WHEN SOME STAFF MEMBERS OF THE SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE (SCLC), including Jesse Jackson, resisted Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s proposal to go to Memphis to support the striking sanitation workers, Dr. King was incensed. SCLC staff, some concerned with their own more favored projects, argued that this new project would spread them too thin. Dr. King issued a strong rebuke to their narrowing of the horizons of the movement. He argued that that this country was in critical condition and that they all had to work together to “redeem the soul of America” (Frady, 1996: 225). Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was a man with a transcendent vision, but in stating these prescient sentiments, he stood on the shoulders of giants. This is too often forgotten in treatments of the Civil Rights Movement. This article seeks to understand the Civil Rights Movement in the context of its larger role as a force for the democratization of U.S. society, internally and in its international relations.

Although liberals and leftists have tended to disregard J. Edgar Hoover’s fear of subversion within the Civil Rights Movement as either a disingenuous cover for his own racism or the paranoid fantasy of an anticommunist psychosis, I would argue that Hoover’s fears were well founded within the context of his own premises: that the Civil Rights Movement posed a fundamental threat to the power arrangements of the American social order that he was sworn to defend. I have long felt that the lack of a serious appraisal of J. Edgar Hoover among liberals stemmed from a fear of confronting the contradictions within liberalism itself, partly revealed in its bastard offspring, neoconservatism. American liberalism is particularly torn between its egalitarian principles (vis-à-vis the New Deal and Great Society traditions) and its desire for stability and social order (stemming from the social position of the U.S. as the hegemonic power within the capitalist world-economy and from its propagation of a founding principle of the capitalist world, the myth of pan-European supremacy).

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Martin Luther King, Jr., understood well these contradictions. His statement in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” could apply to liberals and moderates:

I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s greatest stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to “order” than to justice, who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.... We will have to repent in this generation not merely the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people (King, 1986: 295–296).

Although broad segments of white America speak with pride of their support for the civil rights tradition of Martin Luther King, Jr. (at least up to the 1963 to 1965 period), some had serious reservations. Despite the accolades given today to Dr. King’s dream, many liberals shared J. Edgar Hoover’s fears about the Civil Rights Movement. They believed it would ratchet up general dissatisfaction with America, leading others to support the demands of the Negro and to seek redress of their own grievances, causing in turn an exponential growth in dissatisfaction with the American social order and the alleged Euro-American cultural foundation of humanity’s greatest achievements.

One can sense this ambivalence in the public pronouncement of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a public figure who consistently supported redistributive programs for the disadvantaged. Moynihan decried America’s inaction in the face of the increasing crises and consequent alienation of the Negro inner city. His concern that the Nation of Islam and other Black militants might soon follow the model of the Chinese Communists may today seem totally outside the bounds of scholarly discussion. However, it makes sense given Moynihan’s support for redistributive programs and opposition to programs that enhanced the social and political power of the poor, because it gave them the wrong message about how one should pursue success in America. Moynihan perfectly reflects the neoconservative dilemma without committing himself to the neoconservative movement.

Studies of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s provide us with rich and powerful analyses of the sources of the struggle, the resources that enabled people to struggle effectively, and the intelligence, creativity, and vision of the women and men who committed their lives to the struggle for justice, equality, and democracy in America. Despite their status as second-class citizens often occupying segregated ghettos away from the American mainstream, the struggles of Black people have been remarkably central to the story of American democracy, and will continue to be central to the task of completing the great American Revolution.

The story of the Civil Rights Movement in its broad outlines is familiar to many
readers. The more specific intellectual history presented here focuses on the interaction of the ideas put forward by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, the evolution of ideas and strategies within the liberal center, and the rise of a counter-revolutionary ideology fashioned in opposition to the radical threat posed by the rise of an increasingly large cadre of revolutionary ideologues and their location within an increasingly insurrectionary inner-city poor, the corollary of the 19th-century dangerous classes.

The Black Freedom Struggle assumed various organizational forms that attempted to articulate the increasingly assertive, militant, and radical sentiments of people within America’s inner cities. Some pivotal organizations of the 1960’s radical awakening were the Nation of Islam, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), the Black Panther Party, and the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). These organizations constituted much of the core of the Black Power militancy of the mid-1960s, but they ultimately gave way to attempts to transcend the limitations of the Civil Rights, Black Power, and New Left movements.

The histories of these organizations provide us with spectacular stories of heroism, creativity, and vision. Despite the boldness and creativity of the individual and organizational leadership that came to the fore in the 1960s, however, the level of challenge that they mounted could not be normalized. It depended on the continued mobilization of an insurrectionary community. Once the insurrection subsided, the forces of repression moved to eliminate the threat to the social order. The revolutionary militants who came to the fore during this period returned to the drawing boards to determine the way forward.

Rather than seek to deepen their understanding of the complex relationship between the action of the broad masses of the population and the thinking of leaders, intellectuals, and organizations, they overemphasized the role of organization and leadership and their failure to give sufficient leadership to the spontaneous rebellion of the masses. The militants concluded that they had failed as revolutionaries and looked around for a more adequate revolutionary model that would enable them to organize their communities for a protracted struggle for power and social transformation. Most scholars of social movements have dismissed this period as the thrashings of a wounded beast in its final death throes, which descended predictably into a swamp of sectarianism, bickering, and utopian groups far removed from the concerns of their former inner-city bases. In my view, the evolution was far more complex and merits much closer study. These scholars lament the shattering of the 1960’s left-liberal consensus, attributing it to the extremism of the militants. I argue that the shattering of that consensus was inevitable and, over the longer run, liberating. The fracturing of the coalition was due not to the extremism of the New Left. Instead, the implosion occurred because of the liberal center’s collusion with the Right in the brutal repression of the
popular Left (Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, SNCC, and SDS) and its acceptance of the presumption of American power as a force for good in the world.

The strategy of armed self-defense used by some Black Power militants was not a strategy for urban guerrilla warfare. Although the notion of urban guerrilla warfare had some currency during the earlier cadre development period among the forces associated with the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), it did not by and large survive the mass mobilization period of the later 1960s, when the Black Panther Party and others articulated a notion of the Long March. The concept regained currency among some only after the deadly assault on the movement’s leaders, including the murders of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and many leaders of the Black Panther Party. The Black Panther Party and the Nation of Islam advocated a policy of self-defense, which clearly incited the animosity of federal and local law enforcement agencies, whose command of a counterinsurgency state allowed them to plot the murder of popular Black leaders. These law enforcement agencies pursued the suppression of the militants with a reckless glee, combined with cold-blooded ruthlessness.

