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CRITIQUING AMERICAN STRUCTURAL RACISM: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CASES OF MUHAMMED ALI AND COLLIN KAEPERNICK

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Abstract

In fighting for justice and equality in the face of American institutional racism, Muhammed Ali became an internationally known and respected figure. His 1976 auto-biography, *The Greatest*, with Richard Dunham and edited by Toni Morrison is a fast paced and well written book. It showcases the intellect, humanity, and determination behind the globally recognized icon. The auto-biography is interesting in the sense that it places boxing on the periphery and instead focuses on Ali's struggles and disappointments, to be recognized as a man in the American South, which would later morph into the greater struggle for civil rights for American minorities. In fighting against what this research terms 'structural racism, what emerged was a battle against the very fabric of core norms and culture, which establishes white American hegemony. In taking on established structures, Ali faced the wrath of 'the Establishment.' The idea of this term becomes vivid via comparative analysis of other case studies, which reveal that those who question American structural racism are met with similar reactions and consequences for their criticism. This study is thus relevant because it exposes how Ali's own fight for justice and racial equality 60 years ago is essentially no different than it is today.

Keywords: Autobiographical analysis, Muhammed Ali, Structural racism, Elite politics, Comparative history.

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1. Introduction

Muhammed Ali (1943–2016) is regarded as one of the greatest sportsman of the 20th century. His persona in and out of the boxing ring left an indelible mark on modern American history and his fight against racism and oppression remains recognized globally. In their obituary to Ali, *The New York Times* described him as a titan of boxing and the 20th Century.

The 1976 509-page auto-biography, "*The Greatest: My Own Story*" with Richard Durham, paints a vivid portrait of Ali's intellect and humanity, the latter somewhat of a misnomer, considering the brutality of his profession. The decision to write an autobiography as his boxing career winded down instead of in his later years proved to be an excellent choice as the narration produces intense memories, which could have possibly been lost if written at a later stage. At the bequest of his agents, the use of a tape-recorder to capture Ali's interactions provides a firsthand account at capturing the 'Rolling 60's'.

Essentially, *the Greatest* is not a book about boxing. Boxing only takes center-stage in the last 50 pages where Ali's rigorous boxing regiment, strict diet, psyche, sexual abstinence, and training methods in the build up to his two most memorable matches, the 1974 *Rumble in the Jungle* and the 1975 "*Thrilla in Manila*". Otherwise, the first 450 pages uses boxing as the backdrop to Ali's journey through Southern racism, institutional racism, imperialism, the civil rights movement, and his exile from the sport and ostracization from American society for what may be congruously described as Anti-American activities.

This research explores Ali's so-called Anti-American activities with the purpose of assessing American structural racism. This is important because as this research will show, the structural racism Ali fought against 60 years ago remains an omnipresent menace to equality, justice, and reconciliation. The method for showcasing this is via cases studies, which show that those who criticize US structural racism are met with an identical response to what Ali faced. The main tool for this comparison is Ali's mentioned autobiography, and the case of former athlete Collin Kaepernick. As the researcher lays out the themes, definite patterns emerge, which allow for the points to be backed up by more case studies.

The aim then of the paper is that in highlighting the similarities, it becomes clear how the US establishment responds to critiques of its structural racism.

2. Materials and Methods

The initial writing on this project began as a book review. What emerged from the analysis however were strong and very intellectual points from Ali on the subject of the racism behind the American system or what this research terms "the Establishment".

In examining these points, the comparison to the present day events could not be ignored. In fact, it was extremely uncanny to see how Ali's critiques and his punishment are almost identical to those who critique the same things Ali did 60 years ago. The research then moved in the trajectory of showing how the American establishment responds to those critical of it. To make the most of this analysis, the research deploys a comparative historical research method. This method examines historical events in order to create explanations that are valid beyond a particular time and place, either by direct comparison to other historical events, theory building, or reference to the present day. The research is thus valid as it uncovers areas where research is needed [1]. Similarly, Buckley notes that comparative methods across time periods and space, counterfactual analysis and the examination of outliers are shown to have the potential to improve research practices [2].

