

CHAPTER SEVEN

From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation

On April 12, 1865, the American Civil War officially came to an end when the Union Army accepted the unconditional surrender of the Confederacy on the steps of a courthouse in Appomattox, Virginia. The Union Army, led by 200,000 Black soldiers, had destroyed the institution of slavery; as a result of their victory, Black people were now to be no longer property but citizens of the United States. The Civil Rights Act of 1866, the first declaration of civil rights in the United States, stated that

citizens of every race and color, without regard to any previous condition of slavery or involuntary servitude, shall have the same right, in every State and Territory in the United States . . . to full and equal benefit of all laws and proceedings for the security of person and property, as is enjoyed by white citizens.¹

There was no ambiguity that the war had buried chattel slavery once and for all. Days after the surrender of the Confederacy, Abraham Lincoln rode into Richmond, Virginia, the former capital of the slaveholders, where he stood upon the stairs of the former Confederate capitol building and told a large gathering crowd of Black people days into their freedom,

In reference to you, colored people, let me say God has made you free. Although you have been deprived of your God-given rights by your so-called Masters, you are now as free as I am, and if those that claim to be your superiors do not know that you are free, take the sword and bayonet and teach them that you are—for God created all men free, giving to each the same rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.²

One hundred and fifty years later, on April 12, 2015, at nine in the morning, 217 miles north of the Appomattox courthouse, Freddie Gray, a twenty-five-year-old Black man, was arrested by the Baltimore police. His only apparent crime was making eye contact with the police and then running away. Freddie Gray was loaded into a van. By the time he emerged forty-five minutes later, his voice box had been crushed, his neck snapped, and 80 percent of his spinal cord severed.

The distance from the end of the Civil War, with the birth of Black citizenship and civil rights, to the state-sanctioned beating and torture of Freddie Gray constitutes the gap between formal equality before the law and the self-determination and self-possession inherent in actual freedom—the right to be free from oppression, the right to make determinations about your life free from duress, coercion, or threat of harm. Freedom in the United States has been elusive, contingent, and fraught with contradictions and unattainable promises—for almost everyone.

Black people were not freed into an American dream, but into what Malcolm X described as an “American nightmare” of economic inequality and unchecked injustice. The full extent of this inequality was masked by racial terrorism. One hundred years after Emancipation, African Americans dismantled the last vestiges of legal discrimination with the civil rights movement, but the excitement of the movement quickly faded as American cities combusted with Black people who were angry and disillusioned at being locked out of accessing the riches of American society. Hundreds of thousands of African Americans participated in the uprisings in search of resolutions to the problems of lead poisoning, rat infestations, hunger and malnutrition, underemployment, poor schools, and persisting poverty. Where liberals and radicals often converged was in the demand that Blacks should have greater political control over their communities. For liberals, Black electoral politics was a sign of political maturity as the movement left the streets for the poll booth, urban governance, and community

control. The problem was not “the system,” it was exclusion from access to all that American society had to offer. Some radicals were also lured by the possibility of self-governance and community control. Indeed, it was a viable strategy, given that much of Black life was controlled by white elected officials and white-led institutions. The question remained: Could the machinery wielded in the oppression of Blacks now be retooled in the name of Black self-determination?

If freedom had in one era been imagined as inclusion in the mainstream of American society, including admittance to its political and financial institutions, then the last fifty years have yielded a mixed record. Indeed, since the last gasps of the Black insurgency in the 1970s, there are many measures of Black accomplishment and achievement in a country where Black people were never intended to survive as free people. Is there no greater symbol of a certain kind of Black accomplishment than a Black president? For those who consider mastery of American politics and Black political representation as the highest expressions of inclusion in the mainstream, then we are surely in the heyday of American “race relations.” Yet, paradoxically, at a moment when African Americans have achieved what no rational person could have imagined when the Civil War ended, we have simultaneously entered a new period of Black protest, Black radicalization, and the birth of a new Black left.

No one knows what will come of this new political development, but many know the causes of its gestation. For, as much success as some African Americans have achieved, four million Black children live in poverty, one million Black people are incarcerated, and 240,000 Black people lost their homes as a result of the foreclosure crisis—resulting in the loss of hundreds of millions of dollars in Black savings. Never before in American history has a Black president presided over the misery of millions of Black people, the denial of the most basic standards for health, happiness, and basic humanity. Entertainer and activist Harry Belafonte Jr., recalled his last conversation with Martin Luther King Jr., in which King lamented, “I’ve come upon something that disturbs me deeply. . . . We have fought hard and long for integration, as I believe we should have, and I know that we will win. But I’ve come to believe we’re integrating into a burning house.”³

The aspiration for Black liberation cannot be separated from what happens in the United States as a whole. Black life cannot be

transformed while the rest of the country burns. The fires consuming the United States are stoked by the widespread alienation of low-wage and meaningless work, unaffordable rents, suffocating debt, and poverty. The essence of economic inequality is borne out in a simple fact: there are 400 billionaires in the United States and 45 million people living in poverty. These are not parallel facts; they are intersecting facts. There are 400 American billionaires *because* there are 45 million people living in poverty. Profit comes at the expense of the living wage. Corporate executives, university presidents, and capitalists in general are living the good life—*because* so many others are living a life of hardship. The struggle for Black liberation, then, is not an abstract idea molded in isolation from the wider phenomenon of economic exploitation and inequality that pervades all of American society; it is intimately bound up with them.

The struggle for Black liberation requires going beyond the standard narrative that Black people have come a long way but have a long way to go—which, of course, says nothing about where it is that we are actually trying to get to. It requires understanding the origins and nature of Black oppression and racism more generally. Most importantly, it requires a strategy, some sense of how we get from the current situation to the future. Perhaps at its most basic level, Black liberation implies a world where Black people can live in peace, without the constant threat of the social, economic, and political woes of a society that places almost no value on the vast majority of Black lives. It would mean living in a world where Black lives matter. While it is true that when Black people get free, everyone gets free, Black people in America cannot “get free” alone. In that sense, Black liberation is bound up with the project of human liberation and social transformation.