This dose of reality shattered any illusions about the liberal-democratic nature of the U.S. for those who were members of the opposition. An approach was sought that would preclude the vulnerability that allowed Black Power militants of the late 1960s to be so easily targeted and eliminated. The New Left as a social force emerged in opposition to the alleged collusion and betrayal of the Old Left, both social democratic and communist. This hostility toward the old Left meant that New Leftists were unlikely either to form working relationships with the Old Left or to engage in careful study of their experience. Those who retained a relative trust in the liberal-democratic nature of U.S. society attempted to consolidate their forces. The New American Movement merged with the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee to become the multi-tendency Democratic Socialists of America.

Those who were most influenced by the struggles of excluded minorities tended to focus on the exclusionary rather than the democratic aspects of U.S. society. Thus, they searched for a model capable of withstanding the extremes of repression likely to be used in a revolutionary situation. These militants were attracted to the model of professional revolutionaries developed by the Third International when the leadership of the Resistance movement against fascism was formed. Among these militants, some adopted the Third International’s organizational form and a Marxist-Leninist theoretical framework that they felt allowed for the development of a truly revolutionary unity of theory and practice. Some Black, Latino, Asian, and Native American militants adopted Third International organizational forms, but clung to a theoretical framework more revolutionary nationalist in content, and like most of these forces, were deeply influenced by Maoism.

Although the paramilitary organizational forms of these movements often fostered dogmatism within their ranks, the spirit of Maoism was deeply democratic, in line with the democratic critique of the New Left overall. This democratic
spirit led to the spreading of the revolutionary spirit to many sectors of our population. It was this democratic contagion that J. Edgar Hoover wanted to stop. Gil Scott-Heron made that point about the Reagan phenomenon in his epic poem-song, “B-Movie.” Scott-Heron tells us of the challenge to U.S. world hegemony during the 1970s. He argues that America no longer had John Wayne to come to the rescue of America in the last minute like in a B-Movie, so we settled for Ronald Reagan. “Go give those liberals hell, that was the message to the new Captain Bly on the new ship of fools.... Civil Rights, Women’s Rights, Gay Rights. It’s all wrong. Call in the cavalry to stop this perception of freedom run wild. Damn it, first one wants freedom, then the whole damn world wants freedom.”

It is not possible to analyze the histories of these organizations here, so I simply allude to them as a pervasive force and influence on the rapports de force. This article is part of a larger project involving a more detailed study of a broad range of organizations. Included will be the Revolutionary Action Movement, the Black Panther Party, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, the Black Workers Congress, the Congress of African People, the Malcolm X Liberation University, Peoples College, the Student Organization for Black Unity/Youth Organization of Black Unity, the Revolutionary Workers League, The Patrice Lumumba Coalition, the Harlem Fightback Organization, the Revolutionary Union, the Progressive Labor Party, Students for a Democratic Society, the Weather Underground Organization, the Sojourner Truth Organization, the Communist Labor Party, the Communist Workers Party, the Revolutionary Communist League, the Workers Viewpoint Organization, the October League, the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization, the August Twenty-Ninth Movement, the Prairie Fire Organizing Committee, the All African Peoples Revolutionary Party, the African Peoples Party, the African People’s Socialist Party, the Black Workers for Justice, the Third World Women’s Alliance, Line of March, the Communist Party USA, the Black Liberation Army, and the Black Guerilla Family.

Simply listing these organizations serves as a stark counterpoint to the relative moderation of some of the Black public intellectuals who came to define the Black Left in the 1980s and 1990s, and the conservative Black nationalists who were associated in the public mind with Black radicalism. Who were these “bad and militant children of the sixties”? Were they simply a product of that particular time, or do they have antecedents and descendants that would help us understand the contradictions and difficulties of our history?

What does social movement theory tell us about this history? Can the revolutionary musings and hopes of this generation of Black youth be seen as simply a negation of what Malcolm X identified as an American nightmare, or was it an expression of frustration about being excluded from the American dream of which Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke so eloquently? Was that which its participants and I imagined to be grand and eloquent just the age-old drama of hopes frustrated and opportunities found?
Over time, I elaborated on the relation of the Black Liberation Movement to the American Dream in public presentations designed for recruitment, celebrations, memorials, and the like. Slain civil rights leaders Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., served as vehicles for mounting a critique of the hypocrisy of the American Dream. Once I moved beyond a popular approach, however, I became increasingly aware of the difficulties involved in separating their social location in America and the world. Despite the labels attached to these towering figures of the 20th-century world, both were quintessential products of the American Century and they spoke most eloquently across the color line and across national borders about the possibilities of a better world, a world that is substantively democratic, egalitarian, and just. These two leaders were steeped in the respective African-American traditions of field Negro revolt and “talented tenth” radicalism, which they intertwined with the most advanced thinking in the U.S. and the world arena. Each synthesized the traditions and work of the giants who came before them: John Brown, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Paul Robeson, Ida Wells Barnett, Cyril Briggs, etc.

The Rebellion of the 1960s

The 1960s was a period of considerable social unrest throughout the world-system. The 1950’s dream of a white, middle-class American utopia, safely tucked away in a suburban haven, was challenged by the realities of a larger world that was more racially and ethnically diverse, much less well-to-do, and that extended geographically far beyond the idyllic world of the 1950’s American Century. Most commentators view the 1960s as a tumultuous period in U.S. history, but few have seen clearly that the period was comparable to the Civil War of the 1860s. In partial recognition of its historical significance, radical intellectuals and activists have sometimes called it the Second Reconstruction.

In the United States, the rebellion of the African-American people spearheaded the revolt. The intensity of the Black revolt surprised the U.S. Left, as well as intellectuals and revolutionaries throughout the world-system, for it did not accord with the analytic frameworks within which most operated. Chinese, Cuban, and African revolutionaries were among the first of the mid-century revolutionary generation to view the African-American revolt as part of the worldwide revolt against white Western domination. Mao Zedong argued that the evil system of imperialism began with the enslavement of the Negro people and that it would surely end with the complete liberation of Black people. Malcolm X’s meteoric rise to revolutionary status after his split with the Nation of Islam was not a product of “Maoist dogma,” but rather the elaboration of a much older revolutionary tradition, one with a similar relationship to the larger social world, but quite independent historically. Malcolm X drew from the long tradition of field Negro revolt that partook of an independent assessment of world anticolonial, socialist, and revolutionary forces over the course of the 20th century.2
Anticolonial agitation was far from new to African Americans, who frequently made common cause with victims of colonial oppression, often seeing their own situation as parallel in some ways. From the turn-of-the-century attack on the humanity of African people, an anticolonial, anti-imperialist mentality took shape within the African Diaspora. From the Ethiopian defeat of the Italian invaders in 1897, the Pan African Congress of 1900, Hubert Harrison's Race First Movement, the identification with Japan's 1905 victory over Russia, Cyril Briggs and the African Blood Brotherhood, Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, the massive movement against Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia, to the efforts of Du Bois, Robeson, and Graham in the Council on African Affairs, we see the growth and maturation of a radical anticolonial mentality among African-American activists and intellectuals. While in prison, Malcolm X developed his own speaking style from listening to Paul Robeson.