Building on this framework, the researcher zoned in on certain events prevalent in Ali's critiques and compared them to the case of former professional athlete Collin Kaepernick. In this comparative analysis, more similar cases began to emerge from the data. Grouping this together, the research presents a comparative analysis, which shows how the US Establishment responds to critiques against it.

The research makes use of archival data (Ali's autobiography) and desktop research to ascertain common themes. Desktop research provides a vast array of sources to check from.

3. Result

3. 1. Definition of Terms

Structural racism implies that systems and their corresponding institutions are inherently racist. In the same we have terminologies like couture/haute couture, capitalism/grand capitalism, or larceny/grand larceny, the same logic applies to racism/structural racism. It is a form of racism, which is embedded through laws, regulations, customs, culture, and ethics within a society or organization. Apartheid for example was a system of legislation that upheld segregationist policies between the people of South Africa. Another good example is the statues, which litter the American South, which glorify white supremacy figures and ideals. Despite no place for statues like that in the modern multi-cultural era, the statues stood for so long because many states had laws, preventing the removal of these statues.

As a term structural implies foundations, pillars, and supporting beams. The metaphorical architecture of structural racism instills inequality and discrimination into systems like the criminal justice network, labour structures, housing, health care, urban planning, education, as well as political power itself. Working like a spider web, its main components entangle and encircle, thus leading to generational poverty. For example, Mosley (2008) notes that in the US there is a 70 % chance that the children of an imprisoned parent will wind up incarcerated. In 1980, there were 143,000 black men in jail or prison and 463,700 graduating in higher educational institutions. In 2000, there were 791,600 black men in jail or prison, and 603,032 were enrolled in colleges or universities. In 2008, Dyson put the figure as a third more in jail than in college and in 2021 Carrega

noted that Black Americans are incarcerated at nearly 5 times the amount as white Americans [3, 4]. This disproportionate jailing has led to their being more Black and Latino youths in jail or prison than in college dormitories.

In 2000, *The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change* convened an influential group of key thinkers, academics, and activists to discuss and define structural racism. Their definition described a system, in which: *public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity. It has come about as a result of the way that historically accumulated white privilege, national values, and contemporary culture have interacted so as to preserve the gaps between white Americans and Americans of color.*"

Aspen's definition, while comprehensive, lacks in one vital aspect. It makes no reference to a pivotal mechanism in the system of structural racism; exploitation. This could be because America's capitalist system, combined with *American exceptionalism*, does not acknowledge that American workers can be exploited. Exploited in its essence is a non-American term. Krieger et al's (1993) definition of structural racism includes reference to exploitative and oppressive social relationships that define racial/ethnic groups and cause a system of inequality. Feagin and Bennefield (2014) captured this frame of thought, noting that for centuries, white Americans have and continue to unfairly benefit from generations of socioeconomic advantage and with it greater opportunities.

The agency, which exercises and sustains structural racism, is *the Establishment*. The British journalist Henry Fairlie, in a 1968 *New Yorker* article claimed credit for inventing the term in the modern political sense. Essentially Fairlie described the Establishment as powerful people but not in the sense of official power like a prime minister, but rather as a variety of powerful people with the same agenda. The Establishment compromise of a closed social group that selects its own members and consists of a network of people who attend the best private schools, go on to attend elite universities, and then later take up prominent positions in the arts, politics, and industry. American professor of history Alfred W. McCoy points out the Establishment in noting how certain American schools and institutions, like Yale for example, serve as stepping stones of those, setting the American decision making process [5].

The Establishment is not to be confused with the elite. In political and sociological theory, the elite are a small group of powerful people who hold a disproportionate amount of wealth, privilege, or political power. American sociologist C. Wright Mills noted how the elite think if not together at least alike and that in their well-regulated existence education plays a critical role. Where the elite and Establishment differ is that the latter has an entrenched and deep ethos within the culture of society. They might be considered the elite of the elite. A good example of this difference is the 2016 US Presidential Election. The winner, Donald Trump while a billionaire and the son of a Forbes 400 listee, still found himself very unpopular on both sides of the bipartisan divide in Washington DC. Some analysts noted that his unfamiliarity with great power politics could be the reason why he only managed one term. While Trump represents the elite class, he is not a part of the Establishment. On the other end of the spectrum, Democratic Presidential runner Bernie Sanders referred to his running rival Hillary Clinton as representing the Establishment, giving her family's 30 year plus association with state power.