Radical Reconstructions

This book opens with a long quote from an essay Martin Luther King Jr. published in 1969. In it, he writes that the Black struggle “reveals systemic rather than superficial flaws and suggests that radical reconstruction of society itself is the real issue to be faced.” What would constitute the “radical reconstruction” of American society? This was a central question confronting the Black movement at the end of the

last period of mass struggle. King himself had come to locate the crises confronting the United States in the “triplets” of “racism, materialism and militarism.” King and hundreds of thousands of other angry Blacks, whites, and Latino/as across the country were rapidly radicalizing in reaction to the hypocrisy, contradictions, and brutality of capitalism. From the “massive resistance” of white supremacists led by the Democratic Party in the South to the expanding war in Vietnam, to the dense poverty exposed by waves of ghetto rebellions, the US government had become an emperor with no clothes.

This unfolding radicalization was not happening in isolation: it was part of a global rebellion against an old colonial order that was rapidly coming undone. During the course of World War II, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Italy, Japan, and France all lost colonial possessions. After the war, in 1947, England went on to lose the British colony of India, which was partitioned into India and Pakistan. And 1960 became known as the “Year of Africa” when seventeen African countries achieved independence from their colonial overlords. Decolonization was achieved in various ways, from “peaceful” transference of power to armed nationalist struggles. The ensuing debates over the futures of postcolonial societies included arguments over how to transform export-based economies into ones that prioritized the needs of the local population. In several of these countries, the debates revolved around different interpretations of socialism. In many ways these debates were distorted, given the wide influence of the Soviet Union, a country that at one point had been socialist but by this period had been for many years a one-party authoritarian regime. The Soviet model of socialism was based on an extremely narrow, limited definition of “state ownership.” But who owned the state was an equally important question. There were other questions generated by those movements, including: how to win state power, political economy, and how all of this would contribute to economic development and self-determination after centuries of colonial ruin. Nonwhite, formerly colonized people around the world hailed socialism (defined in many ways) almost universally as the means for achieving their freedom and reconstructing state power in their own names.

By the end of the 1960s, many Black revolutionaries took for granted that African Americans were a colonized population within

the United States. In the book *Black Power*, Carmichael and Hamilton said as much: “Black people in this country form a ‘colony,’ and it is not in the interest of the colonial power to liberate them. Black people are legal citizens of the United States with, for the most part, the same *legal* rights as other citizens. Yet they stand as colonial subjects in relation to white society.”⁴ This idea was popular because it seemed an accurate way to describe the relationship between the impoverished, largely Black urban cores in the midst of much whiter, larger metropolitan areas. Colonialism could also explain the financially predatory relationship of business to Black communities, which was almost wholly organized around extraction, with little to no investment. All of these descriptions made sense of Black oppression and exploitation and seemed to fit with what was happening to Black and Brown people all over the globe. As Stokely Carmichael wrote, “Black Power cannot be isolated from the African Revolution. It can only be comprehended within the context of the African Revolution. Thus with Black Power . . . came an intensification as the African Revolution from Watts to Soweto went into the phase of the armed struggle.”⁵

It was, however, inaccurate to describe Black Americans’ relationship to the United States as colonial, despite these obvious similarities. The profits reaped from the exploitation of Black urban dwellers were not insignificant, but neither were they the important revenue streams back to the American “metropole.” The outflow of capital from the inner city worked almost exclusively to the benefit of the layer of business owners directly involved in economically exploitative relationships with the urban ghetto, such as bankers and real-estate agents. This was not a motor of American capitalism compared to the cotton, rubber, sugar, and mineral extraction and trade that had fueled colonial empires for hundreds of years.

Being an oppressed minority population does not necessarily mean being colonial subjects. Calling Black people a colonized people drew the Black struggle into the global rebellion against the “colonial oppressors.” Malcolm X spoke to this when he recognized that it was “incorrect to classify the revolt of the Negro as simply a racial conflict of Black against white, or as purely an American problem. Rather, we are seeing today a global rebellion of the oppressed against the oppressor, the exploited against the exploiter.”⁶ Placing the Black rebellion within

the context of the “African Revolution” defied the idea that Black people were a “minority” population fighting on their own in the belly of the beast. The identification of the Black struggle with the anticolonial movement also reintroduced interpretations of socialism back into the Black movement. There had been thousands of Black socialists, communists, and other anticapitalists in the United States for years, but the anticommunist witch hunt led by the federal government had largely destroyed any links between the socialist movement of the 1930s and the new wave of struggle in the 1960s.

By the end of the 1960s, socialism was once again on the table as a legitimate alternative to the “evil triplets” King worried about. Most Black radicals were gravitating toward some conceptualization of socialism. It was easy to see why, considering how exposed the crimes of capitalism were. The United States had been experiencing years of economic growth, yet poverty, underemployment, and substandard housing were still the norm for Black and Brown people. In a speech Malcolm X gave at the founding of his Organization of Afro-American Unity, he said:

I’m telling you we do it because we live in one of the rottenest countries that has ever existed on this earth. It’s the system that is rotten; we have a rotten system. It’s a system of exploitation, a political and economic system of exploitation, of outright humiliation, degradation, discrimination—all of the negative things that you can run into, you have run into under this system that disguises itself as a democracy. . . . And you run around here getting ready to get drafted and go someplace and defend it. Someone needs to crack you upside your head.⁷

He would go on to name that system:

All of the countries that are emerging today from under the shackles of colonialism are turning toward socialism. I don’t think it’s an accident. Most of the countries that were colonial powers were capitalist countries and the last bulwark of capitalism today is America and it’s impossible for a white person today to believe in capitalism and not believe in racism. You can’t have capitalism without racism. And if you find a person without racism and you happen to get that person into conversation and they have a philosophy that makes you sure they don’t have this racism in their outlook, usually they’re socialists or their political philosophy is socialism.⁸

Similarly, King, near the end of his life, connected the “fire” burning down the house of America to the inequities rooted deep in the country’s political economy. In 1967, King was reckoning with several questions that pierced the heart of American injustice:

“Where do we go from here,” that we honestly face the fact that the Movement must address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of American society. There are forty million poor people here. And one day we must ask the question, “Why are there forty million poor people in America?” And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising questions about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy. And I’m simply saying that more and more, we’ve got to begin to ask questions about the whole society. We are called upon to help the discouraged beggars in life’s marketplace. But one day we must come to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. It means that questions must be raised. You see, my friends, when you deal with this, you begin to ask the question, “Who owns the oil?” You begin to ask the question, “Who owns the iron ore?” You begin to ask the question, “Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that is two-thirds water?”⁹