The modern Civil Rights Movement was a product of the post-World War II world. In the international arena, movements for national liberation were prominent in every part of the formerly colonized world, i.e., Indochina, India, China, and Africa. Thus, the Civil Rights Movement was born during a period of worldwide decolonization. In this period, the British, French, and Dutch empires collapsed and new nations emerged that were composed of people of color. To exercise influence over these new nations, the U.S. was forced to eliminate its official sanction of segregation and to adopt a posture of support for civil rights. African Americans were aware of the decolonization movements in the Third World, and many came to interpret these events as a sign of the increasing vulnerability of white power, not only in the wider world, but also at home.

The collapse of the European empires seemed to vindicate the notion of the inevitable rise of the dark world — part of the folklore of the Black working-class communities from which Malcolm Little had come. When the Civil Rights Movement was flowering, Malcolm X was saying that we had arrived at the end of white world supremacy. The Civil Rights Movement drew inspiration from the challenge to the white world, but did not develop a position as frankly oppositional as that of Malcolm X and the Black nationalists. They hoped their movement might lead to the redemption of America.

The major campaigns of the Civil Rights Movement, from the Montgomery Bus Boycott to the voter registration drives of 1963 and 1964, sought to force the U.S. social system to live up to its ideology of equality for all under the law. The goal of the movement was to integrate Blacks into the existing system, destroy caste barriers, and afford basic civil rights to all Americans. Initially, the movement did not question the structure and goals of the system itself. In the period of the classical Civil Rights Movement, which simply called upon the United States to live up to its ideology, the movement enjoyed the greatest support from whites in terms of money, the media, personnel, and the government.

In the period after 1965, equal employment, access to trade unions, affirmative
action, and fair housing became the goals of the Civil Rights Movement. These goals called for a redistribution of wealth and services, changes in the functioning of institutions, as well as changes in the North. During this period, much of the support from white liberals was withdrawn. Fundamental challenges were posed concerning America’s values, its violent history, its hypocritical self-image, its role in world affairs, and its economic structure that was said to generate exploitation at home and dependence abroad.

In this conjuncture, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s views increasingly came to resemble those of Malcolm X. Malcolm argued for a coalition between radicals in the Civil Rights Movement, Black nationalists in the U.S., and revolutionaries in the three continents. As Malcolm moved actively and aggressively to create such coalitions, he was assassinated by forces in league with the conservative leadership of the Nation of Islam, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the Central Intelligence Agency. To understand the reasoning behind the extreme measures taken by the U.S. government against Malcolm X, and later against Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black Panther Party, we should review some other aspects of the geopolitical situation within which the Civil Rights Movement came to the fore.

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 brought to power a regime that was to become a decisive factor in the defeat of the fascists and whose military sphere expanded into Central Europe as a result of World War II. This was an element in a larger issue, the rise of a world communist movement. European Communist parties played important roles in the resistance to fascism throughout Europe. Although this enabled some Communist parties to come to power in certain Eastern European countries (aided more or less by the Red Army), strong Communist parties existed in some Western European countries and appeared to be in a position to challenge the capitalist parties.

The U.S.S.R. was viewed as the center of a world socialist movement that was organizing for a worldwide proletarian uprising, but it also proclaimed itself the natural ally of the national liberation movements. This claim flowed from its socialist and anti-imperialist ideology, but its more solid grounding was that the Soviet Bloc consisted primarily of semi-peripheral states that had been victims of semi-colonial or neocolonial domination. A combination of fears drove the U.S. in this period. Among them was the possible ideological appeal to a rebellious working class, to a left and cosmopolitan intelligentsia, and to those simply left out, some of whom identified with allied forces in the Third World who America was attempting to pursue. When Malcolm X argued that the Black Freedom Struggle was a component of the world struggle against capitalism and imperialism, the worse nightmare of J. Edgar Hoover and the U.S. ruling establishment was realized. Thus, when Malcolm X successfully concluded an alliance with Martin Luther King, Jr., this all but signed a death warrant for both of them.

Because the U.S. role in the Cold War brought it in opposition to the aspirations of people of color in Africa and elsewhere, Black leaders had long criticized U.S.
foreign policy. Over time, however, many of them muted their criticism, especially in view of McCarthyism. Paul Robeson, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Shirley Graham were among the few who consistently opposed U.S. foreign policy, and at great cost. All these leaders were pro-socialist and anti-imperialist. After the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, in which the poorly armed Vietnamese decisively defeated the French Army, Paul Robeson published an article entitled “Ho Chi Minh: The Toussaint L’Overture of Indochina.” In it, Robeson compared Ho Chi Minh to the famous leader of the Haitian slave revolt, but also warned of Eisenhower’s threat to send Americans to Vietnam to protect the tin, rubber, and tungsten of Southeast Asia for the “free world.”

Du Bois criticized the anticolonial role of the U.S. as a new type of colonialism. In 1950, he ran for the U.S. Senate in New York on the American Labor Party ticket. His campaign was very critical of the anticommunist policies of the Republican and Democratic parties. On February 8, 1951, the Truman administration indicted Du Bois for allegedly being an agent of a foreign power because of his work with the Peace Information Center in New York. The 82-year-old Du Bois was handcuffed, fingerprinted, and treated like a common criminal in the press. In November 1951, a federal judge dismissed the case because the federal government failed to submit one shred of evidence to substantiate its claim.

Paul Robeson vigorously protested Truman’s decision to send U.S. troops to Korea and, arguing Korea today, Africa tomorrow, urged U.S. Blacks to resist being drawn into the conflict. Black people’s fight for freedom, he claimed, is in the United States itself. His career went into decline after he refused to sign a loyalty oath in the 1950s and militantly advocated for equal rights for American Blacks. Beyond legal and paralegal harassment, he and Du Bois had their passports revoked and they were ostracized. Black leaders of the Communist Party in America (CPUSA), Benjamin Davis and Henry Winston, went to prison.