While people like Barrack Obama, Kamala Harris, Thurgood Marshall, or Clarence Thomas have come to disrupt the Establishment in its traditional sense, it is still dominated by the White Anglo Saxon Protestants (WASP's). WASP elites have dominated American society, culture, and politics for most of the history of the United States, maintaining a monopoly through intermarriage, inheritance, and nepotism. Ultimately, where the WASP establishment ends, and where white supremacy begins is quite blurry. Defined, white supremacy is described as "an institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations, and peoples of color by white peoples and nations of the European continent; for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power and privilege" [6]. If we remove the phrase white or color from the definition, then what remains is a definition identical to the Establishment.

Ultimately, the Establishments main concern is hegemony of a political power of global proportions. It is very sensitive to where power should lie and who it should be with. In its entire 250-year history, the US has had one minority president and one minority vice-president. The US Senate, where a large portion of American political power lies has seen only 11 African-American senators, 8 Asia-American senators, 11 Hispanic senators and 3 Native American senators in its entire history. The 117th US Congress, was 23 % made up of racial or ethnic minorities, the highest percentage ever [7].

While formal political power plays its role in enforcing the Establishments hegemony, its levers and gears obtain optimal operating performance in a capitalist system. Capitalism, which requires an exploiting class so to sustain unsustainable massive profits, succeeds through racism, which subjugates certain populations. Thus racism and capitalism mutually construct harmful social conditions [8]. As introduced by Robinson (1983), racial capitalism is the idea that racialized exploitation and capital accumulation are mutually constitutive. Racial capitalism created the modern world system, through slavery, colonialism, and genocide because “the development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, so too did social ideology” [9]. Racially minoritized and economically deprived groups face capitalist and racist systems that continue to devalue and harm their lives, even within newer, supposedly deracialized neoliberal agendas [10, 11].

A way, in which hegemony or uncontested power works, is through convincing people that it does not exist. This in effect allows the Establishment to operate without criticism and scrutiny. Operating through a system of control via media structures, the latter disseminate and propagate agendas, consent, and ultimately obedience. In creating a culture of fear, few question the status quo and those who do are censored or ostracized. Whistleblowers who have exposed the myth of American democracy are gagged, jailed, or hounded, as the cases of Chelsea Manning, Julian Assange, and Edward Snowden attest.

In describing the media as the controlling institution of capitalism, Parenti notes how they set the issue agenda, choosing what to emphasize and what to ignore or suppress, in effect, organizing much of our political world for us. The media may not always be able to tell us what to think, but they are strikingly successful in telling us what to think about [12, 13]. As effective and powerful ideological institutions, the media then carry out a system-supportive propaganda function, by reliance on market forces, internalized assumptions, self-censorship, and without overt coercion [14].

In sum, the navigation from structural racism, to capitalism, to its system of media control goes to the crux of this paper. The case of Ali and Kaepernick expose how the Establishments stranglehold on media serves to suppress voices that criticize it. According to Chomsky, “If people try to enter the system that do not have that point of view they are likely to be excluded, after all no institution is going to design a mechanism to self-destruct, that’s not the way institutions function. So they all work to exclude, marginalize or eliminate any dissenting voices or alternative perspectives, because they are dysfunctional to the institution itself.”

It is not enough to exclude dissenting voices, but public perception must be manipulated to create an enemy or target. The purpose of creating an ideological target is to support the major social control mechanism. Social control is the study of mechanisms in the form of patterns of pressure, through which society maintains social order and cohesion. Social control is typically employed by group members in response to anyone it considers deviant, problematic, threatening, or undesirable, with the goal of ensuring conformity [15].