Black women were also connecting the system of capitalism to the hardship their families experienced. Black women who had been active in the civil rights movement went on to form the Third World Women’s Alliance in 1968. By the early 1970s they published the *Black Women’s Manifesto*, which analyzed racism and sexism in the movement and more generally: “The system of capitalism (and its afterbirth . . . racism) under which we all live, has attempted by many devious ways and means to destroy the humanity of black people. This has meant an outrageous assault on every black man, woman and child who resides in the United States.”¹⁰ Some of the women involved in the Third World Women’s Alliance would also go on to form the Combahee River Collective. They too would link the oppression of Blacks and women to capitalism:

We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We are socialists because we believe that work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who

do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. Material resources must be equally distributed among those who create these resources. We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and anti-racist revolution will guarantee our liberation. . . . Although we are in essential agreement with Marx's theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analyzed, we know that his analysis must be extended further in order for us to understand our specific economic situation as Black women.¹¹

By 1970, the Black Panther Party, an unabashed revolutionary socialist organization, was the largest and most influential Black revolutionary organization, with more than 5,000 members and 45 chapters. In 1971, the Panthers' newspaper, the *Black Panther*, reached its peak circulation at 250,000 papers a week¹²—a reach far beyond their membership. Ordinary Blacks reading the paper would have found the Panthers' outline for Black liberation mapped out with their “Ten-Point Program.” Among their many demands were an end “to the robbery by the capitalists of our Black community,” “decent housing fit for the shelter of human beings,” “an immediate end to police brutality and murder of black people,” and “land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace.”¹³

Anticapitalism filtered into every aspect of Black life, including the workplace. In 1968, the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, made up of former Black students and Black autoworkers in Detroit, made similar references. An organizer from that group, John Watson, said in 1968,

To struggle in our own interests means that the Black people of the ghetto must struggle to overthrow white capitalism. The struggle against capitalism is world wide [*sic*] and the revolutionary struggle of the ghetto is crucial and essential in the over all [*sic*] world revolution. If the Koreans and Vietnamese can overthrow imperialism in Asia, then Asia will be free. But if the Black Revolution can overthrow capitalism and imperialism in the US, then the whole world will be freed. This, then, is our role.¹⁴

By the end of the 1960s, there was widespread understanding that the capitalist economy was responsible for Black hardship and that socialism was an alternative way to organize society. Organizations that

called for the overthrow of the government, like the Black Panthers, were so popular that in 1969 FBI director J. Edgar Hoover declared that “the Black Panther Party, without question, represents the greatest threat to internal security of the country.”¹⁵ The popularity of the Panthers—in concert with successive years of ghetto rebellions—compelled the economic and political elite to create more space for the development of a Black middle class, but for the majority the questions of inequality and injustice remained largely unresolved.

Given the widespread advocacy of socialism, in one form or another, at the end of the last Black insurgency, it is almost odd when socialism is dismissed as incapable of explaining racism or Black oppression. Political commentator Tim Wise published in 2010 a typical critique on his blog:

Left activists often marginalize people of color by operating from a framework of extreme class reductionism, which holds that the “real” issue is class, not race, that “the only color that matters is green,” and that issues like racism are mere “identity politics,” which should take a backseat to promoting class-based universalism and programs to help working people. This reductionism, by ignoring the way that even middle class and affluent people of color face racism and color-based discrimination (and by presuming that low-income folks of color and low-income whites are equally oppressed, despite a wealth of evidence to the contrary) reinforces white denial, privileges white perspectivism and dismisses the lived reality of people of color. Even more . . . it ignores perhaps the most important political lesson regarding the interplay of race and class: namely, that the biggest reason why there is so little working-class consciousness and unity in the United States (and thus, why class-based programs to uplift all in need are so much weaker here than in the rest of the industrialized world), is precisely because of racism and the way that white racism has been deliberately inculcated among white working folks. Only by confronting that directly (rather than sidestepping it as class reductionists seek to do) can we ever hope to build cross-racial, class based coalitions. In other words, for the policies favored by the class reductionist to work—be they social democrats or Marxists—or even to come into being, racism and white supremacy must be challenged directly.¹⁶

Specificity always helps to illuminate the issues, but Wise lumps several categories of people together, only to reduce their ideas and political

activity to downplaying or ignoring racism. Folding “the left,” “activists,” “social democrats,” and “Marxists” together and describing them collectively as privileging “white perspectives” while dismissing “the lived reality of people of color” obscures more than it clarifies. For one, there are important distinctions among those with a political analysis and framework for understanding the world and those who show up at demonstrations. There is also an embedded assumption that “the left” is white and effectively ignores racism—a curious assumption, given the clear historical support and affiliation with socialism and socialists among African Americans quoted above. How did socialism go from being the greatest threat to the federal government (as it called the revolutionary socialist Black Panthers) to being perceived as “white” and marginal to the struggles of “people of color”?

To really unpack that history would involve understanding the extent of the repression the federal government exacted against its “internal enemy” as a way to break their influence among ordinary African Americans. It would also involve taking the politics of the Panthers seriously, as well as the political debates that ensued across the revolutionary left of the 1960s and 1970s over where to build their groups, how to build, and among what audience. To be sure, there were deep internecine battles over how to move forward, but the least charitable way to describe these debates is to reduce many differing political viewpoints and organizations into the generic category of “class reductionist left activist.” The revolutionary left today *is* mostly white and tiny, but today’s reality must be firmly situated in a history of massive repression, including imprisonment and state-sanctioned murder, as well as in intense political debates over strategy, tactics, and political perspectives.

As to the political content of Wise’s critique, most revolutionary socialists would agree that the most significant challenge to the development of class consciousness in the United States *is* racism and that, without a struggle against racism, there is no hope for fundamentally changing this country. It is true that the most well-known socialist-identified person in the United States is Vermont senator Bernie Sanders, who exemplifies most of what Wise is criticizing more generally in the left. But Sanders is a United States senator who has spent decades rubbing shoulders with the powerful elite. Sanders is reluctant and almost uncomfortable discussing the specific ways that racism adds

another burden onto the existing oppression Black workers and the poor face. Thus, Sanders essentially argues that addressing economic inequality is the best way to combat racism. It is an old argument from the right wing of the socialist movement that was challenged and denounced by its left wing—the wing that became the Communist Party after the Russian Revolution in 1917.