During this repressive period, traditional Black criticism of U.S. foreign policy waned. Black protest leaders did exploit sensitivity over the image of the U.S. as the leader of the “free world” to press for certain concessions to Blacks in the U.S. In the early 1940s, this tack was taken by the March on Washington Movement (MOWM), led by A. Philip Randolph. In this sense, the MOWM was the model for the modern Civil Rights Movement. From 1944 to 1950, Black initiatives led to several concessions by the executive and judicial branches of the federal government. White primaries were struck down by the courts, President Truman formed the first presidential civil rights commission, segregation in interstate bus travel was legally denied, segregation in the Army was attacked, literacy tests for voting were declared unconstitutional, border states began the token desegregation of graduate schools, dining cars were desegregated, etc.

In this context, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) initiated a full-fledged attack on the principle of “separate but equal.” Yet Black leaders paid a price for these gains: they either soft-pedaled their opposition to
U.S. foreign policy, or opposed outright those like Robeson, Graham, and Du Bois who stood up for the indivisibility of the anticolonial struggles in the Third World and the Black struggle for freedom, justice, and equality in the U.S.

The scourge of McCarthyism nearly wiped the memory of these central characters from African-American life and from American life more broadly. However, Malcolm X revived their vision, more vividly and closer to the grass roots. Examples of the way in which he illuminated the landscapes of an entire generation of intellectuals, activists, and grass-roots individuals are many. He contended that we were not a minority, but a majority of the have-nots in the world and that our struggle should be for our God-given human rights instead of civil rights that Uncle Sam could grant or deny at his discretion. The implications of such ideas began to sink in at the highest levels of the U.S. government. Daniel Patrick Moynihan compared the Black revolt to the Chinese Communists, noting that the Black Muslim movement indicated the near total alienation of segments of the African-American population from the United States. Others in the U.S. elite compared the Black revolt to the National Liberation Front in Vietnam.

In 1963, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover decided that the Civil Rights Movement was the leading edge of a social revolution in the United States and set out to destroy it. Hoover often used the danger of violence to justify his hunt for Communists in the Civil Rights Movement; similarly, his concern over Communist influence provided an excuse for his surveillance of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and other civil rights leaders. It noteworthy that his 1963 decision to destroy the movement preceded any of the major urban rebellions that rocked the nation’s cities from 1964 to 1971.

Hoover and the elites he represented were concerned about violence, but this violence was not a product of the activity of the Civil Rights Movement per se. It was part of the zeitgeist of the times. Hoover feared that the Civil Rights Movement’s democratic and egalitarian spirit would become contagious, pushing other groups to make similar claims. That would overwhelm the ruling consensus based on accepting inequality that was justified in terms of the inferiority, lack of initiative, and lack of human capital among groups culturally different from those in the social, political, and economic mainstream. Violence was not the issue; it was symptomatic of a loss of control and a nearly total lack of legitimacy. Hoover called for a comprehensive attempt to prevent the rise of a messiah that could unify Black nationalist “hate groups,” but his intent was to prevent the unification of the disparate members of excluded groups with sympathetic members of the white mainstream. That volatile mix might pursue an egalitarian agenda vis-à-vis the elites of the American race-class system.

**Economic Restructuring and Black Labor**

A major component of the restructuring of the capitalist world-system during the period spanning 1945 to 1990 was the transnational expansion of U.S. capital.
Capital migration in this period was a response to the class and social conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s that had further strengthened the bargaining power of the U.S. labor force. That bargaining power was predicated on the militant labor struggles of the 1930s. In the 1970s, deepening economic crisis intensified competition among the various segments of the labor force. The unprecedented expansion of the 1960s had made it seem as though there was room to bring more and more people into the labor force. Under such conditions, concessions could be made to the African-American population, which had mounted a ferocious attack on the citadels of power, including militant protest and violent rebellion. During this period, Blacks were admitted to sections of the labor force that had heretofore been closed to them. However, Black people’s history as a labor force in the United States lent an intensity to their perception of social relations within the world of work. They thus made demands for treatment that others thought extreme, or touchy at best. Militant caucuses and radical worker organizations were formed all over the country.

Since this new group of militant and radical workers entered the labor force at a time of rapid expansion of the labor force, their militancy was underscored with the onset of a tight labor market. In capital’s view, these labor market factors produced an alarming lack of labor discipline. As capitalist enterprises began to experience a squeeze on profitability, they sought cheaper and more malleable workforces outside the core zones. They also manipulated immigration laws to allow for an influx of immigrant labor, workers who were not citizens and were often undocumented. At the same time, an intense ideological attack was unleashed on the labor force, targeting their supposed unreliability, lack of discipline, and lack of a work ethic in comparison with the leaner workforces of the periphery. This ideological campaign against a “fat cat working class” was complemented with a subterranean campaign designed to justify the wholesale dismissal of the militant Black and Latino working class from the workforce. The most intense component of this ideological attack focused on the marginal sections of the working class. Subjected to long-term or “structural” unemployment, this group was entitled only to the dregs of the welfare state, such as AFDC (now TANF, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families). This moral crusade against the poor became the center of the conservatives’ Southern strategy, a mean-spirited, cynical strategy of “colorblind” racism designed to undercut any sense of human solidarity with the most disadvantaged segments of our population.

Gains by the Civil Rights Movement created room for a significantly enlarged Black middle class. It formed the basis for a move to the right among the major civil rights organizations, as well as the growth of a conservative segment of the Black body politic to the right of the liberal civil rights establishment. The new Black and Latino conservatives would play a useful role in the class warfare waged against the poor by those seeking to recapture the white republic of old. This time they were joined by a large number of honorary whites, a morally
debased group that capitulated to the white conservatives’ victim-blaming and self-righteous moral poverty.

In the larger framework, the central theme of this era was the crisis of U.S. hegemony represented by the military and political challenge in Vietnam, spearheaded by the increasing competitiveness of Japanese and German enterprises vis-à-vis U.S. enterprises. No longer adequate was the global liberalism of the post-WWII era. The political and economic elite sought a way to reverse the declining fortunes of the U.S., setting the stage for the backlash of the 1970s.

The conservatism of the Reagan-Bush years was a reaction to the challenges of the 1960s and 1970s, and especially to the revolution of 1968. Too often, this period is viewed simply as a society-wide revulsion to the extremes of the New Left. However, the extremes of the New Left reflected the real polarization within the world-system, where subaltern groups allied with the American hegemon around the world were under challenge. A truly remarkable aspect of this period was the depth of support within the United States for movements opposing U.S. hegemony and the rule of its subaltern allies. Such internationalism had long characterized large sections of the Black Freedom Struggle and the world socialist movement. Now it had become the dominant position of major sections of the population, with a majority of young blacks and a significant number of white college students arguing for the necessity of a revolution in the United States.

