Trotter Review

Volume 7
Issue 2 *A Special Issue on the Political and Social Relations Between Communities of Color*

Article 5

9-23-1993

"No Justice, No Peace!": The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict

Claire Jean Kim
Yale University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review

Part of the African American Studies Commons, Asian American Studies Commons, and the Peace and Conflict Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Kim, Claire Jean (1993) ""No Justice, No Peace!": The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict," *Trotter Review*: Vol. 7: Iss. 2, Article 5.
Available at: http://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol7/iss2/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the William Monroe Trotter Institute at ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in Trotter Review by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact library.uasc@umb.edu.

"No Justice, No Peace!": The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict

By
Claire Jean Kim

In the opening scene of the recently released film, *Menace II Society*, the protagonists, two young African-American men, make a routine beer run to a convenience store owned by a Korean-American couple. The merchants' manifest suspiciousness toward them triggers an exchange of hostilities that concludes when one of the men kills and robs the couple. For audiences of all colors, this depiction of black-Korean conflict appears starkly familiar. Ranging from verbal altercations to killings, to retail boycotts and picketing campaigns, conflicts between Korean-American merchants and black customers, including African Caribbeans, have become commonplace in many major American cities over the past decade.[1] Well before the highly publicized destruction of Korean-owned stores during the Los Angeles uprising of 1992, the mainstream media had chosen to spotlight black-Korean conflict as an emergent symbol of racial strife and urban decay in America.

Familiarity, however, has not bred understanding. Mainstream media coverage, which has been emphatically biased, has ensured that black-Korean conflict is at once widely recognized and scarcely understood.[2] Rather than performing a public service by explaining the sources of black-Korean conflict, the media has consistently performed the distinct ideological function of depoliticizing it and protecting the status quo from any challenge that it might pose. Thus, the media has tended to either attribute black-Korean conflict to innate "cultural" differences or to collapse all such conflict into the movie image described above, even though the most far-reaching instances of this phenomenon—black-led retail boycotts and picketing campaigns against Korean-owned stores—have been fundamentally *political* protests against the racial hierarchy endemic in American society.

Unlike cultural clashes or criminal activity, the black-led retail boycotts and picketing campaigns against Korean-American merchants that have occurred in major U.S. cities, including New York and Los Angeles, over the past decade have been organized, sustained collective actions. That is to say, they must be understood in reference to their political dimensions: their politically structured context, the political grievances and aims expressed by their participants, and their political consequences. As a society, we tend to perceive all strife negatively, as a problem to be "solved." Yet, most forms of protest rely upon disruption to catalyze social change. Therefore, rather than simply seeking to ameliorate these conflicts between blacks and Korean Americans, we need to understand what structural and political factors encourage their recurrence.

The Red Apple Boycott of 1990 and Racial Politics in New York City

The Red Apple Boycott, which occurred in 1990 in Flatbush, a section of Brooklyn, New York, was one of the most widely publicized and controversial instances of black-Korean conflict in recent history.[3] It culminated a decade of black-Korean conflict happening across New York City. Precipitated by a Korean-American shopkeeper's alleged assault upon a Haitian woman customer, the Red Apple Boycott began as a spontaneous outburst among black area residents and developed into a sustained protest campaign that lasted for thirteen months, embroiling the black and Korean-American communities, the police, the courts, clergy, and political officials at all levels, including the newly elected mayor, David Dinkins.

The activists leading the boycott and picketing campaign included both veteran Black Nationalists who had been active in city politics since the 1960s and Haitian community activists serving the rapidly expanding Haitian immigrant population centered in Brooklyn. As the protest leaders, these activists consistently articulated and pursued a Pan-African political agenda for which the immediate merchant-customer altercation was only a departure point. Through speeches, rallies, marches, placards, and fliers, they not only demanded redress for the alleged assault victim, but also decried racist practices throughout American society (e.g., redlining, which constrains black entrepreneurship) and exhorted blacks to mobilize in pursuit of political empowerment and self-determination. Thus, what was ostensibly a showdown between blacks and Korean Americans was, more fundamentally, a protest in which the former pursued both immediate and long-term political goals related to racial justice and empowerment.

The Red Apple Boycott's linkage of a targeted retail boycott and a broader political campaign resonated with both historical tradition and contemporary forms of activism within the black community. Since the 1800s, advocates of economic nationalism have accused nonblack merchants of mistreating and exploiting their poor black customers and have urged blacks to start up and patronize black-owned businesses. From the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaigns in Chicago and New York during the 1920s and 1930s to the community control movements of the 1960s, tenets of economic nationalism have shaped perceptions of race and entrepreneurship within the black community.[4]

The Red Apple Boycott was also part of an ongoing black empowerment movement that emerged in New York City during the late 1980s.[5] Relying upon loose but regular cooperation among several high-profile, black activist-leaders, this movement is best characterized as a series of ad hoc community mobilizations around specific incidents of racially motivated white violence against blacks—for instance, the killings of Michael Griffith in Howard Beach, Queens, and Yusef Hawkins in

Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. Although somewhat reminiscent of the Black Power movement of the 1960s, this emergent movement is firmly anchored in such present-day political realities as the increasingly evident constraints upon black electoral power and the new opportunities presented by a growing black immigration population from such areas as Haiti. The movement's distinctive combination of the tactics of civil disobedience and the rhetoric of Black Nationalism points to its concurrent strategies of pursuing racial empowerment both through and outside of the political system. One of its slogans, "No Justice, No Peace!" captures this perspective. Led by several prominent organizers, the Red Apple Boycott was a building block for this black empowerment movement.