The Russian Revolution gave life to an international communist movement that was much further to the left than the old Socialist Party. The emergence of revolutionary communism in the 1920s and 1930s overlapped with the rapidly developing radicalization of African Americans. Blacks were referring to themselves as “New Negroes,” as opposed to the old, victimized Negroes of the Jim Crow South. These “new” Blacks were imbued with the confidence of living in big cities, finally out from under the surveillance and intimidation of Jim Crow. They were emboldened by their brethren having fought in the “Great War,” which President Woodrow Wilson described as an American war fought in the name of democracy. They were also embittered by the contradiction that America made public appeals to democracy while racist whites initiated pogroms across the North.

Within this overheating political cauldron, there were different Black political responses. The followers of Marcus Garvey argued that Blacks should triumphantly return to Africa. Black radicalism also flourished. The African Blood Brotherhood was small but influential in its espousal of both socialist and nationalist politics. The Communist Party (CP) also became a political pole of attraction and recruited many of the best Black revolutionaries of the era, who actively transformed the party’s political perspective on its work among African Americans. As historian Robin D. G. Kelley has argued, “If the Third International . . . proved more sympathetic and sensitive to the racial nature of American class struggle, it is largely because Black folk made it so . . . advocating a radical fusion of socialism and ‘race politics.’”¹⁷ When Black writer and literary giant Claude McKay traveled as a delegate to the Communist International in 1922, he reported:

In associating with the comrades of America, I have found demonstrations of prejudice on the various occasions when the white and black comrades had to get together, and this is the greatest obstacle that the Communists of America have got to overcome—the fact

that they first have got to emancipate themselves from the ideas they entertained toward Negroes before they can be able to reach the Negroes with any kind of radical propaganda.¹⁸

The Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin directly intervened in the American CP and argued that the party should immediately begin to agitate politically among African Americans.

The shift in orientation was sharp and dramatic. Whereas the founding convention of the CP in 1919 merely stated that the “racial oppression of the Negro is simply the expression of his economic bondage and oppression, each intensifying the other,” by 1921, after Lenin’s involvement on the question, the CP now declared:

The Negro workers in American are exploited and oppressed more ruthlessly than any other group. The history of the Southern Negro is the history of a reign of terror—of persecution, rape and murder. . . . Because of the anti-Negro policies of organized labor, the Negro has despaired of aid from this source, and he has either been driven into the camp of labor’s enemies, or has been compelled to develop purely racial organizations which seek purely racial aims. The Workers Party will support the Negroes in their struggle for Liberation, and will help them in their fight for economic, political and social equality. . . . Its task will be to destroy altogether the barrier of race prejudice that has been used to keep apart the Black and white workers, and bind them into a solid union of revolutionary forces for the overthrow of our common enemy.¹⁹

By the early 1940s, thousands of Blacks had joined the CP.

In the period leading up to World War II, the politics of communism became the dominant political framework for most of the non-white world as hundreds of millions of people of color across the globe were inspired by Lenin’s writings on the right of oppressed nations to fight for their own freedom. Lenin wrote:

The proletariat must struggle against the enforced retention of oppressed nations within the bounds of the given state. . . . The proletariat must demand freedom of political separation for the colonies and nations oppressed by “their own” nation. Otherwise, the internationalism of the proletariat would be nothing but empty words; neither confidence nor class solidarity would be possible between the workers of the oppressed and the oppressor nations. . . . On the other hand,

the socialists of the oppressed nation must, in particular, defend and implement the full and unconditional unity, including organizational unity, of the workers of the oppressed nation and those of the oppressor nation. Without this it is impossible to defend the independent policy of the proletariat and their class solidarity with the proletariat of other countries.²⁰

Through the period of the Popular Front (the name for the strategy Lenin describes), the CP maintained its popularity among African Americans and many of the oppressed. But over time, the constantly shifting, contradictory positions of the CP and Soviet Union, which were now led by the increasingly tyrannical Josef Stalin, led to a mass exodus from the party after the war. In the United States during the war, the CP had embraced the Democratic Party and called for unity against Hitler at all costs. Its conclusion that American Blacks should therefore downplay the continuing fight against racial inequality would eventually erode the ranks of the CP's Black membership. But the foibles of the CP should not be conflated with the validity of anticapitalism and socialism as political theories that inform and guide the struggle for Black liberation. C. L. R. James, a Black revolutionary from the Caribbean and a collaborator of Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky, continued to develop Marxist theory and its relationship to the Black struggle when he wrote in 1948—years before the emergence of the civil rights movement—about the dynamics of the Black movement and its impact on the class struggle in general:

We say, number one, that the Negro struggle, the independent Negro struggle, has a vitality and a validity of its own; that it has deep historic roots in the past of America and in present struggles; it has an organic political perspective, along which it is traveling, to one degree or another, and everything shows that at the present time it is traveling with great speed and vigor. We say, number two, that this independent Negro movement is able to intervene with terrific force upon the general social and political life of the nation, despite the fact that it is waged under the banner of democratic rights and is not led necessarily either by the organized labor movement or the Marxist party. We say, number three, and this is the most important, that it is able to exercise a powerful influence upon the revolutionary proletariat, that it has got a great contribution to make to the development of the proletariat in the United States, and that it is in itself

a constituent part of the struggle for socialism. In this way we challenge directly any attempt to subordinate or to push to the rear the social and political significance of the independent Negro struggle for democratic rights.²¹

James's observations still resonate, especially in the context of today's movement. The Black movement is an independent force that has its own timing, logic, and perspective based on the history of racism and oppression in this country.