In the U.S., prototypical organizations of the New Left included Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), and the Black Panther Party. Yet the New Left was much more complicated. Robert Williams and Malcolm X were public figures that most clearly represented this trend. The period was generally marked by the decline of the New Left, as these three organizations unraveled. With their decline, numerous organizations proliferated in a movement that defined itself as operating within the tradition of these organizations, but having learned from their errors.

If New Left organizations brandished the weapon of ungovernability, the Left Leninists and revolutionary nationalists who took up the banner of these organizations represented an unprecedented crisis of legitimacy. This stratum of activists entered the culture of professional revolutionaries that emerged from the antisystemic movements with the advent of Leninism in the USSR, and then spread throughout the revolutionary movements of the capitalist world. These revolutionaries were preparing for the long march, a protracted struggle to defeat capitalism. Many knew that they would not personally live to see victory, but believed their struggle would contribute to an alteration in the relations of force that would cumulate and eventually result in the popular overthrow of the rule of capital. This had nothing to do with violent revolution and everything to do with the power of the people organized materially and morally into an irresistible force.

There is a profound historical gap in our scholarship on this period, reflecting perhaps an even more profound historical amnesia. Max Elbaum has provided a
service of immeasurable value with his comprehensive analytical history of this period, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao, and Che*. Elbaum tells of a world full of possibilities, when millions of youth sided with the barefoot people of the world, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had preached during the last year of his life. For Elbaum (2002: 2), the revolutionary fervor of this period stemmed in part from their recognition “that the power of the oppressed was on the rise and the strength of the status quo was on the wane.” In early 1971, polls reported that upwards of three million people thought a revolution was necessary in the United States (*Ibid.*). By the 1980s and 1990s, one can scarcely imagine such a state of affairs.

The idea of a cadre of professional revolutionaries may seem like an astonishing departure from reality. Yet, the world of the 1970s remained part of the 1968 era, when revolution seemed to be on the agenda everywhere. The emergence of a generation of professional revolutionaries in the heart of world capitalism, building on the legacies of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black Panther Party, was no laughing matter. The extreme state violence visited upon these predecessors accurately gauges the state’s reaction. Below I trace this period of U.S. history, arguing that it is of far greater import than is usually acknowledged. This history has itself become a victim of the struggle between the forces of movement, democracy, and equality on the one hand, and the struggle for reaction and the maintenance of an imperial, Pan-European status quo on the other. Simply put, we might follow Malcolm X’s insight that we were witnessing the end of white world supremacy.

**American Dream or American Nightmare**

Some have sensed in Martin Luther King’s 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech at the March on Washington the most eloquent testimony to the American Dream, but others regard Malcolm X’s description of an American nightmare to be America’s most fundamental challenge. No matter how bitter some have become over the hypocrisy of the American Dream, however, there is little doubt that these two towering figures of the 20th century were quintessential products of the American Century, and at the same time its most authoritative critics.

I have argued elsewhere that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech represented the highpoint of U.S. world hegemony, or what some call the American Century (Bush, 1999). Though some were skeptical of Dr. King’s dream from the outset, the momentum of the forces of progress seemed to overwhelm the forces of reaction so dramatically that one’s sense of optimism was heightened beyond what now seems possible. These people had every confidence that the determined and the virtuous could bring about a fundamental democratic transformation of American society, in part by doing so in the larger world. America would finally live up to its creed and would loosen its grip on countries around the world.
Despite widespread pessimism concerning the prospects of the inner-city poor outside the South, the victory over Jim Crow gave the Civil Rights Movement a level of moral authority and momentum that might have created a political movement capable of achieving the kind of transformation reflected in Dr. King's dream. Many activists and scholars felt that the failure of the dream was simply a lesson that needed to be learned, if not by the middle-class leadership of the Civil Rights Movement, then certainly by its predominantly working-class base. The sense was that Malcolm X had always had it right, and that Dr. King would also learn this lesson.

The reification of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., into polar opposites imposed a framework that hindered the ability of militants to understand the more subtle evolution of American society and of the social forces within American society at that time. We all know that Malcolm X's critique caught on like wildfire subsequent to Dr. King's hopeful pleading, and that King himself soon followed Malcolm's lead and said that his dream had turned into a nightmare. For Dr. King, the revolution in the streets of the Black and Brown ghettos and in the jungles of Vietnam exposed the cold-blooded and ruthless nature of the U.S. social system. To understand Dr. King's despair and his seeming transformation into an advocate of global revolution, we should pay careful attention to this historical period.

In this sense, J. Edgar Hoover was a much more careful analyst of these times than were many activists and scholars who supported the Civil Rights Movement's democratic and egalitarian ideals. He argued that the Civil Rights Movement was the leading edge of a social revolution in the United States and thus had to be destroyed. Hoover recognized the powerful connections between the increasingly radical Black freedom struggles, radical nationalist movements in the Third World, and an emerging rainbow coalition carrying such a radical message to increasingly impatient inner-city tenants and a broad section of labor, youth, women, and liberal intellectuals and activists. Hoover understood well the social psychology of rebellion. He had studied closely the history of rebellion in the United States.

The post-World War II rise of the U.S. to hegemonic status called for a social psychology altogether different from that of the era of contention for hegemony. The late 1940s established the centrality of anticommunism to the repression of popular democracy and the construction of an atmosphere of repressive tolerance in which ideas of individual freedom coexisted with the harshest repression of political difference. An utterly white world — concerned with consumer goods, family life, and obeisance to God and country — emerged in suburban havens away from the inner city. God had blessed America (or rather white America), leading *Time Magazine* editor, Henry Luce, to declare the American Century. The liberal and radical intelligentsia and their affiliated social movements might have opposed such a program had they not been locked in mortal internal conflict between the "revolutionaries" and "reformists" within the Left and between the
anti-Stalinist Left and those still aligned with, or open to, the Communist parties and their popular fronts. A major counterinsurgency instrument in this rift was the CIA-funded Congress of Cultural Freedom. Through it, an important segment of the anti-Stalinist Left was persuaded to side with liberal and reactionary anticomunism as a mechanism of developing a patriotic center-left force that eschewed the more traditional cosmopolitan internationalism of Left and liberal intellectuals, thus severely constraining opposition to the great American celebration. This combination of carrot and stick was an effective tool in suppressing dissent, but the evolution of the worldview was more complex. Not simply a matter of CIA manipulation, at issue was the establishment of an atmosphere that effectively allowed for the emergence of a stance that accepted American hegemonism as a positive force in a world menaced by the Communist danger. In this context, a segment of the radical and liberal intelligentsia adopted the status-quo orientation of the conservatives vis-à-vis the American presumption of a leadership role in world affairs.