The Role of the Mainstream Media

Mainstream media coverage of the Red Apple Boycott criminalized the conflict, thereby obscuring its political dimensions. While a few journalists attributed the boycott to such innocuous causes as "cultural" differences or the language barrier, the vast majority depicted it as scapegoating—the irrational venting of frustrations upon an innocent group. Portraying Korean-American merchants as a "model minority" (hard-working, family-oriented, etc.) that was being scapegoated by elements of the "underclass" (morally deviant, behaviorally pathological, etc.), the media effectively denied the rationality, purpose, and political agency of the Red Apple Boycott's participants.

The mainstream media had chosen to spotlight black-Korean conflict as an emergent symbol of racial strife and urban decay in America.

By depicting the Red Apple Boycott as unfair, illegitimate, and even criminal, the media successfully deflected its challenge to the status quo. Insofar as the media-led, ideological countermobilization against the boycott eventually compelled a reluctant Mayor Dinkins to take action against the protesters, it decisively shaped the boycott's outcome.[6] Even as the media helped to quell this community mobilization campaign, it also demarcated the limits of black mayoral power in advancing racial empowerment. Although it had ignored the inaction of the former mayor, Ed Koch, during previous boycotts, the media clamored for Mayor Dinkins to take decisive action during the Red Apple Boycott. Simply because he was black, Mayor Dinkins was thought to be guilty of racial favoritism until he took concrete steps (e.g., crossing the picket line, deploying the police against the protesters) to prove himself innocent.[7]

The response of the media and political officialdom to the Red Apple Boycott reflected a perspective on race that has come to dominate policy-making, journalistic, and academic circles over the last decade.[8] Claiming both conservative and liberal adherents, this perspective holds that racism is no longer a serious problem, and that we should address remaining social inequalities through "color-blind" or "race-neutral," universalistic policies rather than through affirmative action programs. Seeking to arrest progress toward racial equality and to preserve the political, economic, and racial status quo, proponents of this perspective assiduously criminalize and delegitimate racial protest, occluding its political content and reducing it to a law-and-order problem. Thus, they charge those who organize such race-based protests as the Red Apple Boycott with promoting racial polarization and unnecessarily "racializing" politics.

One of the most striking features of this emergent perspective is its command of bipartisan support. Although it took root under Reaganism, this perspective has reached its apogee with the Clinton administration, whose nonresponse to the Los Angeles uprising, mishandling of the Guinier nomination and the Haitian refugee situation, along with its vote-currying vows to end welfare "as we know it" and succor "the middle class" make the possibility of vitiating institutionalized racism over the next several years look improbable, indeed. After all, we cannot alleviate a problem whose very existence we deny.

Notes

[1]The list of cities includes but is not limited to: New York City, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Chicago, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and Atlanta.

[2]For a helpful discussion of the media's approach to racial issues, see Simon Cottle, "'Race,' Racialization, and the Media: A Review and Update of Research," *Sage Race Relations Abstracts* 17, No. 2 (May 1992): 3–57.

[3]I refer to the protest by this name because the Family Red Apple store was its primary target. It is sometimes referred to as the Church Avenue Boycott or the Flatbush Boycott, as well. This description and analysis of the protest is based upon personal interviews with boycott leaders and participants, such primary sources as boycott fliers and government documents, along with material from the black press in New York City, especially the *New York Amsterdam News* and *The City Sun*.

[4]See Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *"Or Does It Explode?" Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). These conflicts usually involved black customers and Jewish merchants.

[5]For a seminal discussion of this type of activism, see James Jennings, *The Politics of Black Empowerment: The Transformation of Black Activism in Urban America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992).

[6]For a discussion of how institutions such as the media shape protest outcomes, see Michael Lipsky and David J. Olson, *Commission Politics: The Processing of Racial Crisis in America* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1977).

[7]For an analysis of the particular structural constraints facing black mayors, see Adolph Reed, Jr., "The Black Urban Regime: Structural Origins and Constraints," *Comparative Urban and Community Research* 1 (1988):138–188.

[8]The following works provide examples of this perspective: Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991); Theda Skocpol, "Targeting Within Universalism: Politically Viable Policies to Combat Poverty in the United States," *The Urban Underclass*, Christopher Jencks and Paul E. Peterson, eds. (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1991); Jim Sleeper, *The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1990); William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); William Julius Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). For a critique of the perspective among the liberal left, see Adolph Reed, Jr., and Julian Bond, "Equality: Why We Can't Wait," *The Nation*, 9 December 1991, 733–737.

Claire Jean Kim is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Political Science at Yale University. She is writing her dissertation on black-Korean conflict, the black empowerment movement, and racial politics in New York City.