McAdam et al. 2001; Tilly and Tarrow 2007), and which may be categorized as contained or transgressive depending on the political context at play. Protest demonstrations usually involve some elements of creativity and improvisation, and often encourage the mobilization of people who might otherwise not engage in interactions that give public voice to their private claims (McAdam et al. 2001; Tilly and Tarrow 2007). The nature, recurrence and outcome of a protest is also contingent upon the dynamics that unfold during and after the event itself, including the number and actions of participants, the response of the authorities, the counter claims advanced during the conversation, responses to the counter claims, and the framing and evaluation of the event by the media and other interested parties. With this understanding it becomes clear that the trajectory of any single event or episode of contentious interaction cannot be scripted or predicted, and is actually dependent on the dynamics of “historically situated, culturally constrained, negotiated, consequential interchanges among multiples parties” (Tilly 2002:122).

The definitions and related concepts offered by Tilly and his colleagues provide a starting point for understanding and categorizing contentious politics, and some insight into the

mechanisms and processes that underlie contentious interactions. As such, they can now be combined with the intersection of racism and oligarchy to better understand the events of the 1959 Theatre Boycott in Bermuda.

Racism, Oligarchy and the Containment of Contention in Bermuda

An analysis of the Theatre Boycott requires a preliminary review of Bermuda's history to illuminate key features that inform contemporary society and provide context for the event in question. The available literature concerning Bermuda includes a mix of historical and descriptive texts, and a sparse selection of analytical perspectives, yet all accounts of the island point to several persistent features of Bermudian society that existed up to the middle of the twentieth century.

Racism & Exclusion

Throughout the literature the primacy of 'race' in Bermudian society is evident, with racism often put forward as both a cause and effect of slavery and enduring racial inequality (Brown Jr. 2011; Hodgson 1997; Packwood 1975). In his foundational analysis of capitalism and slavery, Eric Williams (1994) notes two types of British colonies, the first of which includes self-sufficient small-scale farmers operating in a diversified economy, and the second that comprised colonies with resources for large-scale production of staples for export. Bermudian history begins as the former type, settled in 1612 by designates of the Virginia Company intent on exploiting the potential riches of Bermuda. The earliest record of slaves in Bermuda appears in the early 1600s, but slavery had yet to become synonymous with 'blacks'. As a result, 'white' slaves, indentured servants, 'blacks' and 'Indians' occupied the same status in early Bermuda

(Bernhard 1999; Jarvis 2010; Packwood 1975; Smith 1976); however, the ideology of racism was already in place, and ‘blacks’ were always viewed as an inferior group that required active subordination. ‘An Act to Restrayne the Insolencies of the Negroes’ – the first of such laws in the British Empire – was passed in 1623 and forebode the full racialization of Bermudian society that was to come (Bernhard 1999; Jarvis 2010; Packwood 1975; Smith 1976).

By the late 1600s, slavery became exclusively associated with Africans (Miles 1989; Williams 1994), and ‘black’ Bermudians by extension. Bermuda’s ruling elite subsequently denied slaves the right to buy and sell goods, farm their own land, or engage in any form of trade and cemented their status as property (Jarvis 2010; Smith 1976). Without any legal rights, ‘blacks’ were at the mercy of their ‘white’ rulers and subject to laws and practices enacted to control the ‘black’ population. At the same time, slaves in Bermuda were considered members of individual households and defined as dependents in the same way as women and children. Slave owners were responsible for clothing, feeding and educating their dependents, and providing care for young, elderly or infirm slaves who were unable to work (Jarvis 2010). In many families ‘white’ and ‘black’ children were raised and educated together, and slave families grew up alongside their ‘white’ owners experiencing very personalized social relations (Butland 1980; Jarvis 2010; Packwood 1975; Prince 2010). Given the close physical and economic relationship between masters and slaves, and the presence of relatively large numbers of women and children on the island, slave owners quickly became preoccupied with maintaining social order and avoiding any sort of conflict, especially in such a small and isolated space (Bernhard 1999; Jarvis 2010; Smith 1976; Tucker 1983). In turn, the familial and patriarchal nature of Bermudian slavery encouraged ‘blacks’ to emulate the prevalent social norms and informal codes of etiquette as defined by ‘whites’ (Paul 1983).

Bermudians transitioned away from agricultural pursuits near the end of the seventeenth century, and slaves were trained in the diverse range of skilled occupations required to support the island's emerging maritime economy. As Bermudian slavery was adapted to seafaring, 'blacks' enjoyed some degree of mobility and economic autonomy both at sea and on land (Bernhard 1999; Jarvis 2010; Packwood 1975; Smith 1976). Slave owners and ship captains used material incentives, such as negotiated wages, shared profits and the freedom to engage in private ventures, to ensure slaves remained loyal and 'well-behaved'. They also encouraged a sense of personal obligation based on household bonds to tie slaves to their ships and their families (both 'black' and 'white') while out at sea (Jarvis 2010). Although coercion and brutality could still be features of Bermudian slavery at a household level (Butland 1980; Packwood 1975; Prince 2010), they were not generally compatible with maritime activities that required skills, cooperation and close quarters. Instead, slave owners relied on shared, or at least compatible material interests, and accepted standards of behaviour to avoid slave resistance or revolt and ensure relative peace for the island (Jarvis 2010).