The Communists were an important force within an increasingly strong and volatile interwar workers movement and within the struggle for racial justice. This is not to say that Communists built these movements, only that they lent them important energy and resources. No other predominantly white organization of that time approached their role in the struggle for racial justice. In the eyes of the guardians of the status quo, the Communists were a dangerous force due to their ability to connect a great number of social forces. Denouncing them as agents of a foreign power was much more a strategy for legitimizing the repression of dissent than for protecting America’s national security against the Soviet Union. During the 1930s and 1940s, intellectuals and activists associated with the Popular Front articulated a democratic, cosmopolitan, and egalitarian form of American patriotism that eschewed the racist strains of pan-European supremacy and world hegemony.

Sectors of the U.S. Left that refused to succumb to the American celebration were either associated with the Popular Front or oriented toward the revolutionaries of the three continents, or what in African-American parlance was known as the dark world. That these social forces frequently overlapped is a testimony to their common causes and should not be surprising or evidence of some sinister conspiracy. It was a credit to the Communist movement that they recognized the transformative potential within the Black Freedom Struggle, although the relationships formed during this period were never smooth and trouble free. The rise of radical nationalist movements in the Third World revitalized the Black third world within, which had itself been repressed with the attacks on W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Alpheus Hunton, and others in the Council of African Affairs and the Peace Information Center.

In the context of this brutal repression, the modern Civil Rights Movement came to the fore wrapped in the blanket of anticommunism. Nonetheless, the
March on Washington Movement of the early 1940s firmly established an appreciation of the importance of international events in strategizing to what was to become the Black liberal leadership. However, the Black intellectual tradition had long been deeply internationalist and radical. The struggle during the 1940s and 1950s was to bring the Black radical tradition under liberal hegemony. Thus, the movement of the 1960s did not create something new; instead, it reconnected with a longstanding Black radical tradition. The new element was the conjuncture in which it took place — providing the moment with particular significance and enabling us to recontextualize occurrences of Black radicalism in previous eras. In the 1960s and 1970s, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and the Black Panther Party moved to the forefront of a new American revolution that would take place in solidarity with the exploited and oppressed of the larger world-system.

The Civil Rights Movement, centered in the South, emerged alongside non-Southern Black nationalist movements during the 1950s and 1960s as the main challenge to the American celebration. They represented the largest segment of a status group that had been explicitly excluded from the spectacular economic prosperity of the postwar era. Women were largely left out as well, or were contradictorily incorporated as the celebrated housewives of the 1950's ideal nuclear family. This was an exceedingly cruel embrace in most cases, but women increasingly defected from the cast as even the radical men of the white New Left and the third world within took up their own versions of manhood rights.

Black society functioned under the myth of a matriarchy. That is, the problem with Black society, notoriously repeated in the controversial Moynihan Report on the Negro family, was that the women ran the show, castrated Black men, etc. In the meantime, women played exemplary, though largely unrecognized roles as leaders of the Black Freedom Struggle. Well-known names here include SNCC founder Ella Baker, SNCC leader Fannie Lou Hamer, Third World Women's Alliance leader Fran Beal, Montgomery NAACP leader Rosa Parks, and others. Debates were also taking place within many revolutionary organizations and there were examples of strong female leadership, such as in the New York City-based December 12th Movement.

The Civil Rights Movement and the more radical forces within the inner cities outside the South provoked a society-wide debate about the nature of racism, power, poverty, equality, and democracy. These debates and the circumstances of the era led to the elaboration of social policy based on vastly expanded notions of equality and social justice. The notion of institutional racism propounded by the Black Power militants, for example, was the foundation for the development of relatively radical attacks on the racial division of labor via policies such as affirmative action. In contrast to this great flowering of opportunity for populations within the boundaries of the United States, the demands of an imperial state were to undermine this debate and polarize America in ways not seen since the War Between the States. Defenders of the status quo mounted a counterinsurgency
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program unprecedented in U.S. history, resulting in the assassinations of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Fred Hampton, Bunchy Carter, George Jackson, and others. Many others were imprisoned. These assassinations devastated the young radical forces and fundamentally altered the terms of the struggle. Leaders such as these are a rarity. Although the secular Left is often critical of what they call the cult of personality, all revolutionary movements have leaders whose skills and charisma are important components of the revolutionary process. Deepening the revolution beyond the mobilization for state power requires a democratization of leadership, but the extraordinary nature of revolution itself requires exceptional leadership.

I have argued that Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X did not create this moment. During the "American Century," a mature global liberalism held sway, promising the spread of the good and then the great society to all Americans, and eventually to all in the world who followed our example and direction. Dr. King pushed this idea as far as possible, but Malcolm X was skeptical. The youthful rebels of SDS argued for a radical democratization of our society. However, the rebellion against U.S. hegemony manifested in the struggles in Vietnam, Algeria, Cuba, China, Ghana, Guinea, and other parts of the three continents undermined the largesse of the liberal state. A central theme of the 20th-century Black Freedom Struggle was the rise of the dark world, which now seemed at hand. The rapport de force had shifted decisively in favor of the colonized, semi-colonized, dependent zones of the world-economy. Malcolm X, SNCC, SDS, CORE, and finally Martin Luther King, Jr., and a host of others called for solidarity with the revolutionaries of the three continents, and for us to become part of this elemental rebellion against the way things are and were. The world revolutionary trend was global in scope, despite the global power of U.S. hegemony, or perhaps because of the global power of the U.S. hegemon.

Let us now examine how the seizure of center stage by the "wretched of the earth" affected the nature of the debates among social scientists and others concerned with social policy, poverty, race, and social inequality. Scholarly debate is not simply about scholarly taste for ideas, but is a response to action in the streets, and thus at its best is a manifestation of the human agency of the oppressed.6

Scholars Debate Poverty, Race, and Class Formation

The term "culture of poverty" originated in the work of Oscar Lewis, but the concept it purports to describe dates back at least to the early period of capitalism when pauperism was the fate of large sections of the proletarianized population in the core of the capitalist world-economy. Michael B. Katz has argued that terms such as "culture of poverty" and "underclass" are simply modern variants on the very old concept of the "undeserving poor." I would like to argue for a broader definition of the concept, rooted in the central stratifying processes of the capitalist world-economy.
Oscar Lewis’ use of the term "culture of poverty," like Marx’ use of the term "lumpenproletariat," reflected a concern with the degradation of the lower rungs of the working population by the conditions of their existence in the capitalist system. Lewis, like Marx, felt that this condition reflected the fact that some sections of the population (for Marx, the lower rung of the reserve army of labor) were completely demoralized and declassed by their experiences at the very bottom of the economic ladder. For Lewis and Marx, the terms "culture of poverty" and "lumpenproletariat" corresponded to the level of perceived class-consciousness and political organization among the lowest rung of the working class. To some extent, they used these terms to call attention to the degradations of the capitalist system, although their overall frameworks differed. Michael Harrington and Daniel Patrick Moynihan used similar approaches (but different concepts) to appeal to the political and economic elite, intellectuals, and the "middle class" to support reforms that would alleviate the wretched conditions of the "Other America" and the Black family, respectively.