3. 2. Ali’s fight against the Establishment

Throughout the history of the globe, there are few global figures, recognized by two names. Cassius Clay and Mohammed Ali is one of them. As a young boxer Clay recognized that being boisterous attracted the attention that an up and coming boxer needed. In an era where African-Americans were expected to be seen and not heard, Ali used his passion for poetry to attract attention by rhyming to which round his opponent would fall in. His rhymes and predictions attracted the attention of fight promoters and fans across the country who wanted to see a braggart

loose. In defying his critics, Ali was able to talk the talk and back it up. His popularity increased as his rhymes and predictions in the ring came true.

On Clays return to South after the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome, in which he took the Gold medal, the eighteen year olds perspective began to develop. Though he received a hero's welcome and was exemplified publically as the 'All-American boy' by the governor, mayor and media, he could not be blind sighted by the injustice, racism, and inequality that were a part of Black Americans perpetual existence. After being refused service in a restaurant, and hounded by a white motorcycle gang, Clay could no longer accept his place a second class American citizen, and neither question nor bring attention to the culture of American society. The indignation and shame he suffered at the restaurant drove him to change his name from Cassius Clay to Muhammed Ali.

The name-change to obvious Semitic identity did not sit well with the Establishment. Boxing promoters and organizers shunned him to the extent that his allies and mentors urged him to rethink the name change because of blacklisting of his career. Refusing to oblige, and announcing his affiliation with the Nation of Islam, Ali was transformed by the media into a public enemy. What the media helped to shape was a narrative that Ali should be called by his African-American identify name.

Ali's public enemy status was cemented in April 1968 when he refused to be drafted into the US Army. Ali would unequivocally state "why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go 10,000 miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on Brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs?" [16]. Vilified by the media and caricatured into a 'draft dodger', Ali's refusal to fight America's war infuriated white supremacy structures. Immediately stripped of his Heavyweight title, within two months Ali was convicted of draft evasion, sentenced to five years in prison, fined \$10,000 and banned from boxing for three years. According to Zirin, the "sentence was unusually harsh and deeply tied to Beltway, a bipartisan consensus to crush Ali and ensure that he does not develop into a symbol of anti-war resistance" [16].

The act of having a globally respected *heavyweight champion of the world*, not kneeling to the demands of American war-mongering, was a deep embarrassment to the US establishment. In a time of East-West tensions, proxy wars, and ideological warfare, Ali's refusal to not only participate in the war but to question it, ruffled feathers across Washington DC. Ali notes how on more than a dozen occasions, 'carrots' were dangled in front of Ali to ensure that he enlists. Promises that he would not see the warzone or even have to leave the US were covertly made to him by Army officials. On one occasion, Ali was offered to opportunity to *just sign* the army enlistment document and never actually enlist. Ali's refusal became a beacon to the growing number of people, opposed to the war and the US Army. With the latter desperate to score a moral victory in having the heavyweight champion of the world accede, the appeasement and Ali's refusal to oblige deeply upset the American Establishment. In many aspects, it was the first time that a Black American stood up against the system. Former Navy Seal and Minnesota Governor Jessie Ventura, brilliantly captured the scenario:

"He gave up the title, the most prestigious title in the world because he refused to go to war. And they would have given him a pat job. All he would have done was walk around doing exhibitions. But he knew if he agreed to do that more young black people would be sent off to a war he was against. And he stood up and said I'll give up the greatest title in the world because I will be a man of conviction."

The Establishment did not take Ali's refusal of their advances lightly. In revoking Ali's passport, he could not earn a living abroad and in dangling a five-year Federal jail sentence over his head to be invoked at any moment, Ali was made into a persona non-grata. In such, no promoter, boxing council, or city council would sanction a domestic fight, so that he could earn a living. As the exile from boxing prolonged, Ali came to the conclusion that he would never fight again given the immense pressure from Washington DC.