Bermuda's maritime economy began to collapse in the late 1700s as the American Revolution impacted inter-colonial trade and the post-war activities of Britain reshaped the mid-Atlantic seascape (Jarvis 2010, Packwood 1975; Tucker 1983). Bermudians were eager to find new and profitable ventures to support themselves and their slaves who, without enough work, became an economic drag on their owners. By the time that slavery was abolished in 1834, most 'whites' were relieved that they would no longer be responsible for their slaves and encouraged 'blacks' to behave in ways that would eventually signal to their readiness to accept the responsibilities of full citizenship (Packwood 1975; Smith 1976). Formal laws that defined the boundaries and relations between 'blacks' and 'whites' were repealed; as a result, long-standing

practices such as racial segregation, and behavioural codes that structured interactions between ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’ became even more significant as social control mechanisms (Butland 1980; Packwood 1975; Smith 1976). ‘Black’ Bermudians understood that Emancipation did not mean freedom from racism or the end of exclusionary practices; however, they celebrated Emancipation with thanksgiving church services and adjusted to their new reality without much fanfare (Packwood 1975; Smith 1976). Shortly after Emancipation Day, Bermuda’s official newspaper reported, “[f]our days of universal freedom have now passed; and four days of more perfect order, regularity and quiet have these famed peaceful Isles never witnessed” (as cited in Smith 1976). For almost a century longer the island ambled along in relative peace as Bermudians turned their attention to economic activities associated with an emerging tourism industry.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, ‘blacks’ accounted for an increasing majority of Bermuda’s inhabitants, yet they remained subordinated and segregated in most spheres of life. Schools, churches, hospitals and social spaces remained segregated (Butland 1980; Hodgson 2009; Philip 1983; Williams 2002). Major hotels and restaurants discriminated against ‘blacks’ as a matter of policy. Public and private places of leisure were segregated, including movie theatres, tennis courts and beaches. ‘Blacks’ were denied entry into the civil service, the post office and other jobs, with advertisements frequently specifying that only ‘white’ applicants should apply (Williams 2002). “[P]eople had been told repeatedly that if Negroes were hired all of the current Civil Servants would walk off the job en bloc. They were also told that if white American tourists were sold postage stamps by Negroes the tourist trade would be driven away overnight” (Hodgson 1997:87). Where ‘black’ workers were employed, they were paid less than ‘white’ workers, and ‘white’ expatriate workers were often imported to

prevent the need to train and employ ‘black’ Bermudians (Brown Jr. 2011; Hodgson 1997; Williams 2002). In effect, every attempt was made to deny ‘blacks’ the ability to fully participate in Bermudian society (Butland 1980; Hodgson 2009).

In addition to the wide range of exclusionary practices that ensured racial inequality, social norms prohibited the open discussion of ‘race’, and reinforced the relational boundaries between ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’ with a strong emphasis on polite and cultured behaviour, even in the face of overt discrimination. Ira Philip, a Bermudian author, historian and former newspaper editor of *The Bermuda Recorder* recalls the legal assaults against community leaders who sought to address racial injustices in public forums in the early to mid-1900s. Those who spoke publicly about racism and exclusionary practices were chastised for speaking in vulgar terms and, in some cases charged with libel, imprisoned or encouraged to leave the island (Hodgson 1997; Philip 1983). Hodgson notes that Bermudian society exhibited a “pattern of hypocrisy whereby it was continually proclaimed that any Negro who even mentioned race was himself a racist” (1997:74). Further, any public discussion of ‘race’ was deemed problematic and could be censored. Hodgson recalls the censorship of a weekly radio program that was sponsored by a ‘black’ social club in the early 1950s: “On any, and every, occasion that the words equality, freedom or race were mentioned the Radio Station would cut off the speech...[i]n a community which functioned on the kind of racialism sponsored by the Government and implemented by every institution on the Island it was stated that the radio would not broadcast any topic that was racial, religious, or otherwise controversial” (1997:75). All accounts of Bermuda up to the 1950s suggest that racism was alive and well, having been deeply encoded in the social life of all Bermudians for more than three centuries; yet the discussion of ‘race’, racism and exclusionary practices was to be avoided at all costs.

Bermuda's 'Forty Thieves'

In addition to racism and the exclusion of 'blacks', oligarchy also features prominently throughout the literature on Bermuda. Bermuda was originally settled as a commercial venture geared toward capital accumulation for wealthy investors from Britain, but by the late 1600s the interested parties deserted their project and left the descendants of the island's original settlers to fend for themselves (Bernhard 1999; Jarvis 2010; Packwood 1975). Residents pursued a variety of economic interests over the first three centuries including agriculture, privateering, shipbuilding and inter-colonial trade, and became quite adept at leveraging their mid-Atlantic location to ensure their economic survival (Brown Jr. 2011; Jarvis 2010; Lewis 1969). Several authors note that, in contrast to the plantation economies of the West Indies that were originally designed to extract wealth, much of Bermuda's wealth remained in the island, and quickly became concentrated within a few families who would effectively, if not officially, rule the country for centuries (Brown Jr. 2011; Jarvis 2010; Lewis 1969; Smith 1976).

For 350 years Bermuda's oligarchy, known in contemporary times as the 'Forty Thieves', comprised the most significant and wealthy 'white' landowners, merchants, professionals, bankers and financiers who exercised full control of the island's non-democratic political system, government and judiciary (Brown Jr. 2011; Lewis 1969; Philip 1983; Strode 1932). Significant land qualifications and electoral practices ensured that less than 10% of 'blacks' could vote in any election, and those 'blacks' who did run for elected office were often educated professionals or relatively significant property owners who were deemed acceptable by the Forty Thieves (Hodgson 1997; Lewis 1969). The visibility of a small number 'blacks' in Bermuda's parliamentary system at any time gave the illusion of 'black' representation; however, the unequal composition of parliamentary bodies and the ability of the Forty Thieves to collectively

influence political outcomes ensured the influence of 'blacks' was negligible (Brown Jr. 2011; Hodgson 1997; Lewis 1969).

In some of the available literature, Bermuda's oligarchic power structure is posited as the primary tool of 'black' subordination (Brown Jr. 2011; Hodgson 1997; Packwood 1975; Philip 1983), and alternatively it is lauded for its appropriate and stable nature and its pivotal role in the island's economic success (Strode 1932; Tucker 1983). Indeed, Bermuda's oligarchs successfully navigated the development of British capitalism, changing tides of Atlantic commerce and the advent of wars between and within European and American centres of power to carve out a unique and often advantageous position for the island. However, they did so by maintaining a business model that consistently relied on slave and cheap 'black' labour to serve the singular pursuit of material wealth for a cohesive group of 'white' families intertwined through kinship and bonded by historical interdependence. Some scholars argue that 'blacks' in Bermuda enjoyed better social conditions and a higher standard of living relative to their counterparts in the West Indies as a result of the country's economic prosperity (Butland 1980; Strode 1932).