It is also the case that when the Black movement goes into motion, it destabilizes all political life in the United States. King argued that the Black movement "forc[es] America to face all its interrelated flaws—racism, poverty, militarism, and materialism. It . . . expos[es] the evils that are rooted deeply in the whole structure of our society. It reveals systemic rather than superficial flaws."²² The oppression of Black workers exposes the foundational lie of the United States as a free and democratic society more than that of any other group, with the exception of the Indigenous population. The political activism and rebellion of Black people bring that lie to the surface for all to see, throwing into question the actual nature of US society. White workers have always followed the lead of Black workers. The militant strike wave I described in chapter 2 was certainly influenced by the Black freedom struggle that had provided a powerful example of organizing and resistance for white workers in the union movement to follow. For this reason, far from being marginal to the struggles of Black people, socialists have *always* been at the center of those movements—from the struggle to save the Scottsboro Boys in the 1930s, to Bayard Rustin's role in organizing the 1963 March on Washington, to the Black Panther Party's organizing against police brutality. At the height of McCarthyism, socialists and communists were so identified with the antiracist movement that antiracist organizing was automatically assumed to be the work of communists.

The Political Economy of Racism

Capitalism is an economic system based on the exploitation of the many by the few. Because of the gross inequality it produces, capitalism requires various political, social, and ideological tools to divide the

majority—racism is one among many oppressions intended to serve this purpose. Oppression is used to justify, “explain,” and make sense of rampant inequality. For example, racism developed under the regime of slavery to explain and justify the enslavement of Africans at a time when the world was celebrating the notions of human rights, liberty, freedom, and self-determination. The dehumanization and subjected status of Black people had to be rationalized in this moment of new political possibilities.

It is widely accepted that the racial oppression of slaves was rooted in the exploitation of the slave economy, but fewer recognize that under capitalism, *wage slavery* is the pivot around which all other inequalities and oppressions turn. Capitalism used racism to justify plunder, conquest, and slavery, but as Karl Marx pointed out, it would also come to use racism to divide and rule—to pit one section of the working class against another and, in so doing, blunt the class consciousness of all. To claim, then, as Marxists do, that racism is a product of capitalism is not to deny or diminish its centrality to or impact on American society. It is simply to explain its origins and persistence. Nor is this reducing racism to just a function of capitalism; it is locating the dynamic relationship between class exploitation and racial oppression in the functioning of American capitalism.

Marx has been criticized for ignoring the issues of race in his own day, but there is evidence that Marx was well aware of the centrality of race under capitalism. He did not write extensively on slavery and its racial impact, but he did write about how European capitalism’s emergence was rooted in the pilfering, rape, and destruction of natives, colonial subjects, and Black slaves. He famously wrote that “the discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of Black skins, signalized the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production.”²³ Marx also recognized the degree to which slavery was central to the world economy:

Direct slavery is just as much the pivot of bourgeois industry as machinery, credits, etc. Without slavery you have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery that has given the colonies their value; it is the colonies that have created world trade,

and it is world trade that is the pre-condition of large-scale industry. Thus slavery is an economic category of the greatest importance. Without slavery North America, the most progressive of countries, would be transformed into a patriarchal country. Wipe out North America from the map of the world, and you will have anarchy—the complete decay of modern commerce and civilization. Cause slavery to disappear and you will have wiped America off the map of nations. Thus slavery, because it is an economic category, has always existed among the institutions of the peoples. Modern nations have been able only to disguise slavery in their own countries, but they have imposed it without disguise upon the New World.²⁴

Thus within Marxism there is a fundamental understanding of the centrality of slave labor to national and international economies.

But what about race? Marx did not write prolifically on race, but one can look to his correspondence and deliberations on the American Civil War to get some idea about his views of racial oppression and how it operated within capitalism and his opposition to it. For example, in *Black Reconstruction*, W. E. B. Du Bois quotes at length a letter Marx penned, as head of the International Workingmen's Association, to Abraham Lincoln in 1864, in the midst of the Civil War:

The contest for the territories which opened the epoch, was it not to decide whether the virgin soil of immense tracts should be wedded to the labor of the immigrant or be prostituted by the tramp of the slave driver? When an oligarchy of 300,000 slave holders dared to inscribe for the first time in the annals of the world "Slavery" on the banner of armed revolt, when on the very spots where hardly a century ago the idea of one great Democratic Republic had first sprung up, whence the first declaration of the rights of man was issued . . . when on the very spots counter-revolution . . . maintained "slavery to be a beneficial institution" . . . and cynically proclaimed property in man "the cornerstone of the new edifice" . . . then the working classes of Europe understood at once . . . that the slaveholders' rebellion was to sound the tocsin for a general holy war of property against labor. . . . They consider it an earnest sign of the epoch to come that it fell to the lot of Abraham Lincoln, the single-minded son of the working class, to lead his country through the matchless struggles for the rescue of the enchained race and the Reconstruction of a social order.

Marx personally opposed slavery and he furthermore theorized that

slavery and the intense racism that flowed from it not only resulted in the oppression of slaves but also threatened the stability of the white working class by creating a downward pressure on wages in general. It was impossible to compete with the free labor of the enslaved.

This did not mean white workers were sympathetic to the cause of the slaves—with a few notable exceptions, they were not. Marx was not, however, addressing the issue of consciousness; he was describing the objective factors that created the *potential* for solidarity. He wrote in *Capital*, “In the United States of America, every independent movement of the workers was paralyzed as long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the Black it is branded.” Marx grasped the modern dynamics of racism as the means by which workers who had common objective interests could also become mortal enemies because of subjective, but nevertheless real, racist and nationalist ideas. Looking at the tensions between Irish and English workers, with a nod toward the American situation, Marx wrote:

Every industrial and commercial center in England possesses a working class divided into two hostile camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker he feels himself a member of the ruling nation and so turns himself into a tool of the aristocrats and capitalists of his country against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination over himself. He cherishes religious, social and national prejudices against the Irish worker. His attitude is much the same as that of the “poor whites” to the “niggers” in the former slave states of the USA. The Irishman pays him back with interest in his own money. He sees in the English worker at once the accomplice and stupid tool of the English rule in Ireland. This antagonism is artificially kept alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short by all the means at the disposal of the ruling classes. This antagonism is the secret of the impotence of the English working class, despite its organization. It is the secret by which the capitalist maintains its power. And that class is fully aware of it.²⁵

From this we can see a Marxist theory of how racism operated after slavery was ended. Marx was highlighting three things: first, that

capitalism promotes economic competition between workers; second, that the ruling class uses racist ideology to divide workers against each other; and, finally, that when one group of workers suffer oppression, it negatively affects all workers and the class as a whole.