Despite their differences, each author was on the left of the political spectrum. The divergence in conceptual elaboration between the revolutionary (Marxist) Left and the reformist Left (i.e., Moynihan) was polarized by the social practice of the lower strata itself, leading to a significant breakthrough in understanding the ideological underpinnings of the capitalist world-economy on the revolutionary Left (e.g., the critique of universalism by Samir Amin and Immanuel Wallerstein), and to the cooptation of sections of the reformist Left by the conservative elites of the capitalist system (Moynihan in particular, but the neoconservatives in general).

By the mid-to-late 1960s, the notion of a "culture of poverty," or of the predominant demoralization of the lower strata, became increasingly untenable as this sector of the population rose in revolt around the world and thus began to speak for themselves. They received support from left-wing and organic intellectuals, as well as political leaders, such as Frantz Fanon, Mao Zedong, Malcolm X, Andre Gunder Frank, and Samir Amin. In the face of the Algerian Revolution, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China, the Black Power movement, the Vietnam liberation movement, and the generalized world revolution of 1968, the idea of a "culture of poverty" seemed to lack grounding in reality. Though in the 1960s liberal intellectuals used the term to support their appeals for an interventionist approach to the problems of poverty, by the 1970s it had become a tool of conservative reaction. The Left began to articulate the more radical notion of a "culture of resistance." Lewis’ work contains a similar concept: when lower-class people organize themselves in trade unions or socialist parties, that is, when they became class conscious, they cease to be part of the culture of poverty.

Anthropologist Mina Davis Caulfield popularized the idea of a "culture of resistance." She adapted it from Robert Blauner, who described a process of "culture-building" as central to the cultural activities of the African slaves in North America. For Caulfield (1969: 202), this process was an adaptation to, and protest
against, the social experience of the colonial situation. She argues that this process could be discerned in the group lives of most, if not all, “culturally exploited people.” According to Caulfield,

we must look not only at the way in which the colonizer acts to break down family solidarity, but also the ways in which the colonized — women, men, and children — act to maintain, consolidate, and build anew the basic units in which children can grow and be enculturated in the values and relationships that are independent of and in opposition to imperial culture (1974: 72–73).

In contrast to the theory of a “culture of poverty,” Caulfield argued that the main characteristics of the culture of resistance are resourcefulness, flexibility, and creativity, rather than fatalism, passivity, and dependence. Against Rainwater, she argued that cultures of resistance are not simple adaptive mechanisms, but alternative means of organizing “production, reproduction, and value systems critical of those of the oppressor” (Ibid.: 84).

The term “culture of resistance” acquired broad usage throughout the Left, particularly within the context of the world revolution of 1968. In 1980, Wallerstein argued that the world-economy is a complex of cultures, though not a haphazard one. Wallerstein (1984: 13–26) discusses a “Weltanschauung of Imperium, albeit one with many variants,” and “cultures of resistance to this Imperium.” For him, the deepening of the capitalist division of labor, as well as the need to facilitate its operation through the allocation of work forces and justify inequality, led to the use of an ideology of racism that became the central organizing theme of the world bourgeoisie. Equally central was the ideology of universalism, which posits a “universal” culture into which the cadres of the world division of labor were assimilated. Wallerstein defined culture as the “the idea-system” of the capitalist world-economy. In this sense, he views culture as the outcome of our collective historical attempts to come to grips with the contradictions, ambiguities, and sociopolitical complexities of the capitalist world. It follows that the construction of culture is the key ideological battleground of opposing interests within the capitalist system.

Why, then, is racism the central organizing cultural theme of the world bourgeoisie? There is general agreement that capitalism is by definition an inegalitarian system. How does this fact square with the ideology of equality of opportunity? It is argued that reward is based on merit, and that every talented person, even the children of the poor, has the opportunity to obtain high reward. Since there is so little upward social mobility, why isn’t the notion of equality of opportunity declared a sham? The justification, according to Wallerstein (1988), is racism:

It provides the only acceptable legitimation of the reality of large-scale collective inequalities within the ideological constraints of the capitalist
world-economy. It makes such inequalities legitimate because it provides theoretically for their transitory nature while in practice postponing real change for the Greek calends.... The hinge of the argument is that those who have low ethnic status (and consequently low occupational position for the most part) find themselves in this position because of an unfortunate but theoretically eradicable cultural heritage. They come from a group which is somehow less oriented to rational thinking, less disciplined in its work ethic, less desirous of educational and/or earned achievement. Because we no longer claim these presumed differential aptitudes are genetic but merely cultural, we congratulate ourselves on having overcome the crudities of racism.... We tend to forget that if a cultural heritage differs from a biological one in that it is historically changeable, it is also true that, if the word “culture” means anything here, it indicates a phenomenon that is slow to change, and is slow to change precisely because it has become part of the superegos of most members of the group in question.

In this way, the oppressed are told that their position in the world can be transformed if they are educated in the skills necessary to act in certain ways, which are said to be the means by which currently high-ranking groups obtained their positions. The slow pace of change itself makes racism central to the functioning of the capitalist world-economy.

Ethnic consciousness, argues Wallerstein, enables a group to struggle politically for its rights. It also socializes the young to a “realistic” perception of social polarization, and thus of occupational expectations. Racism functions to keep people in place while their labor is needed, puts them on hold when their labor is not needed, and brings them back in when conditions permit. Such groups are eager and willing to be brought back in and thus can rightly be considered a “reserve army” in a literal sense (Wallerstein, 1988: 13–14).