In the late 1800s Bermuda's oligarchs focused on the development of tourism as the means to continued capital accumulation, and the country remained dependent on the external world for its continued subsistence in literal and figurative terms. Bermuda's economic activity had always been geared to providing a service or producing an intangible product, and little of the island's resources were used to sustain the local population (Brown Jr. 2011). The result was the ever-present threat of economic and literal starvation for many Bermudians if the flow of capital was hindered. Nevertheless, by the 1950s oligarchs were reaping the rewards of a

booming tourism industry that brought international capital to the island, and connected them with wealthy elites from other parts of the world (Butland 1980; Evans 2014; Strode 1932).

The Politics of Politeness

A third persistent feature of Bermudian society is the general absence of serious political contention between ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’, alternatively described by some as ‘racial harmony’. Indeed, up until the first half of the twentieth century Bermuda was a country without the history of extreme violence, bloodshed, resistance and protest recorded in other colonial islands (Bernhard 1999; Jarvis 2010). Some authors point to the historical interdependence and cooperation between ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’ fostered by Bermuda’s small size, externally dependent economic activities and unique articulation of patriarchal slavery (Butland 1980; Jarvis 2010). Other scholars suggest fear, social control and political apathy on the part of ‘blacks’ is to blame (Brown Jr. 2011; Hodgson 1997).

A cursory review of Bermuda’s political history reveals that oligarchs had routinely been successful in containing any serious contention between ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’ through laws, exclusionary practices and strict codes of social etiquette (Bernhard 1999; Butland 1980; Hodgson 1997; Jarvis 2010; Packwood 1975; Philip 1983; Smith 1976). With regard to slavery, it has been suggested that Bermuda’s active involvement in Atlantic trade was partly responsible for the unique articulation of patriarchal slavery that shaped the lives of ‘blacks’ in Bermuda before and after Emancipation (Jarvis 2010; Lewis 1968; Packwood 1975; Prince 2010; Smith 1976). It has also been argued that Bermudian slavery was much more benevolent and less brutal than that experienced in the West Indies (Jarvis 2010; Strode 1932; Tucker 1983), which may account for the perceived history of harmony and cooperation between ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’.

While those arguments will not be taken up here, it is evident that major slave rebellions or collective acts of resistance rarely materialized.

In the century following Emancipation, there were sporadic attempts to address racial inequities, often led by expatriate ‘blacks’ who were baffled by the political apathy of Bermudians, and stymied by oligarchic control (Brown Jr. 2011; Hodgson 1997; Philip 1983). Efforts to organize ‘black’ workers were somewhat successful in the first half of the twentieth century, with the establishment of the Bermuda Workers Association, the Bermuda Industrial Union, and the advent of labour strikes as a tolerated form of contention (Hodgson 1997; Philip 1983). There were also smaller scale attempts to encourage the acceptance of ‘blacks’ into segregated spaces (Hodgson 2009; Philip 1983; Williams 2002). However, in each case those efforts failed to engage the majority of the ‘black’ population, and did not produce enough momentum to alter the racialized structure of Bermudian society (Brown Jr. 2011; Hodgson 1997; Hodgson 2009; Philip 1983; Williams 2002). When public contention appeared possible, Bermuda’s leaders attempted to steer problematic interactions toward official and prescribed political processes. Alternatively, the implied and real threat of economic sanctions for ‘blacks’ often served to silence the voices of discontent. Hodgson (2009) suggests it was a known practice to hold the threat of ‘calling a mortgage’ over ‘blacks’ in exchange for their compliance with the established social order. In his analysis of ‘black’ Bermudian family life, Paul (1983) notes that the granting of mortgages to ‘blacks’ to facilitate the acquisition of land and dwellings was a fundamentally important feature, due to the historical importance of property and the land owning requirements that regulated political involvement. The majority of ‘blacks’ could afford to purchase neither land nor dwelling, but for those who achieved the former, they were reliant on ‘whites’ to facilitate the latter (Hodgson 1997; Paul 1983).

By the 1950s, given the island's increasing dependence on tourism and the necessity of maintaining its carefully crafted image for international consumption, 'blacks' were often reminded that any change to the status quo could have significant negative effects for all Bermuda residents, and specifically for their own survival (Hodgson 1997). Yet, there were rumblings of discontent among 'blacks', as well as concerted attempts to address the 'race' issue through official channels such as the House of Assembly. In response to the rumblings, a Select Committee on Race Relations was established by Bermuda's parliament in 1953 (Brown Jr. 2011; Hodgson 1997; Tucker 1983; Williams 2002). The committee's report confirmed the lack of substantial progress that could be expected, and provided the public narrative used to justify a gradual approach to social reforms:

We have appreciated that reforms, however necessary and advisable, must win acceptance and that the goal must be towards steady progress, with the minimum dislocation of government services and the private sensibilities of all sections of the community. We are conscious too, that due regard must be had to the protection of our travel industry, the major means of our livelihood. It is always debatable what effects, if any, more liberal policies might have on the tourist trade but it seems clear that some caution is justified. In spite of anti-discrimination legislation abroad, it is evident that prejudice has, by no means, been eradicated. In the development of the policies which this Report recommends, we must be careful to keep our reforms in line with the generally accepted conditions of the countries from which we get a majority of our visitors, if we are to avoid the risk of endangering our vital trade interests... (as cited in Brown Jr. 2011:53)

The use of parliamentary committees, white papers, reports and studies were not new to 'blacks' in Bermuda. They were accepted political mechanisms through which racial issues could be delicately raised, discussed behind closed doors and then effectively shelved. To 'blacks' they provided the temporary illusion of action, and to the oligarchy they provided the assurance that the status quo would be protected (Lewis 1969; Philip 1983; Williams 2002). As a result, until the Theatre Boycott the majority of 'blacks' appeared resigned to accept their

subordinate social position, making only limited and sporadic attempts to encourage changes to the status quo and instead vying for better access to material rewards within the existing system.

