

# Black leaders did not want destruction in the beginning; but they lost control

## "White reaction convinced them (blacks) of racism"

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Canadian University Press

MONTREAL (CUP)—Reporter: "Why didn't you take the students' demands seriously?" Faculty Association Executive member: "You know these West Indian students— they exaggerate, they're expansive. And they use obscenity, but we've come to overlook that. They think differently."

If it wasn't exaggeration, it was unpredictability, a term the administration at Sir George Williams University substituted for communication as its key crisis phrase.

And it was precisely that state of mind that precipitated the conflict and its tragic consequences.

Of course, there were immediate triggers. After two weeks of occupation, the students were betrayed in the last moments. They expected victory, were told their demands would be met and then, in the midst of the victory euphoria, were let down dramatically by a moribund faculty suddenly up with a snarl.

The pent-up frustration could not be contained—though it might have been had the police not been called. And the computers, so carefully guarded from harm by the students for 14 days, were smashed beyond repair by their meticulous guardians.

### The great societal process

They would have done their case better to withdraw quietly, losers in a wearying struggle. They had the support of the student body and might have seen their demands met after a while. But they responded to power with the only power they could muster, destruction.

The anatomy of response is an intriguing problem but not very relevant.

Not much more relevant are the eight months of administrative waffling on the charges against Perry Anderson. The weakness and hesitancy led naturally to escalation, demands, and finally occupation. That is a straight-forward process.

The substantive charges against Anderson — which now may never be explicitly defined—may or may not be valid. Racism is a difficult attitude to expose on the subtle individual level. Nuances of speech, treatment of individuals, deliberate color-blindness may all be indicators. It is not so much individual attitudes per se as the societal institutions that create them that are important. Pragmatically, in order to satisfactorily illustrate racism, an educator would take an individual and show how he had been molded by, and was implicitly involved in, a greater societal process.

That is the dramatic technique.

Whether it is ethically justifiable is questionable. A judgment would involve balancing relative weights of the consequences to the individual model against the possible value of an increase in sensitivity to and awareness of societal racism.

### If you are told so, then . . .

It is at best doubtful whether people, in the final analysis, were sensitized to racism. There is no doubt that a significant number of white students were—they joined the occupation and talked out racism for days. They, however, would have arrived at that sensitivity on their own. An enormous number of people never looked beyond militancy and destruction.

Black leaders may have been satisfied with the outcome, at least to a certain extent. They did manage to create a solid, militant core of blacks. Though they had little feeling for property rights, they did not want the destruction that resulted. They know the strategical implications of damage



ONE OF THE RIOT SQUAD  
. . . a trophy of destruction

and knew their case would be washed away in the swirl of shrill outcry.

They simply lost control.

There is no doubt the blacks were extremely sensitive to racism. They may have reacted too quickly, sized up situations too readily. They were of course influenced by the black movement in America and the emerging one in Halifax.

But all of this would not have been sufficient cause for the eruption. It was more white reaction that convinced them of racism than anything else.

When people are told they're different, they become different.

White radicals were one of the culpable groups. Their obsequience, hesitancy to question and debate with blacks convinced the blacks of their control. Decisions in the computing centre were almost invariably made by blacks, debate on strategy involved blacks. White did not participate until they proved their worth by an independent occupation of the faculty club.

Administrators were also involved. Their continual hesitancy to act because of the "unpredictability" of blacks was disastrous. They could have handled white protest—dialogue, compromise, all legitimate tactics with whites.

But they made it clear from the beginning that

they didn't know what to expect from the blacks and acted accordingly. The stilted politeness, retreat to downtown hotels, lack of communication all hinged on their evaluation of blacks as something Different, to be handled Differently.

The faculty played its hand badly too. Teachers, perhaps the best people to sense the mood of the school, failed utterly. They were more concerned with Anderson's suspension and its implications to teaching security than with evaluating the political situation and making the best of it. And spokesmen kept making unfortunate evaluations of black students to the media. And, of course, there were hundreds of: "I don't care whether he's black, white, green or pink, I want the facts."

The media played the affair as a black-white confrontation—though in reality it had been turned to a complex student power, revolutionary action. The blacks sensed the news value was in blackness. Reporters called white students by their first names and collared them informally—they spoke to Mr. Black and asked politely for interviews.

### And then the destruction

The blacks then became blacks—different from anyone else.

And in doing so, they were fully aware that they had been forced to. They acknowledged the individuals were not conscious racists but saw clearly that the societal ethic had forced the individuals to treat them differently from all others.

As the differences piled up and the division was sharpened, the blacks, though never talking about it, began to despair. Perhaps, they thought at heart the racist aspect of the situation could be explained away, that it was only surface dirt.

As the occupation stretched on and they read signs calling them niggers, warning them to get back into their place, they lost hope. The overt racism coupled with the not-to-subtle covert racism convinced them they would not win.

When the confrontation came, they had little to lose—as human beings.

The whites involved were split. Some were radical people who tried all the while to put the affair into political perspective. The blacks insisted they weren't interested in "isms"—capitalism, socialism, Marxism. They ejected one Maoist who was too vociferous.

But many were white liberals genuinely interested in attaining justice, in creating a new Hearing Committee. They were driven to destruction because they were betrayed by people they believed would finally be reasonable—liberal administrators and faculty.

### Not conscious racists—yet

In the final analysis, it was the attitude of difference that killed Sir George. Had this revolt been treated like any others, the tragedy would not have happened.

The demands made by the occupiers were the mildest made to date in the history of serious student revolt. The students simply wanted a new hearing committee, agreeable to both sides, a demand they likened to any trial where prosecution and defense select the jury.

Administrative and faculty rigidity came not from the unreasonableness of the demands (though of course a fair number opposed in principle to giving in to students in any way) but rather from evaluation of the people they were dealing with.

And they were incapable of dealing with blacks. Perhaps the blacks in the long run did prove their case. But everybody has paid an enormous price for that lesson.