

A Surge in Activism: Activist groups help white people show up the right way

In the wake of the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and Elijah McClain, we saw many more white people showing up in the streets in solidarity with Black people in the fight against police brutality and racism.

We have also heard many white people asking, “What can I do to help?” While there are a variety of ways in which white people can “show up” to fight against racism and the racist systems that pervade education, housing, economic status, employment, the justice system and policing, they may have limited knowledge of the history of organizing and activism, and may feel intimidated by joining in, or uncertain on how to begin.

After the 2016 election, I started going to local organizing meetings held by Resist Hate and White Noise Collective, and Showing Up for Racial Justice Rhode Island (SURJ-RI). I’m an introvert who feels awkward in group settings, and was worried I didn’t know enough to be a part of what was happening, but I was always welcomed warmly by these groups and their members who guided attendees in exploring how our whiteness shaped our views on race and racism, and how it could get in the way of our wanting to “help” Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC), and even cause harm. While I did not continue formally attending these groups’ meetings, I have continued to follow the actions of a variety of local activist groups and have taken part in some of their actions over the past five years.

At the White Noise Collective and Showing Up for Racial Justice meetings, I met AJS, who has been and continues to be committed to the fight for justice and freedom for all of us. AJS, who prefers to be identified only by their initials, is an activist and organizer for SURJ-RI, a community of organizers working to fight for racial justice. Through discussions, community organizing and action, SURJ-RI mobilizes white people to act as part of a movement for racial justice with passion and accountability.

I recently asked AJS about this moment in time in regard to activism, and how white people can plug into fighting for racial justice. AJS’s responses are solely their own and do not reflect the collective view of the SURJ Providence chapter.

Wendy Grossman (Motif): Why we are seeing a surge in white people showing up for the marches, voicing their concerns about racism and police brutality and supporting the Black Lives Matter movement now, as opposed to five or so years ago when it first emerged after the killing of Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown, and so many who came after them?

AJS: There’s a number of cultural factors that can be elaborated upon. For instance, when you have a shameless white nationalist for a president, people can more easily understand a systemic critique that says the entire American government, top to bottom, is racist.

Liberalism is an individualist philosophy; it says that things would be better only if we could just get the right people into the right positions of power. During the Obama administration it was not as easy to articulate this systemic critique. There was a certain confusion. How is it possible for the system to still be racist if we elected a person of African **AND** immigrant descent as president? Didn’t the posters tell us “Rosa sat so Martin could march; Martin marched so Obama could run; Obama ran so our children

could fly”?

Trump is an abhorrent, vile development on the political landscape and there is nothing to be celebrated about his election. But that confusion is no longer a factor. Many more people can understand a systemic analysis.

Other factors could include things like a generalized simmering anger about the travesty of the public health infrastructure response to COVID and the attendant economic implosion. Both have been, are, and will be long-term calamities for BIPOC people.

WG: What does SURJ-RI see as its current and immediate future role and goals as far as bringing more people into the movement to fight for racial justice? Still in the middle of the pandemic, how have you had to change the way you are doing things, and how are you able to sustain action and motivation to stay active, despite the restrictions around gathering face-to-face?

AJS: Our activism/organizing efforts have always been defined by a model of accountable solidarity with BIPOC-led community organizations in the Greater Providence area, namely Direct Action for Rights and Equality (DARE), Providence Youth Student Movement (PrYSM), George Wiley Center, The FANG Collective, The Alliance to Mobilize Our Resistance (AMOR) Coalition, and several others. We have these accountability partners and take guidance/direction from them. In the past four years, there have been several instances where very well-intentioned so-called white folk have become activated and want to get involved in activism. Our task in those instances has been to provide political education and orientation so that these folks can plug into the larger movement with accountable solidarity. Our analysis includes an understanding and emphasis of class that acknowledges and celebrates the fact that the working class and poor so-called white folk have always played an important role in the struggle for racial justice. Personally, I can say that this model of operations and outcomes has been tremendously rewarding for me as an activist in multiple ways and made it possible for me to build community.