The intersection of racism and oligarchic power had resulted in the effective containment of serious political contention between ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’; however, a sociological analysis must do more than simply describe the existence of these persistent features, or assume that their intersection in history is sufficient to explain the events of 1959. In the following analysis, racism, oligarchy and contentious politics are used as lenses through which the 1959 Theatre Boycott can be examined.

Sources & Methods

This analysis of the 1959 Theatre Boycott in Bermuda is informed by an interest in the historical development of Bermuda’s highly racialized society with its persistent features of racism and oligarchic control, and the mechanisms of contentious politics through which formal racial desegregation was achieved in spite of attempts to slow the pace of social change. Document analysis of the principal public newspapers in Bermuda during June and July 1959 was conducted. All articles and letters touching on racial segregation in Bermuda, and the desires and demands for social change were examined. Articles about segregation and/or desegregation in other jurisdictions were generally omitted; however, when discussions about racial issues were connected to the case of Bermuda, they were considered.

In total, 50 newspaper articles, 40 letters to the editor, three editorials and eight photos with related captions were included in this analysis. Reports from international sources commenting on the boycott and related issues were examined if they were reprinted in the principal Bermuda newspapers. An examination of the documentary, *When Voices*

Rise...Dismantling Segregation in a Polite Society, was also undertaken. The documentary, originally released in 2002, was the first substantial recounting of the 1959 Theatre Boycott that includes the perspectives of the 'leaders' of the desegregation effort. The documentary details the behind-the-scenes preparations, events, reactions and public discourse from the perspective of 'blacks' in Bermuda.

The principal newspapers in Bermuda during the 1950s were *The Royal Gazette* and *The Bermuda Recorder*. *The Royal Gazette* is Bermuda's 'official' daily newspaper and has been published since the late eighteenth century. The paper has been historically regarded as the 'white paper', and until the late twentieth century was targeted mainly to the 'white' minority in the islands. *The Bermuda Recorder* was published twice weekly from 1925 to 1975 and was considered to be the 'black paper', providing local and international news and advertising to the island's 'black' population. Together, the historical documentary and newspaper references provide insight into the public discourse around (de)segregation and the desires and demands for first-class citizenship on the part of 'blacks' in Bermuda. Additionally, they also reveal the attitudes and approaches of oligarchs and the public toward desegregation and the enfranchisement of Bermuda's 'black' population.

The present analysis was driven by the following research questions. First, why did 'black' Bermudians engage in mass demonstrations and public protests over segregation in 1959, after 350 years of racialized living conditions? Second, what role did the public aspect of political contention over Bermuda's racial issues play in bringing about significant social change? Third, why did Bermuda's oligarchs agree to accelerate the pace of desegregation beyond the demand for desegregated seating in Bermuda's theatres? In the discussion that

follows, I outline the events of the boycott and explore the impact of the intersection of racism, oligarchy and contentious politics.

The 1959 Theatre Boycott

The 1959 Theatre Boycott began as the brainchild of a small group of ‘black’ friends who met secretly during the 1950s and discussed strategies to address Bermuda’s most pressing social problems. Many of the young men and women in the group had been educated in Canada and the U.K. where they experienced desegregated society and more social freedom than in their home country. They pretended to be a ‘literary society’ to avoid the interest of authorities, and met in private homes to maintain their anonymity. The group remained secret for years, fearing serious economic sanctions such as the ‘calling’ of their parents’ mortgages at the hands of the Forty Thieves if they were discovered (Williams 2002).

According to its founder, Dr. Stan Ratteray, the Progressive Group was meant to be the beginning of a political force in Bermuda, established before the advent of universal adult suffrage and the British parliamentary system (Williams 2002). Members believed that racism and the oligarchic power structure in Bermuda were at the root of issues affecting ‘blacks’, and they articulated their ideas in a document titled *An Analysis of Bermuda’s Social Problems*. The group’s short-term plans included the initiation of some form of political action, and in the long-term they hoped to gain access to various groups including government in order to influence policies around segregation and political empowerment (Williams 2002). The Progressive Group launched their boycott campaign in June 1959 by mailing letters and distributing circulars to ‘blacks’ that encouraged the total boycott of theatre performances until they offered desegregated seating.

In this the 350th year of Bermuda's history, we the under-mentioned group wish you to make an effort to bring about the end of second-class citizenship. There is no reason why any person should not be allowed to sit any place in any theatre. You are well behaved, well dressed and you know only too well that you have to pay your admission. You have a sense of personal dignity, courage and leadership. Therefore assert yourself and Boycott All Theatres as of June 15th; encourage your friends to do likewise. The fact that some theatres are not segregated proves that the management segregates just as a matter of principle. Therefore, you are earnestly urged not to attend any theatre until the management changes its policy. Remember success depends on you."
 –A PROGRESSIVE GROUP (Bermuda Recorder 1959n)

For 17 days ‘blacks’ boycotted Bermuda’s main theatres and held non-violent protests against segregated seating practices. Small, curious crowds gathered in the beginning, but as the main newspapers spread the word, more ‘blacks’ joined the protests that were transforming their desire for desegregation into a demand. The nightly gatherings created opportunities for charismatic and spontaneous street activists, without connections to the organizers, to address participants and encourage them to continue until their demands were met (Bermuda Recorder. 1959t; Royal Gazette 1959i; *ibid.* 1959g; *ibid.* 1959nn. Williams 2002). On one occasion, to the surprise of Progressive Group members in attendance, an unknown speaker read from the secret document produced years earlier and broadened the boycott message to include issues of democracy, the franchise, discrimination and human dignity in general (Williams 2002). On the third day of the boycott the theatre company chairman dismissed the event as “a storm in a teacup” (William 2002). The chairman’s remark became the byline for an article in *The Bermuda Recorder* (1959ee) and the material for emotional protest speeches that further raised the ire of ‘black’ Bermudians becoming increasingly engaged in the unscripted and public discussion of ‘race’ and segregation (Bermuda Recorder 1959t; Williams 2002).