White Supremacy for Some, Not Others

If white working-class people do not benefit from capitalist exploitation, then why do they allow racism to cloud their ability to unite with nonwhite workers for the greater good of all working people? The answer requires understanding how a white identity was created as a corollary to the racism directed at African Americans.

One benefit of the North American form of racial slavery to enslavers and the ruling class generally was that it deflected potential class tensions among white men. American freedom for whites was contingent on American slavery for Blacks. Historian Edmund Morgan explains that slavery was

the primary evil that men sought to avoid for society as a whole by curbing monarchs and establishing republics. But it was also the solution to one of society's most serious problems, the problem of the poor. Virginians could outdo English republicans as well as New England ones, partly because they had solved the problem: they had achieved a society in which most of the poor were enslaved.²⁶

The enslaved could not easily rise up; if and when they did, all white men could unite to subjugate them. Whites who were small farmers and those who were big planters had nothing in common except that they were not slaves, and that eased the potential tensions between them.

When slavery ended, an evolving strategy of “white supremacy” functioned in a similar way to blunt the political and economic tensions that existed among white men in the South, as chapter 4 describes. Broadly, “white supremacy” was the response to the supposed threat of “Negro domination”—the idea that the end of slavery and the reforms of Reconstruction would reverse the roles of Blacks and whites. Poor whites were recruited to the “lost cause” of white supremacy in order to preserve their own privileged spot in the hierarchy or risk their own demise with the ever-present threat of “negro domination.” But the rallying cry of “white supremacy” was intended to obscure,

not elucidate. “White supremacy” was not a coherent strategy “but involved ad hoc responses to chaotic circumstances.”²⁷ In its original iteration it was intended to remove Blacks from political power, without which they would be more vulnerable to economic coercion. Above all, “white supremacy did not mean that whites were to be supreme.” Instead, it was a political strategy intended to manipulate racial fears as a means of maintaining class rule for the landed elite of the cotton-rich Black Belt.²⁸ White supremacy has historically existed to marginalize Black influence in social, political, and economic spheres while also obscuring major differences in experience in the social, political, and economic spheres among white people. Like slavery, this was necessary to maximize productivity and profitability while dulling the otherwise sharp antagonisms between the richest and poorest white men.

What does this have to do with the world today? The political strategy of uniting all whites around white supremacy and a commitment to politically and economically marginalizing or excluding Black people does not exactly resemble the country we live in today. This does not mean that white men are not in an overwhelmingly powerful position in the institutions that control the political and economic destiny of this country. But the actual legacy of the political project of white supremacy expresses itself by obscuring the class antagonism among whites. “White people” are typically regarded as an undifferentiated mass with a common experience of privilege, access, and unfettered social mobility. These perceptions have largely been facilitated by the academic distillation of a “white” identity into an aspirational category of “whiteness.”

“Whiteness” is therefore not necessarily embodied in white people; it can apply to anyone—Black, Latino, Asian, and, yes, white people. In some ways, this distinction between whiteness and white people was intended, importantly, to allow for distinction and differentiation. But when “acting white” is invoked to explain the actions of reactionary nonwhite political actors, like Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas, it is being used to transpose class and race, further distorting the existence of class differences. In this way, “whiteness” is an adaptation of the American left to the myth that the United States is a classless society. Nonwhite people in positions of power are accused of “performing whiteness” instead of exercising their class power—as if Clarence Thomas or Barack Obama are acting in ways they do not wholly intend

to. Moreover, it invariably collapses important distinctions among whites into a common white experience that simply does not exist. This has huge implications in the struggle to build solidarity among the oppressed and exploited and in creating the alliances and coalitions that must be built to challenge the plutocracy at the helm of the country.

More than 19 million white Americans fall below the poverty line, nearly double the number of poor Black people. Black people are over-represented among the ranks of the poor, but the sheer number of poor white people also destabilizes assumptions about the nature of American society. The poverty rate among working-class whites has grown from 3 percent to 11 percent since 2000.²⁹ Even though the recession increased Black poverty, the gap between white and Black poverty has narrowed—not because Blacks are doing better, but because whites are doing worse.³⁰ In fact, 76 percent of whites have experienced poverty at some time in their lives. Four out of five American adults struggle with “joblessness, near-poverty, or reliance on welfare for at least part of their lives.”³¹ Despite the ubiquitous “common sense” of “white privilege,” most ordinary whites are insecure about the future. Whites’ pessimism about the economic future is at a twenty-five-year high, with millions believing that they cannot improve their living standards. This pessimism is rooted in the erosion of their economic situation.³²

Far and away, African Americans suffer most from the blunt force trauma of the American criminal justice system, but the pervasive character of law-and-order politics means that whites get caught up in its web as well. African Americans are imprisoned at an absurd rate of 2,300 for every 100,000 Black people. White people, on the other hand, are incarcerated at a rate of 450 people per 100,000. The difference speaks directly to the racial disparities that define American criminal justice, but it is worth noting that the rate at which white people in the United States are incarcerated is still higher than the incarceration rates of almost every other country in the world.³³ It’s also unquestionable that Blacks and Latino/as experience death at the hands of police at much greater rates than whites, but *thousands* of white people have also been murdered by the police. This does not mean the experiences of whites and people of color are equal, but there is a basis for solidarity among white and nonwhite working-class people.

This more complicated picture of the material reality of white

working-class life is not intended to diminish the extent to which ordinary whites buy into or accept racist ideas about Blacks. It is also true that, by every social measure, whites do better than African Americans on average, but that does not say much about who benefits from the inequality of our society. For example, in a country with four hundred billionaires, what does it mean that 43 percent of white households make only between \$10,000 and \$49,000 a year?³⁴ Of course, an even larger number of Black people make this pitiful amount—65 percent—but when we only compare the average incomes of working-class Blacks and whites, we miss the much more dramatic disparity between the wealthiest and everyone else.

If it isn't in the interest of ordinary whites to be racist, why do they accept racist ideas? First, the same question could be asked of any group of workers. Why do men accept sexist ideas? Why do many Black workers accept racist anti-immigrant rhetoric? Why do many Black Caribbean and African immigrant workers think that Black Americans are lazy? Why do most American workers of all ethnicities accept racist ideas about Arabs and Muslims? In short, if most people agree that it would be in the interest of any group of workers to be more united than divided, then why do workers hold reactionary ideas that are an obstacle to unity?