Affinity spaces for so-called white people are important for two reasons.

First, it is really exhausting and challenging for BIPOC organizers and activists to be constantly obliged to deal with a newcomer’s whiteness. Why should they have to? So we try to provide that pressure relief valve for those we hold ourselves accountable to.

Second, there is no ‘graduation from whiteness’ in this process. People socialized as white and who are beneficiaries of white supremacy, even if they do this work for decades, still have racist inclinations, tendencies and ideas. The human mind is a complicated, imperfect thing that is not capable of being erased and reprogrammed like a computer. If it were, we wouldn’t be human. So we need places for us to work on ourselves regularly. Building a community where we can do that while simultaneously being accountable to the larger movement is extremely special and important. Creating that space helps us overcome what amount to limited gestures of white allies.

This is all to say that we don’t really plan with total independence of our Accountability Partners, we work to develop some basic agendas while subordinating that project to their goals. Now simultaneously, there are instances where we get certain direct requests for action from these organizations. Several times in the past, we have run education modules, what we call Dialogue Series, that are attenuated to the training and orientation of activists looking to do accountable racial justice activism as part of the larger movement. During these modules we investigate patterns common among

people socialized as white, and seek to understand how these patterns influence or limit the potential of our anti-racist work. These patterns include (but are not limited to) cultural appropriation, micro-aggressions, and guilt and shame. We use these spaces to develop greater self-awareness, literacy and accountability in order to show up with more integrity to the movement work in which each of us is involved. We also investigate larger patterns and systems of racism including white supremacy culture; intersections of race, class, and gender; and practices of allyship.

We have seen a tremendous expression of interest from people in the past month that is encouraging. Our Accountability Partners have even expressed a desire for us to help them handle an extraordinary growth in so-called white volunteers who have some presumably very admirable intentions by holding a Dialogue Series, which is currently being planned and organized. We have also been offering support to mutual aid projects in myriad ways.

COVID-19 is a hurdle but we've adapted. Instead of our usual in-person meetings we have figured out Zoom.

Simultaneously, we have seen many people return to participation in our chapter because of the digital format and being home for work. Quite a few members had to step back from certain forms of participation in the past few years because of professional and family obligations. Now they are able to plug into a Zoom call during the evening. So as a result we did a series of car rallies over two June weekends across the state calling for police abolition.

The results of the 2016 election were unexpected. Nobody anticipated that someone without a single day of prior government service (even on the PTA!) would be allowed to become president. Nobody thought we would ever have a game show host as Commander in Chief. We, as a chapter, were simply unprepared.

In June, things were very different. We had people plugged in with our Accountability Partners on a daily basis because of COVID. We were supporting these organizations on a sustained, deeply embedded level since February and March. So when these new protests began, our Accountability Partners expanded their efforts outward in order to organize and support organizers who were leading the rallies. We were able to very quickly and efficiently take on tasks to support their leadership in that moment because they had already been doing work on the ground daily since COVID flipped the world as we know it upside down.

WG: What would be SURJ RI's advice or ask for white people who want to do anti-racism work, but are new to activism, and feel intimidated and don't know where or how to begin taking action?

AJS: Please feel welcome to come to our Open Meetings and participate in one of our Dialogue Series!

The struggle against racism has been going on for over half a millennium in this hemisphere. Understanding one's space-time location in that broad spectrum of struggle and being able to embrace that requisite humility is not impossible, but it is a challenge, particularly if one is unable to subordinate one's own political aspirations to the movement. Participation in this struggle is not about personal gain. There is not supposed to be reward or acclamation for doing the right thing, this is instead about our collective human liberation. There's no participation trophies, accolades or public endorsements promised by participation.