During the first week of the boycott, *The Royal Gazette* tended to describe the nightly protests in terms of crowd size and behaviour, with specific emphases on order, non-violence

and the presence of authorities (Royal Gazette 1959b; *ibid.* 1959g; *ibid.* 1959h; *ibid.* 1959i; *ibid.* 1959m; *ibid.* 1959q; *ibid.* 1959oo). Both newspapers reprinted official statements from the theatre company in response to the boycott, reiterating plans to offer desegregated seating in the new theatre, and suggesting that current practices were related to limited capacity and practical considerations (Bermuda Recorder 1959cc; Royal Gazette 1959ll). *The Bermuda Recorder* (Bermuda Recorder 1959o; *ibid.* 1959p) printed letters from the Progressive Group to ‘black’ Bermudians thanking them for their support, encouraging their ongoing participation and refuting comments made by the theatre chairman and published in *The Royal Gazette*.

The Bermuda Recorder published twice weekly, and therefore spent less time on the descriptive details and instead ran several articles in each issue to catch readers up on the boycott news. In the first editorial related to the boycott, the editor of *The Bermuda Recorder* praised the organizers for their timing and judgment, drew comparisons with other protests around the world, and sent a message to the theatre chairman and his sympathizers:

For the benefit of all concerned it is most urgent that the merchant prince re-orientate his attitude towards the race question. The ‘invited’ African has copied the traits of the European – good, bad or indifferent. He is making an all out effort to develop his intellect through the attainment of cultural and mechanical skills. A high standard of living is forcing him to become industrious, or to be crushed in this surge to survive. This descendant of Africa is acquiring the native shrewdness of the European. Circumstances force him to become aggressive. He is becoming aware of the contribution he has made toward the development of this Island Paradise. He is no longer hood-winked by theories of race superiority; if given the opportunity, he feels certain that he can compete with the next man irrespective of his racial origin” (Bermuda Recorder 1959x).

Bermuda’s House of Assembly, comprised mainly of the island’s most powerful oligarchs, was drawn into the public discussion nine days into the conflict, with both newspapers reporting division amongst members about how and whether to respond to the demands of protestors (Royal Gazette 1959jj; Bermuda Recorder 1959dd). The parliamentary discussion was

reported at great length, essentially replaying the dynamics of the debate for all Bermudians. The articles focused on the theatre chairman's characterization of the protesters as poorly behaved "hoodlums" and the "show of force" by 'blacks' that was mitigated by police tolerance (Royal Gazette 1959jj). That the demand for segregation was made outside of the usual political process was also discussed, with some voicing strong opposition to immediate segregation on that basis alone. "I should be very reluctant to see the directors of this company give way at this point because of the way the demand has been made...I don't think it would be wise for the directors or the community to allow a situation to develop where any group of people can impose their will on any other group by this means" (Royal Gazette 1959jj). The theatre chairman concurred, arguing that the boycott "was not the traditional way to solve problems in Bermuda" (Bermuda Recorder 1959dd).

During the parliamentary debate 'black' and 'white' members of parliament made several references to the fear of social unrest, with many suggesting that the theatres either close or desegregate immediately. There were also calls for negotiations or a parliamentary committee to review the issue, and frustration that the principle of desegregation had already been conceded, yet there were still protests designed to hasten the pace of change (Bermuda Recorder 1959dd; Royal Gazette 1959jj). Some 'black' Members of Colonial Parliament (M.C.P.) appealed for racial harmony and encouraged their 'white' colleagues to understand the 'powder keg' of discontent in Bermuda, stoking fears of incident if no solution was found. They considered that perhaps the indignity associated with desegregation was challenging for 'white' members to understand, and revealed that many 'blacks' were already engaged in personal boycotts of the theatre due to their policy of segregated seating (Bermuda Recorder 1959dd; Royal Gazette

1959jj). “It is time people of goodwill realized that policies like this cannot continue if they wish to maintain good relations between the two races” (Royal Gazette 1959jj).

Although the reporting was similar in both papers, there were also important political and ideological differences in the way each publication framed the conversation for its audiences. *The Royal Gazette* devoted the majority of its article to the discussion of behaviour, appropriate process, and explanations offered by ‘white’ members for the delay in desegregation. *The Bermuda Recorder* article was significantly longer, and devoted additional space to the comments from ‘black’ parliamentarians that sought to fully explain the indignity of segregation, the impact of long-standing prejudice, and the situation of ‘blacks’ in Bermuda.

We must remember that we are not living in a small community whose people’s ideas are circumscribed by the small area which contains them. Their ideas are influenced by travel, radio and newspapers, and they do not think like their grandfathers did...[t]his particular demonstration is merely an index of the type of problems lying beneath the surface in...any community where people are not getting their rights as citizens...you must realize that these people are trying to get where you have got, and it is their natural aspiration...[t]here was a time when the coloured members of the House could give the answers to what should be done, but today there are lots of people who are thinking and acting for themselves. There are no longer a small number of people with brains... (Bermuda Recorder 1959dd).