There are two primary reasons: competition and the prevalence of ruling-class ideology. Capitalism creates false scarcity, the perception that need outstrips resources. When billions are spent on war, police-brutality settlements, and publicly subsidized sports stadiums, there never seems to be a shortage of money. But when it comes to schools, housing, food, and other basic necessities, politicians always complain about deficits and the need to curb spending and cut budgets. The scarcity is manufactured, but the competition over these resources is real. People who are forced to fight over basic necessities are often willing to believe the worst about other workers to justify why they should have something while others should not.

The prevailing ideology in a given society consists of the ideas that influence how we understand the world and help us make sense of our lives—through news, entertainment, education, and more. The political and economic elite shape the ideological world we all live in, to their benefit. We live in a thoroughly racist society, so it should not be

surprising that people have racist ideas. The more important question is under what circumstances those ideas can change. There is a clash between the prevailing ideology in society and people's lived experience. The media may inundate the public with constant images and news stories that describe Blacks as criminals or on welfare, but an individual's experience with Blacks at work may completely contradict the stereotype—hence the insistence from many whites that they are not racist because they “know Black people.” It can be true in that person's mind. People's consciousness can change and can even contradict itself.

This is also true for African Americans, who can harbor racist ideas about other Black people while *simultaneously* holding antiracist ideas. After all, Black people also live in this racist society and are equally inundated with racist stereotypes. The development of consciousness is never linear—it is constantly fluctuating between adhering to ideas that fit a “common sense” conception of society and being destabilized by real-life events that upend “common sense.” The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci explains the phenomenon of mixed consciousness this way:

The active man-in-the-mass has a practical activity but has no clear theoretical consciousness of his practical activity which nonetheless involves understanding the world in so far as it transforms it. His theoretical consciousness can . . . be historically in opposition to his activity. One might almost say that he has two theoretical consciousness[es] (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all fellow workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed. The person is strangely composite: it contains Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science, prejudices of all past phases of history at the local level and intuitions of a future philosophy which will be that of a human race united the world over.³⁵

Whether or not a group of workers has reactionary, mixed, or even revolutionary consciousness does not change its objective status as exploited and oppressed labor. The achievement of consciousness is the difference between the working class being a class in itself as opposed to a class for itself. It affects whether or not workers are in a position to fundamentally alter their reality through collective action. As one writer observed, “Only a collective can develop a systematic alternative

world view, can overcome to some degree the alienation of manual and mental work that imposes on everyone, on workers and intellectuals alike, a partial and fragmented view of reality.³⁶

Just because white workers, to take a specific example, may at times fully accept reactionary ideas about African Americans does not change the objective fact that the majority of the US poor are white, the majority of people without health insurance are white, and the majority of the homeless are white. It is true that Blacks and Latino/as are disproportionately affected by the country's harsh economic order, but this is a reality they share with the majority of white workers. The common experience of oppression and exploitation creates the potential for a united struggle to better the conditions of all. This is obviously not an automatic process, nor is it a given that essentially economic struggles will translate to support or struggle for the political rights of Blacks to be free of discrimination and racism. Political unity, including winning white workers to the centrality of racism in shaping the lived experiences of Black and Latino/a workers, is key to their own liberation.

Tim Wise's observations reduce these real issues to an abstract accusation of "privileging" class over race. But our movement has to have theoretical, political, and strategic clarity to confront challenges in the real world. When, in 2012, Chicago's Black public school CEO Barbara Byrd Bennett was scheming with mayor Rahm Emanuel to close more than fifty schools located exclusively in Black and Latino/a neighborhoods, should Black teachers, students, and parents have united with Bennett, who has certainly experienced racism and sexism in her life and career, but who was also leading the charge to undo public education in Chicago? Or should they have united with the thousands of white teachers in Chicago schools and the vice president of the Chicago Teachers Union, a white, heterosexual man, to build the movement to save public education in the city?

Probably very few people in history have had as much racist invective directed at them as Barack Obama has—hating him is basically shorthand for racism now. But he has also championed policies that absolved the banks and Wall Street of any responsibility for crashing the economy; as a result, since 2007 ten million people have been displaced from more than four million homes by the foreclosure crisis.³⁷ Should Black workers put that aside and unite with Obama out of racial solidarity and

a shared “lived experience,” or should they unite with ordinary whites and Latino/as who have also lost their homes to challenge a political program that regularly defends business interests to the detriment of all working-class and poor people? In the abstract, perhaps these are complicated questions. But in the daily struggles to defend public education, fight for real healthcare reform, or stop predatory foreclosures, these are the concrete questions every movement faces.

The “blind spot” of class within the framework of people like Tim Wise not only leaves them incapable of explaining class division among the oppressed, it also underemphasizes the material foundation for solidarity and unity within the working class. Instead, the concepts of solidarity and unity are reduced to whether or not one chooses to be an “ally.” There’s nothing wrong with being an ally, but it doesn’t quite capture the degree to which Black and white workers are inextricably linked. It’s not as if white workers can simply choose not to “ally” with Black workers to no peril of their own. The scale of attack on the living standards of the working class is overwhelming. There is a systematic, bipartisan effort to dismantle the already anemic welfare state. When, in 2013, \$5 billion cut was cut from food stamps, it had a direct and deleterious impact on the lives of tens of millions of white working-class people.

In this context, solidarity is not just an option; it is crucial to workers’ ability to resist the constant degradation of their living standards. Solidarity is only possible through relentless struggle to win white workers to antiracism, to expose the lie that Black workers are worse off because they somehow choose to be, and to win the white working class to the understanding that, unless they struggle, they too will continue to live lives of poverty and frustration, even if those lives are somewhat better than the lives led by Black workers. Success or failure are contingent on whether or not working people see themselves as brothers and sisters whose liberation is inextricably bound together.

Solidarity is standing in unity with people even when you have not personally experienced their particular oppression. The reality is that as long as capitalism exists, material and ideological pressures push white workers to be racist and all workers to hold each other in general suspicion. But there are moments of struggle when the mutual interests of workers are laid bare, and when the suspicion is finally turned in the other direction—at the plutocrats who live well while the rest of us

suffer. The key question is whether or not in those moments of struggle a coherent political analysis of society, oppression, and exploitation can be articulated that makes sense of the world we live in, but that also champions the vision of a different kind of society—and a way to get there.

