

# UNCOMFORTABLE CONVERSATIONS WITH A BLACK MAN

## BOOK DIGEST

### GOOD TROUBLE

#### Fighting for change

#### QUESTION

**“WHY AREN’T THE PEOPLE OBEYING DIRECT ORDERS FROM POLICE?  
WHY ARE THEY RESISTING ARREST?  
ANY LIGHT YOU COULD SHED ON THIS WOULD BE GREATLY APPRECIATED.”**

*“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice—Dr Martin Luther King Jr.”*

*“We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be co-workers with God.*

*And without that hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. So we must help time and realize that the time is always ripe to do right.—Dr Martin Luther King Jr.”*

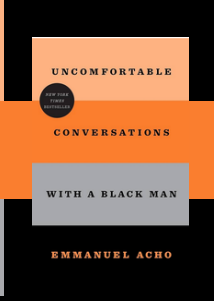
Emmanuel Acho recalls a time where he witnessed his mother throwing herself into a wall. In shock, he slowly digested the news that his aunt had died in Nigeria and that his mother was experiencing the Anger stage of grief. He then reflects on how our reactions to anger are not, cannot, always be logical. Most of us don’t know how to express anger... and if it’s hard on the individual level, what can we expect from a group? Especially when the members of that group are mourning the death of someone who died as a result of racism.

*“When you see people out protesting for George Floyd, or Ahmaud Arbery, or Breonna Taylor, or any of our beloved black people who have been murdered, what you’re seeing is a group of people who are angry. About police violence, about systemic inequality, about the American dream that isn’t yet real for everyone. The protests take a lot of different forms, and even when they get violent—which I don’t condone—what’s really happening is just like my mother banging her shoulder against the wall.”*

And more importantly, one cannot focus only on angry reactions and fail to notice that it’s only one end of the spectrum. Just like we cannot reduce football fans to only those who drunkenly misbehave after the match.

He then raises a major question that he’s wrestling with:

*“When does a “protest” become a “riot”, and who gets to decide? And is there some line when a riot against injustice becomes something else—a rebellion? Let’s get into what I’ve learned.”*



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### LET'S REWIND

Protests in America predate the United States. Indeed, the Sons of Liberty had already led protests against taxation without representation and Nat Turner a rebellion of enslaved people in Virginia.

He brings our attention to four words: protest, riot, rebellion and massacre, and writes:

*“You may think the lines are pretty clear: a protest is generally understood as an orderly demonstration; a riot, not so much; a rebellion is an uprising; and a massacre is, well, a massacre—a tragedy of one-sided violence. And yet, as with so much else, it turns out that race has played a big part in how protests are viewed. And policed.”*

The goal standard for nonviolent protests anywhere is Civil Disobedience, a term that was coined by Henry David Thoreau. It is based on the idea that conscience must prevail over laws and that grievances must be expressed with civility. For instance, Thoreau stopped paying taxes to protest slavery, Gandhi went through several hunger strikes to protest British occupation in India and MLK coordinated sit-ins which were joined by seventy thousand black and white people over 20 states in two years in the 60's.

Regarding UNcivil disobedience, the Merriem-Webster dictionary defines a riot as:

*“A tumultuous disturbance of the public space by three or more persons assembled together and acting with a common intent.”*

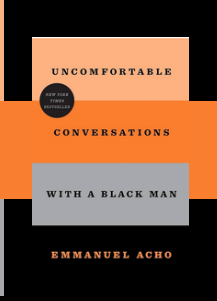
In general, looting and indiscriminate violence are associated with riots in people's minds.

Before the mid-twentieth century, race-related riots were usually led against black people by white mobs.

Tragic examples include the only coup d'Etat to have happened on American soil, when white supremacists stormed the city hall in Wilmington and overthrew the elected government in 1898, then going to black neighborhoods and either shooting or arresting black people. Between 60 and 90 black people died. He also recalls the aforementioned riot that happened in Tulsa, Oklahoma (see chapter 5). Historians estimate that 300 black people died.

He writes:

*“Contrast this with the 1960's, when the character of the conflicts shifted from the white people attacking black people to black people resisting oppression. White people still called the resistance a RIOT, but black people described it as a REBELLION.”*



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Rebellions are meant to be responses to injustice. Contrary to riots, they tend to be planned and not spontaneous.

He highlights:

*“Throughout all this history, white privilege has ruled how these conflicts were described. When it was white people instigating the violence, the media, politicians, law enforcement, and eventually historians called what was a MASSACRE a RACE RIOT. When black people started to initiate the protests, the media called what was a REBELLION a RIOT, a description meant to portray all white people (citizens, property owners, businesspeople), some of whom were in on the oppression, as persecuted victims of unjustified black anger and hostility, while also making white policing of the situation, no matter how brutal, into a heroic or at least justified response.”*

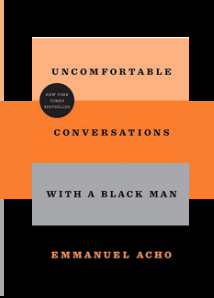
Emmanuel Acho reflects on how law enforcement has responded on a spectrum from doing nothing to participating when race conflicts were instigated by white people. In contrast, they chose force, arrest and even to kill in face of black protesters. He adds:

*“Over and over, in the aftermath of black rebellion, law enforcement, predominantly white law enforcement, has invested in more “law and order”—a decision, you might guess, that tends to make things worse.*

In 2013, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi created Black Lives Matter, a black-centered political movement, when a Florida jury acquitted George Zimmerman of murdering an unarmed black teenager called Trayvon Martin. Protests have been led all over the country since then, usually after the murder of a black person by law enforcement officers. Those murders included Tamir Rice (Cleveland), Eric Garner (New York), Michael Brown (Missouri), Alton Sterling (Baton Rouge) and of course Georges Floyd (Minnesota), Ahmaud Arbery (Georgia) and Breonna Taylor (Kentucky) in 2020.