The Bermuda Recorder published its article on the House of Assembly debate the day after *The Royal Gazette*, noting the “hoodlum” comment in its headline and devoting a second article titled, “*Hoodlum*” Charge Answered Last Night from City Soapbox, in which the protest speakers refuted the theatre chairman’s comments (Bermuda Recorder 1959i). Throughout the boycott, the Progressive Group, street activists and protestors had encouraged and prided themselves on orderly conduct and appropriate, non-violent behaviour in accordance with Bermuda’s social norms (Williams 2002). Both newspapers featured letters attesting to the behaviour of ‘blacks’ in theatres and in general, and interested parties wrote about the connection

between appropriate and cultured behaviour and first-class citizenship, with ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’ often agreeing that the former was a prerequisite for the granting of the latter. When commenting on her experiences at the movie theatres, a ‘black’ Bermudian made the connection explicit:

My advice to you is ‘learn how to behave’ just that; behave...Do you wonder why the white man wants to sit upstairs? [There is a] need for plain ordinary common sense and good behaviour in order to get their ‘first-class citizenship.’ This in my opinion is our people’s weak spot. I want our people to be able to take their place in life. Good behaviour can lead to first-class citizenship (Royal Gazette 1959w).

The day after the House of Assembly debate, the theatres closed to “avoid incident” (Bermuda Recorder 1959f). The boycott was essentially over, but the protests continued and public discourse brought the interests of the entire island into the conversation. In the only *Royal Gazette* editorial on the topic, the editor acknowledged the boycott as a means to accelerate social change, and highlighted the risks of public contention:

...For potentially explosive any such public display must be considered – and the longer it is continued the greater, we suggest, may the danger become. Some small incident could touch off riotous consequences that would do this country a great deal of harm...In this sense, then, it is not a matter entirely between the cinema owners and the boycotters. Before the situation deteriorates to the point where there is no retreat for either side, there is patently room for discussion and negotiation, particularly in the light of the cinema company’s decision to desegregate when the new “super cinema” opens (Royal Gazette 1959f).

The editorial appeared alongside an article announcing the closing of the theatres, and was followed by a small note about why it was still relevant. “We see no need to rewrite it...[i]n what we have written our prime concern has been law and good order in the Colony. A “cooling off” period is now in effect and good use can be made of it” (Royal Gazette 1959f). The next day, the Governor of the colony intervened and formed a small committee including the ‘white’ Attorney General and two ‘black’ M.C.P.s who would subsequently offer to mediate a solution. There

were further calls for negotiations with the anonymous leaders of the Progressive Group, suggestions of government departments or committees to study the issues, and appeals to bring the debate back to established political mechanisms already in place (Royal Gazette 1959kk). In newspaper responses and protest speeches the answer given on behalf of ‘blacks’ was a simple ‘no’, as there was nothing to negotiate (Bermuda Recorder 1959q; Williams 2002).

Both newspapers continued to report on the growing protests and quoted the nightly speakers, effectively spreading the protest message to all (Royal Gazette 1959c; *ibid*, 1959c ; Bermuda Recorder 1959i; 1959l; 1959u). ‘Black’ and ‘white’ Bermudians, expatriates and visitors wrote letters to the editors, sometimes in response to each other, expressing their evaluative views on the appropriateness of the protests and related demands, the behaviour of protesters and ‘blacks’ in general, first and second class citizenship, and racial harmony. Interestingly, there were six letters to the editors that appeared in *The Bermuda Recorder* (not including letters submitted by the Progressive Group), compared to 29 letters to the editor of *The Royal Gazette*. ‘Blacks’ and ‘whites’ were talking to each other via the official newspaper, and engaging in the public conversation about ‘race’. Others outside of Bermuda were also engaging in the argument. Several articles noted that news of the protests had prompted questions in the U.K. House of Commons (Royal Gazette 1959nn), and drew rebuke from a British daily newspaper (Royal Gazette 1959ii). The public conversation about racism, segregation and rights had clearly gone beyond the boycott, and was being heard beyond Bermuda’s shores.

Thirteen days into the conflict, *The Bermuda Recorder* reported breaking news: a major hotel had adopted a ‘no discrimination’ policy, allowing ‘blacks’ to board and dine at their establishment (Bermuda Recorder 1959w). Within two days the Bermuda Hotel & Guest Association announced ‘no discrimination’ policies at major hotels, followed by the same

message from many of the island's restaurants and bars (Royal Gazette 1959n; *ibid.* 1959k). The theatre company held out for one more day, but finally announced that Bermuda's theatres would open on July 2, 1959 without segregation (Bermuda Recorder 1959ff; Royal Gazette 1959j). Upon announcing the policy change, each organization or business referenced discussions with the governor, legislative assembly, special committees and the like, and suggested that the move to desegregate was deemed in the best interest of Bermuda. (Royal Gazette 1959n; *ibid.* 1959j). None mentioned the boycott, the protestors or the weighty issues beyond desegregation; however, *The Bermuda Recorder* suggested that the policy change was “[o]bviously hastened by last week's mass protests against segregation” (Bermuda Recorder 1959j). In a statement from the Bermuda Hotel and Guest House Association, Bermudians of all colours were asked to show patience and cooperation in public and demonstrate good behaviour in the presence of tourists.

The managements of the hotels wish to emphasize the importance of tourist income to the entire economy of Bermuda and the obligation of Bermudians to maintain a friendly and helpful attitude towards visitors, consistent with our natural development. The hotels, The Trade Development Board, and other interests each year spend hundreds of thousands of pounds and maintain offices abroad to attract visitors to Bermuda. Income from these visitors represents approximately 80 per cent of Bermuda's total annual income, and plays a vital part in providing the high standard of living enjoyed by all of us here.
(Royal Gazette 1959n)

On the same day as ‘no discrimination’ policies were announced in *The Bermuda Recorder*, the paper also reprinted an article titled *Bermuda – Step One* that had appeared in the U.S.-based magazine, *TIME* on June 29, 1959. The article cited the boycott as Bermuda's “first major post-war manifestation of racial conflict”, and noted various forms discrimination, segregation and suppression of ‘blacks’ as the cause of tension in the “sun-and-fun haven for U.S. tourists” (Bermuda Recorder 1959c).