No serious socialist current in the last hundred years has ever demanded that Black or Latino/a workers put their struggles on the back burner while some other class struggle is waged first. This assumption rests on the mistaken idea that the working class is white and male, and therefore incapable of taking up issues of race, class, and gender. In fact, the American working class is female, immigrant, Black, white, Latino/a, and more. Immigrant issues, gender issues, and antiracism *are* working-class issues.

Conclusion

Racism in the United States has never been just about abusing Black and Brown people just for the sake of doing so. It has always been a means by which the most powerful white men in the country have justified their rule, made their money, and kept the rest of us at bay. To that end, racism, capitalism, and class rule have always been tangled together in such a way that it is impossible to imagine one without the other. Can there be Black liberation in the United States as the country is currently constituted? No. Capitalism is contingent on the absence of freedom and liberation for Black people and anyone else who does not directly benefit from its economic disorder. That, of course, does not mean there is nothing to do and no struggle worth waging. Building the struggles against racism, police violence, poverty, hunger, and all of the ways in which oppression and exploitation express themselves is critical to people's basic survival in this society. But it is also within those struggles for the basic rights of existence that people learn how to struggle, how to strategize, and build movements and organizations. It is also how our confidence develops to counter the insistence that this society, as it is currently constructed, is the best that we can hope to achieve. People engaged in struggle learn to fight for more by fighting for and winning something. But the day-to-day struggles in which many people are engaged today must be connected to a much larger vision of what a different world could look like. Political scientist and

radical Michael Dawson argues for “pragmatic utopianism” that “starts where we are but imagines where we want to be . . . based on the utopian imaginings of a much different America—one we are repeatedly told was impossible to obtain—combined with the hardheaded political realism that generated the strategies and tactics necessary to achieve their goals.”³⁸

Is this neoliberal, gentrified, overpriced, under-resourced society the best our species can create? The *Black Women’s Manifesto* provided a very succinct idea of what the “new world” would look like:

The new world that we are struggling to create must destroy oppression of any type. The value of this new system will be determined by the status of those persons who are presently most oppressed—the low man on the totem pole. Unless women in any enslaved nation are completely liberated, the change cannot really be called a revolution. . . . A people’s revolution that engages the participation of every member of the community, including men, and women, brings about a certain transformation in the participants as a result of this participation. Once you have caught a glimpse of freedom or tasted a bit of self-determination, you can’t go back to old routines that were established under a racist, capitalist regime.³⁹

It is the struggle itself that can compel people to push for more.

In the summer of 2014, the Black working class of Ferguson “caught a glimpse of freedom and tasted a bit of self-determination” when they stood down the police and National Guard and stayed in the streets for Mike Brown. Their local struggle inspired Black people around the country to take to the streets and stand down the police. What began as a narrowly conceived demand for justice for Mike Brown has erupted into a movement largely identified by the slogan “Black Lives Matter.” It reflects the political maturation of this stage of the movement. The next stage will involve progressing from protests aimed at raising awareness or drawing attention to the crisis of police violence to engaging with the social forces that have the capacity to shut down sectors of work and production until our demands to stop police terrorism are met. The movement has shown that violent policing does not exist in a vacuum: it is a product of the inequality in our society. The police exert their authority in a fundamentally disordered society. The clearer we can see these threads connecting police mayhem to the

disorder in our society, the clearer we can express our need for a different kind of world. This is not simply wishful, utopian thinking. The quotes from Black radicals and revolutionaries throughout this chapter show that this is a familiar conclusion at which those intimately involved in social movements arrive.

At the beginning of this book, I asked why this movement has appeared in this moment, even though police violence and terrorism have been such a common feature of Black life throughout American history. In doing so, I have examined the ideological and political forces that often dramatically slow the fight for Black rights in particular. Historically, the insistence that Black deprivation is rooted in Black culture and in Black people has deflected attention away from the systemic roots of racism, compelling African Americans to look inward instead of making demands on the state and others. But this is a fluid and contradictory process, especially when looking inward reveals that most Black people are working harder than everyone else and still not getting ahead. The space within that contradiction is explosive. We saw it explode in the 1960s, and we can still smell the smoke today. I also explain “colorblindness” not as an aspiration but as a political tool intended to deny the responsibility of the state and free-market capitalism for the disparities that perpetuate racial and economic inequality for African Americans. When we cannot see the historical and contemporary uses of racism, it can be used to further dismantle the public institutions that often stand as the last buffer between poor and working-class people and the street. The hopes initially vested in Obama, who has instead acted to silence and quell Black rebellion, have brought the question to the fore: Can we get free in America?

No one knows what stage the current movement is in or where it is headed. We are very early in the most current rendering of the Black awakening. But we do know that there will be relentless efforts to subvert, redirect, and unravel the movement for Black lives, because when the Black movement goes into motion, it throws the entire mythology of the United States—freedom, democracy, and endless opportunity—into chaos. For the same reasons, the state ruthlessly crushed the last major movement of the Black freedom struggle. The stakes are even higher today because what seemed then like an alternative—greater Black inclusion in the political and economic establishment—has

already come and failed. In this sense, the election of Obama completed that political project and has brought us back to this point.

Today, American life is much bleaker for the vast majority of people. The challenge before us is to connect the current struggle to end police terror in our communities with an even larger movement to transform this country in such a way that the police are no longer needed to respond to the consequences of that inequality. As the Black revolutionary C. L. R. James wrote on the historic and transformative power of the Black movement:

Let us not forget that in the Negro people, there sleep and are now awakening passions of a violence exceeding, perhaps, as far as these things can be compared, anything among the tremendous forces that capitalism has created. Anyone who knows them, who knows their history, is able to talk to them intimately, watches them at their own theatres, watches them at their dances, watches them in their churches, reads their press with a discerning eye, must recognize that although their social force may not be able to compare with the social force of a corresponding number of organized workers, the hatred of bourgeois society and the readiness to destroy it when the opportunity should present itself, rests among them to a degree greater than in any other section of the population in the United States.⁴⁰