Between 15 and 23 million people demonstrated around the world after Georges Floyd’s murder, according to the New York Times. Most people were engaged in civil disobedience, but there was also a lot of violence across the U.S., which reminded Emmanuel Acho of his mother’s anger and instinctual answer to grief.

He reflects on how all that happened in 2020 had positive consequences when looking at how confederate statues were taken down or at how Fedex pressured the owner of the Redskins so that the team’s name could be changed.



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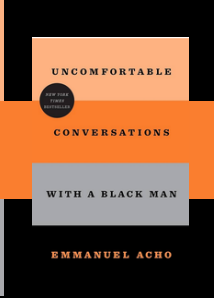
He shares:

*“The longer the protests have gone on, the more I recognized them as the dividend-paying rebellions that they are. The more I come to see the founders of the Black Lives Matter movement (...) as the Sisters of Liberty.”*

Finally he reminds us that the 1963 March on Washington had a specific agenda (beyond MLK’s beautiful “I Have A Dream” speech) that was read by activist Bayard Rustin, deputy director of the march, in front of the Lincoln Memorial. Unfortunately, none of these 10 demands couldn’t be applied to the current circumstances faced by black folks in the U.S.. He hopes that the internet can help us overcome what couldn’t be entirely achieved 57 years ago.

### Here are the 10 demands:

1. Comprehensive and effective civil rights legislation from the present Congress — without compromise or filibuster — to guarantee all Americans: Access to all public accommodations, decent housing, adequate and integrated education, the right to vote.
2. Withholding of Federal funds from all programs in which discrimination exists.
3. Desegregation of all school districts in 1963.
4. Enforcement of the Fourteenth Amendment — reducing Congressional representation of states where citizens are disfranchised.
5. A new Executive Order banning discrimination in all housing supported by federal funds.
6. Authority for the Attorney General to institute injunctive suits when any Constitutional right is violated.
7. A massive federal program to train and place all unemployed workers — Negro and white — on meaningful and dignified jobs at decent wages.
8. A national minimum wage act that will give all Americans a decent standard of living. (Government surveys show that anything less than \$2.00 an hour fails to do this.)
9. A broadened Fair Labor Standards Act to include all areas of employment which are presently excluded.
10. A federal Fair Employment Practices Act barring discrimination by federal, state, and municipal governments, and by employers, contractors, employment agencies, and trade unions.



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### LET'S GET UNCOMFORTABLE

Emmanuel Acho asks:

*“What are the sparks that ignite protests, riots, rebellions? Where are the lines between them today? And beyond that—what’s WORTH it to create real change?”*

It all relates to power and perspective. Most of the times, the only difference between a riot and a rebellion is the one labeling it... It also highlights the question: is the only “right” option a totally nonviolent one?

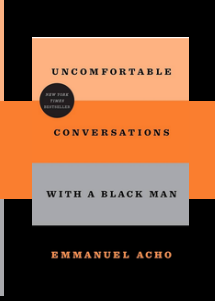
In the 60’s, two great leaders helped spark that hard-won change and they had very different approaches. MLK preached nonviolent civil disobedience and Malcolm X believed that it had to be done “by any means necessary”. He adds:

*“I’m in no way saying violence is necessary to create progress—but I am saying it’s easy to condemn the latter, and we also have to look at who is doing the condemning and how it compares to the justifications for the protest in the first place.”*

The need for protest cannot disappear as long as systemic racism doesn’t.

To conclude that section, he shares how he chose this chapter’s title after those words from late civil rights hero John Lewis:

*“Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.”*



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### TALK IT, WALK IT

The ways to fight for equality are limitless—the only thing that truly matters is to be sincere about it.

As usual, he offers many resources:

- Educating ourselves in the history of social unrest across the globe (in the U.S, in South Africa during the Apartheid, in China, during the Arab Spring movement...)
- Visiting [www.blacklivesmatter.com](http://www.blacklivesmatter.com)
- Listening to BLM's podcast: What Matters
- Donating
- Reading recommendations: The Autobiography of Malcolm X, by Malcolm X and Alex Haley & The Fire Next Time, by James Bladwin.
- Documentaries: Raoul Peck's on James Baldwin's The Fire Next Time, Let the Fire Burn, The Weather Underground
- Music: Songs from Public Enemy
- Modeling the kind of protest we wish to see
- [www.communityjusticeexchange.org/ndfn-discovery](http://www.communityjusticeexchange.org/ndfn-discovery): to fund bails to get protesters out of jail
- Opposing plans to build private prisons in our states
- Investigating laws and decisions around officers carrying body cameras
- Supporting efforts to defund the police and reallocate funds towards mental health programs, underfunded schools, drug recovery programs, and other efforts that have been shown to effectively reduce crime.

He shares a staggering fact: NYPD's budget is so large that it would equate the 36th largest defense budget in the WORLD (in comparison to other countries).

*"Finishing the work of protests in America is tantamount to finishing off racism.*

*It's a big order: the biggest order.*

*Which is why we need all the good people to fight, fight, fight injustice and inequality wherever we find it."*