The day after theatres opened with desegregated seating, *The Royal Gazette* headline was

Business As Usual (Royal Gazette 1959d) and, in separate articles a visiting speaker to the island was quoted in both papers as saying, “I have never known such significant change in social relations to take place anywhere in the world with such rapidity and lack of bitterness and strife” (Royal Gazette 1959e; Bermuda Recorder 1959m). *The Bermuda Recorder* published an article about the positive reaction in New York to the end of segregation in Bermuda, noting the news was carried in the New York Times, and on U.S. radio and television (Bermuda Recorder 1959h). The paper also featured an excerpt from an official publication sanctioned by the Church of England suggesting that “normal channels” should have been used given that “Bermuda has the British tradition of fair play and free speech” (Bermuda Recorder 1959e).

In local newspapers, articles connected to the theatre boycott and desegregation waned quickly, but the public discourse continued. During and after the boycott, *The Royal Gazette* printed 29 letters to the editor, 15 of which appeared in the three weeks after desegregation, and 10 of which were in response to a lengthy letter from a U.S. visitor warning of the dire consequences for Bermuda. “To admit [‘blacks’] to full social parity, which is a very different thing from educational or political parity, is the worst mistake you in Bermuda have made” (Royal Gazette 1959cc). Shortly thereafter, the topic disappeared from public view as discussions about racism and discrimination moved back into the private realm. The contentious conversation was over, at least for the moment.

The 1959 Theatre Boycott marked the beginning of the end of formal segregation in Bermuda, but it by no means marked the end of informal (and sometimes voluntary) segregation, racism or discrimination. Two years after the boycott, Kingsley Tweed, the previously unidentified protest speaker left the island in fear for his life after receiving numerous death threats, and other street activists involved in the protests suffered economically and personally in

the years that followed (Williams 2002). In its final letter to ‘blacks’ in 1959, the Progressive Group thanked the street activists, congratulated Bermudians and gently suggested that “having made these gains, we [should] not dissipate our energies with the frivolous projects that are rumoured to be afoot...[r]emember, there are still goals to be achieved. Therefore, in the future we will call upon Bermudians for a similar display of solidarity if it is deemed necessary” (Bermuda Recorder 1959r). The letter speaks to the private or underground nature of ‘black’ resistance in Bermuda, and hints at connections to past and future events, although the Progressive Group remained silent for another 40 years. It is likely that social changes resulting from the boycott are connected to previous attempts at social reforms up to that point, and the eventual achievement of universal adult suffrage and the adoption of party politics later in the 1960s. Those connections will not be found in the island’s newspapers or history books, but may be accessible through the voices of ‘black’ Bermudians, including those members of the Progressive Group who are still alive and well in Bermuda.

Conclusion

Sociological literature on the study of societies shaped by British colonialism provides historical evidence of the intersections of racism and politics that foster durable inequality between racially defined groups. There is also a significant body of research regarding the mechanisms and processes that surround contentious politics and the dynamics of contentious conversation. Bermuda is not unique in that its historical development features racism, oligarchy and contentious politics; however, the intersection of all three during the Theatre Boycott profoundly impacted the course of the protest and its immediate outcomes. In the spirit of Tilly’s approach to studying political contention through the analysis of historical events, the present analysis

documents the unfolding of the boycott and attempts to identify the mechanisms and processes at work. At first glance, the protest does not seem to be part of a wider or sustained social movement, and instead appears to pop out of the history books as a brief, albeit significant, episode of contentious politics. A more thorough examination of information and insights from leaders, role players and participants in the protest may challenge that perspective, and will likely provide fruitful avenues for future research. However, the events surrounding the boycott itself and the answers to specific research questions define the present scope.

Why did ‘black’ Bermudians engage in public protest over segregation after 350 years of racialized living conditions? This analysis has focused on the Progressive Group’s boycott, and the subsequent protest demonstrations as means to end exclusionary practices in a society largely shaped by racist ideology. The boycott and protests were designed to temporarily disrupt nightly social activities while maintaining social order, and alter the long-standing policies of the theatres in Bermuda. That entertainment venues were the sites of protest is significant in that they represented normal aspects of social life, and were simultaneously the spaces in which clear social boundaries between ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’ were routinely drawn and reproduced. The Progressive Group and ‘blacks’ in general were aware that the dismantling of such boundaries had not, and likely would not be achieved using the regular instruments in vogue in Bermuda’s political system.

With respect to why the protests engaged more ‘black’ Bermudians than any previous attempts at collective political action, we may never fully know the answer without access to their private conversations. However, it is clear that the choice to focus on ‘everyday practices’ such as going to the movies was powerful for many ‘blacks’, and made it obvious to most that the reasons given for desegregation did not hold up. As the editor of *The Bermuda Recorder*

noted, “The organizers of the Movie Boycott...reflect sound judgment in probing at a weak spot in the armour of the segregationists. There is no excuse for segregation in Movie-houses that feature Westerns and cartoons” (Bermuda Recorder 1959x). The focus on theatre seating is a reminder that racism was an inescapable feature of routine social interactions, and that exclusionary practices on the basis of ‘race’ negatively impacted all ‘blacks’ regardless of their education, accomplishments or social position.

Throughout the analysis of the boycott conversation, it is interesting to note that, in general, ‘blacks’ did not specifically dispute the ideology of racism. In fact, they appeared to accept the existence of distinct ‘races’, and in many instances seemed to understand the negative evaluation of characteristics historically assigned to ‘blacks’. However, along with the organizers of the protest, most also believed that ‘blacks’ had demonstrated the ability to act appropriately in social interactions across the boundary of ‘race’ over time, and were therefore ready to demand the rights and accept the responsibilities of social equality. In essence, they focused on the exclusionary practices in public spaces as evidence of social inequality, and left the attack on economic disparity, political inequality and racist ideology for another day.