However, there may be less reserve than meets the eye. Racism may impede one’s entry into the formal economy, but we must know something about the operation of the informal economy before we can speak with relative certainty of someone’s willingness to be “brought back in.” If better opportunities arise in the informal economy — criminal employment, drug dealing, etc. — will some members opt for this more lucrative opportunity than for the marginal jobs normally available to them, even in good times? And why not? Any teenager will tell you that the attraction of the drug economy is the quick buck. What is there in the cultural values of the dominant culture that entreats us not to go after the quick buck? Other value systems in the population (religious or Black nationalist value systems, etc.) do offer alternatives to the dominant value system. Despite the hype about the need for positive role models in the inner city, as a society we seem disappointed in the propensity of some inner-city denizens to follow the bottom-line thinking of the corporate elite.
A “culture of resistance,” then, is a product of a period of popular mobilization among the peripheral and peripheralized populations of the capitalist world-economy. During periods of demobilization, this “culture of resistance” assumes a more individual form. Today, some scholars refer to it as a “culture of opposition,” viewed sometimes simply as negative or nihilistic (see Anderson, 1999: 316; West, 1994: 17–31). Oscar Lewis argued that a distinguishing feature of groups with a culture is that they are self-conscious. Thus, to the extent that the urban poor are not a self-conscious (or class-conscious) group, but atomized individuals, to that extent a culture of poverty can be said to exist (Lewis, 1970: 74).

Who could disagree with the sentiment expressed here? Lewis is impressed by his observations of revolutionary Cuba (Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon, 1977a, 1977b). Yet, does this lament about the presumed lack of class-consciousness among the inner-city poor in the United States point us in the right direction? I think not. We must resist the magic aura these words evoke for people committed to a democratic, egalitarian, and just transformation of the capitalist world.

Weber (1978: 926–939) viewed classes in relationship to one another as objective categories, which did not imply any form of consciousness or capacity for collective action. Immediate class interests, he argued, were given by market position and hence as theoretically indeterminate so far as collective action is concerned. For collective action to take place, something beyond class interests had to be introduced. In contrast, status groups by definition act collectively in relation to one another and are endowed with the will to collective action. For Weber, political communities construct “value systems,” which provide the parameters within which groups have more or less legitimacy and prestige in comparison to one another, and with reference to which they have more or less pride, solidarity, or the capacity to act collectively in relation to one another.

Thus, a status-group-structured distribution of power provides a natural or logical context for the collective action of status groups. In contrast, a class-structured distribution of power does not provide its constituent classes with any necessary solidarity in their relations with one another, and hence no capacity for collective action because the market principle eliminates all considerations of honor or is constrained in its working by such considerations.

Arrighi, Hopkins, and Wallerstein (1989b: 3–28) call for an extension of Weber, which presupposes that by definition “status groups are constituents of and thereby carriers of a moral order.... Classes are not: if they become so, it is in virtue of processes fundamentally different from, and not entailed in, those that constitute them as classes in relation to one another” (Ibid.: 17–18). They counsel us to resist the intellectual pressure to reify groups, to presume their permanency and longevity, although they realize that it is difficult to resist such pressure. Although self-conscious groups seem to act collectively in significant ways, and appear to be solid and resilient, we tend to lose sight of the extent to which this solidarity is a consequence of the group’s actions in relationship to others. Following this line
of reasoning, we would conclude that class-consciousness and other forms of
group consciousness (or cultures) are derivative. They derive from the social
practice of the groups involved. That is why the term “culture of poverty” fell into
disuse during the high tide of political and social mobilization among the lower
strata worldwide, and returned to favor when these strata were again politically
and socially subordinate.

Although many have viewed the phenomenon of ethnic proletarianization as
a dilemma reflecting particular national situations such as the United States and
South Africa, Wallerstein argues, in opposition to Gunnar Myrdal, that racism and
underdevelopment are not dilemmas, but are constitutive of the capitalist world-
economy as a historical system. Indeed, Wallerstein (1988: 17) states that racism
and underdevelopment are the “primary conditions and essential manifestations of
the unequal distribution of surplus value. They make possible the ceaseless
accumulation of capital. They organize the process occupationally and legitimate
it politically.”

We are not captives of these structural restraints. Just as the political and
military defeat of the insurgency of the 1960s to 1970s provided the condition for
the reassertion of regressive formulations such as the “culture of poverty” and the
“underclass,” a resurgence of large-scale sympathetic study of the lower strata
may not occur until they reassert themselves as a social and political force. In the
meantime, those of us who are most closely aligned with these strata may identify
the questions most in need of investigation in terms of the system of structural and
ideological constraints that so profoundly restricts the human potential of the most
disadvantaged members of our social world. We should be particularly attuned to
issues that will assist particular sections of the lower strata in getting a grip on their
situations so that they can take efficacious action when the opportunity presents
itself.

In We Are Not What We Seem: Black Nationalism and Class Struggle in the
American Century, I attempted to use these formulations to analyze the trajectory
of the Black Freedom Struggle during the American Century. I believed the
ideological tension centered on universalism versus racism and sexism was key
to understanding the different modalities of that struggle. It helped me to
understand that from the viewpoint of certain strata within the ruling class, the
Civil Rights Movement was part of the mature global liberalism of the American
Century. It was not so much that the movement was the program of the liberal
ruling class, but that they had their own civil rights agenda, to which they were able
to co-opt some members of the Black liberal establishment. But “talented tenth”
radicalism remained the most powerful component of the Civil Rights Movement.
When articulated with the worldview of the Black working class (and I neglected
to emphasize Black women), the Black radical tradition remains the most
powerful pole of antisystemic thought within American society. What, then, is the
worldview of the Black working class? Since it remained a victim of racism, which
intensified even during the post-civil rights period, various forms of Black nationalism continued to resonate with this class. Though the Black working class might someday transcend this nationalism, thus far revolutionary nationalism has been the most powerful component of the Black radical tradition (e.g., Hubert Harrison, Cyril Briggs, W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Malcolm X, Huey Newton, and Queen Mother Moore).

Despite the seeming permanence of racism as an ideological feature of historical capitalism, we should pay close attention to emerging groups being generated by the changing shape and forms of the capitalist world-economy. Perhaps these groups will combine in unforeseen ways and the centers of social action will shift at given times. We should not forget the constant refrain of the Civil Rights Movement to keep our eyes on the prize.

NOTES

2. Cedric Robinson (2000) has elaborated most eloquently on this notion.
4. I present this argument at some length in Bush (1999), building upon the literature on COINTELPRO in O'Reilly (1989) and Churchill and Vander Wall (1990, 1988).
5. This point is presented in Melanie Bush, Breaking the Code of Good Intentions: Everyday Forms of Whiteness. Doctoral Dissertation, CUNY Graduate Center, 2002.
6. See Melanie Bush (2002) for an extended formulation of this idea.
7. The term "spectrum" is used deliberately in contradistinction to the word "continuum," which implies too much continuity in views.
8. Howard Winant's description (1990) of the evolution of some liberals into neoconservatives is very insightful.

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