As Ali's peak years faded away, million dollar offers to fight outside the US availed themselves. However, Ali felt that taking up the fight would diminish the strength of his stance. After the Supreme Court of Appeal cleared Ali to fight again in 1970, no boxing authority or city would sanction an Ali fight due to immense pressure from white supremacy structures. Ali notes that

almost 40 fights were scuppered or called off on his return from exile. Framed as an anti-patriotic draft dodger, Ali's stance was sensationalized in the media as anti-military, anti-flag, and thus anti-American. Quoting one white supremacist, angered over a potential Ali fight on December 7th, he said, "If you allow that coward *** to make money on December 7, those brave boys who lie entombed in the USS Arizona will turn over in their graves. Now you made December 7th 1970, a day of infamy along with Dec 7th 1941." On another occasion Ali noted how critics accused him of "disgracing the title and the American flag and the principles, for which it stands for".

3. 3. Comparison

Social media's mammoth rise after 2010 brought with it unfiltered information and media capable of being disseminated extremely fast over the world. The advent of quality cameras on cell phones further exacerbated the virility of information. This advancement has undoubtedly shed light on topics, previously ignored by mainstream media. The killing of unarmed black Americans is one previously ignored topic, which found the global limelight thanks to social media.

US structural racism was brought to a spotlight of global dimensions by four events, starting in 2013. The first was the acquittal of George Zimmerman, following his killing of the unarmed black teen Trayvon Martin in that year. Second was the separate double homicide of the unarmed Michael Brown and Eric Garner while in police custody, which sparked riots, protests, and unrest across the country. In June 2015, a white supremacist opened fire at a black church service, killing 8, bringing again attention to America's deep seated racism. In 2016, two separate shooting incidents, leading to the deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, the later, whose death was streamed live on Facebook, again brought attention to US structural racism.

Arguably these four events led to Collin Kaepernick, a professional American football player, to sit instead of traditionally stand as is custom during the playing of the US national anthem in August 2016. The following week he knelt during the anthem, stating that his kneeling was a protest against racial injustice, police brutality, and systemic oppression in the country. Kaepernick would state; "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color" [17]. He would further state that "To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder."

The ensuing media frenzy catapulted Kaepernick, a third-string Quarter back, to global attention. The polarizing reporting divided American mostly along racial lines. Fox News Tomi Lahren tweeted that Kaepernick should leave America. Other accusations include; "He should shut up and be grateful", "Stop complaining about being a millionaire", or "be grateful for the paycheck he earns".

The message behind Kaepernick protest was cast aside in favor of equating the protest as dishonoring the flag, and thus disrespecting the US military. Kaepernick responded by saying "the media painted this as I'm anti-American, anti-men and women of the military, and that's not the case at all." As the saga drew out, NFL team owners and executives, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, and even members of the US government condemned Kaepernick. The position of disrespecting the flag and disrespecting the military became more prominent. President Trump would go on to state that NFL owners should "fire" players who protest during the national anthem. According to Donahue, Trumps comments prompted NFL personnel as well as the various teams from blacklisting Kaepernick as possible backlash would be bad for business. Donahue notes that "NFL owners don't want to pick him up because they don't want to get a nasty tweet from Donald Trump".

At the end of the seasons, Kaepernick's contract was not renewed and remains unsigned by any team. In bringing attention to racism by protesting, the Establishment responded to him in an identical fashion to how they did to Ali. Three major themes emerge from the comparative analysis. First is that both were persecuted via the media structures, which represent elite capital interests. In manufacturing both as traitors, they became ideological targets or public enemies.

A second theme emerging is what is termed the gratitude factor. On numerous occasions both were told to shut up and be grateful, stop complaining about being a millionaire, and to be grateful for the paycheck they earn. This implies that African-Americans should be silent and rather show thanks for being able to earn millions in a white capitalist society. This accusation is not framed from the direction of the Establishment towards Ali/Kaepernick but rather white society versus Ali/Kaepernick. This is an interesting and powerful complex.

The third theme is directly related to America's militaristic foreign policy, which in ways affirms the Establishment's uncontested global power. Kaepernick's kneeling protest was equated to "disrespecting the flag". According to Donahue, "if someone did not show respect to the country during recognized moments of national solidarity, that person was a "traitor" or "has no respect for America" [17]. Ali notes that "not saluting the flag could get one lynched".