With respect to their desire for change, a member of the Progressive Group states that ‘blacks’ were likely looking for leadership from someone with the courage to go against Bermuda’s social norms and speak out (Williams 2002). The combination of the Progressive Group and the self-appointed protest speakers provided both, and set in motion an unpredictable series of events. The Progressive Group had planned a boycott and made a claim. Some ‘blacks’ demonstrated curiosity and interest, and the boycott simultaneously became a protest demonstration where the claim was expanded. The response of the officials and authorities turned the dialogue into a contentious conversation and blurred the illusory boundary between

business and politics in Bermuda; in fact, the boycott highlighted the conjoint nature of wealth and power, and the oligarchic nature of the island's political environment. And finally, the participation of the media made it all public, allowing parties who were not directly involved in the contention to weigh in. Both the 'black' and 'white' newspapers gave similar accounts of the boycott and related events, but their inherent biases were evident upon deeper examination of their content. The newspapers functioned as conduits for conveying different perspectives in the public debate over segregation, citizenship and human dignity, and although the examination of public discourse in the summer of 1959 uncovers the conversational dynamics and unexpected trajectory of the boycott, more questions remain.

What impact did the transgressive nature of the protest have in the normally calm and conservative realm of Bermudian politics? As a normal part of social living, contention had long existed over racism and exclusionary practices, but political contention had largely been contained. There had been committees, white papers, reports, recommendations and negotiations pertaining to Bermuda's social issues. A few 'black' M.C.P.s in Bermuda's parliamentary bodies offered the illusion of representation, yet actually represented the co-option of 'blacks' into a political system designed to maintain the status quo. Strict social norms prevented dynamic conversation and resolution of issues within and outside government. And so it had been for almost four centuries. That demands were made and the boycott was staged outside of the normal processes available for dispute resolution was the first transgressive element of the contention. It encouraged authorities, officials and other interested parties to denounce the protest as illegitimate, and offer it as an example of behaviour that was clearly against Bermuda's unspoken code of conduct, therefore nullifying the demand. However, both newspaper accounts of the protest and the House of Assembly debate debunked claims of bad

behaviour, leaving the Forty Thieves little room to maneuver away from the real issue(s). The second, and perhaps most significant transgression, was the participation by a wide swath of the 'black' community in Bermuda. 'Blacks' had never before appeared to act as a cohesive group without some other identity marker, and the activation of new political actors solely defined by their racial label was unsettling. The situation was deemed explosive, and likely to reoccur as a politically viable and perfectly legal response to future (and past) grievances. As a result, the island's political leaders temporarily lost their bearings in a rapidly evolving situation that could not be contained. Although it appeared for a time that perhaps the oligarchy wasn't in complete control, a brief discussion on oligarchic power in Bermuda might offer some more insight.

What role did oligarchic power play in the unexpected outcomes of the boycott that extended beyond desegregated theatre seating? Two weeks into the boycott, Bermuda's oligarchs, in their capacity as business leaders, announced the end of segregation in hotels, restaurants and theatres, suggesting it was the right thing to do for the country. They did not suggest it was simply the right thing to do. Oligarchs met with each other and the Governor in private, and held discussions that did not include any 'black' M.C.P.s, many of whom seemed happily surprised at the desegregation announcements (Royal Gazette 1959n). However, it should not be assumed that the presence of 'black' members of parliament was inconsequential. The House of Assembly debate featuring three 'black' politicians facilitated the conversation that laid bare the 'black' perspective in a formal political setting, with members of the public as keen onlookers. It represented a change in relations, if only temporarily, across the social boundaries defined by 'race'. In this analysis, the House of Assembly conversation contained the meat of the argument, and planted the seeds for its resolution.

Given Winters' (2011) assertion that oligarchic power is grounded in material wealth and the anchored by ideological and practical commitments to the defense of the same, it might be reasonable to assume that the Forty Thieves acted in their own best interests when they yielded to the demands for desegregation beyond the theatres. Although the theatre company was the preliminary target for the boycott, all parties in the dispute understood that it represented the oligarchy. The chairman was a member of parliament and the head of a prominent family who held significant interests in Bermuda. His family members and colleagues were also members of the government, and had accumulated significant material wealth, social stature and political power across generations. They had invested in Bermuda's tourism industry for almost a century, and were the primary benefactors of its returns with even more wealth and political power as their rewards.

In the summer of 1959 newspaper reports confirmed that word of the boycott and street protests was reaching audiences beyond the island's shores and exposing the reality of Bermuda to be different than its brand. Bermuda's segregation practices contravened British law, and the intervention of the Governor in the segregation controversy represented possible and likely interference from Britain in Bermudian affairs in the future. The risks to the oligarchy's investment in, and unequivocal control of the island were evident, as was the fear that transgressive acts like the boycott might become popular and routine. After swimming against the tide of social change taking hold in Bermuda, the oligarchs abruptly switched course. They did not, however, eschew the racial ideology that was woven into the fabric of Bermudian social life. While racism and racist attitudes may have informed their practices of exclusion, the oligarchs likely understood that a continued commitment to segregation threatened their base of power that was material in its essence. Accepting desegregation did not mean the death of

racism, or even the end of exclusionary practices on the basis of 'race'. However, it did end the storm for the moment, and allowed the oligarchy to continue its pursuit and defense of material wealth for the foreseeable future.

By most accounts, the boycott was one of the most significant, albeit brief, episodes of contentious politics in contemporary Bermuda. It occurred in a highly racialized setting, and transpired under the watch of a cohesive oligarchy primarily committed to the protection of shared material interests and the maintenance of the status quo. Neither its trajectory nor its consequential impacts could have been predicted. Nevertheless, racism, oligarchy and contentious politics can be used as conceptual tools with which to analyze the boycott and its immediate outcomes. It is likely that more robust investigations will lead to insights relevant the events of the Theatre Boycott specifically, and social change in Bermuda generally. The preliminary analytical framework used in this analysis provides only a glimpse of the mechanisms and processes at work in 1959, and represents a viable starting point for further research. Specifically, such research might shed light on the mechanisms and processes involved in underground movements that can't be observed directly or gleaned from widely accessible historical accounts. Further, sociological research in the case of Bermuda is likely to simultaneously draw from, align with and, in many cases, contradict existing analyses of political, economic and social development in British island colonies. As such, Bermuda's figurative location on the sociological periphery deserves more attention.

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