Simultaneously, love and camaraderie are tremendous potential benefit that I admit has made my life

100% better in the past several years. The connections with both other SURJ activists and our Accountability Partners are really important to me in a very personal way.

WG: Anything else important you'd like to share?

AJS: First, it is paramount to emphasize the centrality of BIPOC organizers in this discussion. SURJ seeks to both implement and simultaneously model for others a style and method of activism that subordinates ourselves to the leadership of BIPOC-led organizations. There are far too many examples of independent so-called white activists who try to start some project without accountable solidarity and end up not just making mistakes but doing harm. When you are dealing with something as mortally serious as white supremacy, you have to have a certain seriousness about how you do this.

Whiteness is not biological reality, it is a mentality, an ideology that has nothing to do with the scientific method and everything to do with power and privilege attendant to it.

The recently-deceased Dr. Noel Ignatiev, author of *How the Irish Became White* (1995) and a scholar of white supremacy, once said in an interview that he believed the majority of so-called white Americans could be described as equivalent to oblivious "Good Germans" during the Third Reich, saying this majority is composed of "well-meaning folk who would be horrified at the suggestion that they are, in fact, reproducing the structures of racism."

There are two issues at hand in this discussion. First, inter-personal prejudice and bigotry expressed in a blatant, shameless fashion that was granted certain license by the ascendancy of first the Tea Party and then Donald Trump, whose entire political career was predicated upon the racist, xenophobic and nativist Birther conspiracy theory.

Then there is the matter of structural, institutional racism. Prof. Ignatiev was quite correct here. His point was that inter-personal opinions are not going to abolish racism. Even if every single human being who runs every position of power in the public and private sector agencies throughout the nation-state were to subscribe to a radical anti-racism philosophy and rid themselves of all of the inter-personal prejudices and bigotries (admittedly a rather tall order itself), the proper operation of the system that governs our society would produce racist outcomes. Mass incarceration, childhood poverty, gigantic disparities in wealth, health, and educational outcomes, all of those are able to be perpetuated by very "Good Germans" whose only malfeasance towards BIPOC people would be doing their job correctly. The system is *designed* to perpetuate immiseration.

Personally as a media scholar (I have a BA in film studies from RIC), I think it is important to point out the tremendous impact of cellular phone camera and social media proliferation. It's not like the police weren't terrible 20 years ago. Instead, BIPOC activists and organizers have short-circuited censorship systems within the mainstream news media that intentionally prevented us from seeing more Rodney King videos. After the 1992 LA rebellion stemming from that police brutality trial verdict, broadcasters and police agencies knew what more of those videos would do and intentionally stopped them from being broadcast. Simultaneously, the media proliferated different positive images of cops that implied they were decent civil servants. That includes not just pro-policing reality and detective shows (cf. the important report 'Normalizing Injustice: The Dangerous Misrepresentations That Define Television's Scripted Crime Genre' by Color of Change and the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center, published January 2020, for further insights) but also things like Chief Wiggum on "The Simpsons", the bloated clown who implies cops are a bunch of overpaid dopes.

So a lot of people in the “Good German” category are understandably and justifiably mortified at the realization that something is not actually like what they once thought. After a good 25 to 30 years of media-ensured obliviousness, they see these videos and experience a very painful wake-up call. It’s a moment of mass political education where everyone is realizing ‘It isn’t a few bad apples, there’s something really evil at the core of policing.’

Abolition has been going on in this hemisphere for 525+ years and has been led by BIPOC people first and foremost. That project of abolition is about something much more substantial than what electoral politics would ever be capable of. It sounds easy, but getting Euro-Americans to subordinate their own political aspirations to the movement and abandon whiteness in the name of humanity is a long process requiring lots of patience and education.

The operative question is whether they can go from the first position of moral indignation to the second: abolition of the racialized system.

*For more information about SURJ-RI and their upcoming meetings and actions, please visit: surjri.org
They also have a Facebook page, Standing Up For Racial Justice RI*