The Establishment frames disrespecting the flag as disrespecting the military. This move represents a check-mate, which frames the target as a terrorist. In framing targets as terrorist, all rationale thought or even mediation is thrown out the window. Americans do not negotiate with terrorists. This line of thought prevents Americans from criticizing its foreign policy of endless wars, invasions, and imperialism on people of color. If one dares to question these issues, they can be easily framed as anti-flag, anti-American, and thus anti-military. This framing makes war-mongers of the American Establishment into noble, upright, and righteous, while those who criticize the exact opposite.

The case of Hip-Hop Mos Def further highlights how the Establishment responds to criticism. Since the 1990's, Mos Def has been vocal of police brutality, the idea of American exceptionalism, and the status of African Americans. His conscious music contains verses critical of the US capitalist state, slavery, and the US as a surveillance state. His support for persons like Amadu Diallo, the inmate Mumia Abu-Jamal, and FBI fugitive Assata Shakur, has in the past got him in trouble with the law. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Mos Def spoke out against the Bush government's lack of response to the largely effected black community.

His legal problems began in 2013 when he changed his name to Yasiin Bey and appeared in a video, in which he demonstrated how inmates at Guantanamo Bay are forced fed. The video opens with the statement "there are currently 120 detainees on hunger strike in Guantanamo Bay. Fourty-four of them are being force fed against their will." In the proceeding video, Bey undergoes a "Standard Operating Procedure: Medical Management of Detainees on Hunger Strike." The proceeding video, vivid and disturbing, ends with Bey, begging to stop the torture. After the release of the video, Bey relocated to South Africa, where he was banned from entering the US and eventually announcing his retirement. While very little is known of the case, in 2017, Bey attempted to leave South Africa using a 'World Passport', which saw being arrested and deported from the country. The fact that he did not have a US passport speaks to possible revocation.

The revoking of passport showcases the Establishments executive power. When Ali refused the draft, his passport was immediately revoked. Denaturalizing a citizen is the government's way of making a person legally disappear. It is a hard powered move in that it puts the legal status of a citizen under duress via executive government structures.

Lastly, the case of Tommie Smith and John Carlos further highlights the dangers, which accompany those who criticize the Establishment. At the 1968 Mexico Olympic Games, Smith and Carlos, two members of the US track team were expelled from the games shortly after their famous black power salute at the podium. Time Magazine, compared the Olympics motto of "Faster, Higher, Stronger" to the event as "Angrier, Nastier, Uglier". While the US team blamed the IOC president Avery Brundage for the expulsion, Brundage was an American. As President of the US Olympic Committee in 1936, Brundage made no objections against Nazi salutes in Munich.

Smith and Carlos faced death threats, including against their families, and following suspension by the IOC faced economic hardships. The death threats Smith and Carlos faced were similar to what Ali faced throughout his career. He recalls on some nights the phone would ring

non-stop with caller after caller threatening his family. He notes how of the many hate mails he received, in the early year, the writers would actually sign their names.

4. Conclusion

What this research has uncovered is that those who criticize the Establishments structural racism are met with a similar response. In defining any criticism of the US as anti-flag and anti-military, the bearer of the criticism is equated to terrorist. Effectively, no one is allowed to criticize white supremacy or American foreign policy.

In shedding light on this subject, we unveil different perspectives on American hegemony and its power. Americans are very politically active people and they are often the most vocal about their political ideals on social media. However, when problems of America's structural racism go viral across the world, few care to really analyze the situation from a different perspective. For example, in the entire spectrum of the Black Lives Matter movement, there has been no connection between American soldiers, returning from 20 years of occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan, and joining the police force, which is a natural complementary profession to take up after military service. While in the military, soldiers were ingrained with an attitude that killing people of color is a natural reflex. On return to state-side, as police officers, in black districts, their natural instinct is to reach for their weapon and fire.

How this narrative is missing from the BLM discourse could be due to the fear of being labelled "anti-flag/military/and ultimately anti-American.

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