

We Are Not What We Seem

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*Black Nationalism and Class Struggle
in the American Century*

Rod Bush



NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS

New York and London

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Bush, Roderick D., 1945–

We are not what we seem : Black nationalism and class struggle in
the American century / Roderick D. Bush

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8147-1317-3 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Afro-Americans—Civil rights—History—20th century. 2. Black
nationalism—United States—History—20th century. 3. Afro-Americans—
Politics and government. 4. Social classes—United States—History—
20th century. 5. United States—Race relations. I. Title.

E185.61.B98 1998

305.896'073—ddc21

98-25483

CIP

New York University Press books are printed on acid-free paper,
and their binding materials are chosen for strength and durability.

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For Melanie and Sarafina Bush
Malik Bush
Thembi Bush Tillman
Sojourner Bush
Margaret J. Bush
Terence K. Hopkins*

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1

The Contemporary Crisis

The time is past when the white world can exercise unilateral authority and control over the dark world. The independence and power of the dark world is on the increase; the dark world is rising in wealth, power, prestige, and influence. It is the rise of the dark world that is causing the fall of the white world.

As the white man loses his power to oppress and exploit the dark world, the white man's own wealth (power or "world") decreases. . . .

You and I were born at this turning point in history; we are witnessing the fulfillment of prophecy. Our present generation is witnessing the end of colonialism, Europeanism, Westernism, or "White-ism" . . . the end of white supremacy, the end of the evil white man's unjust rule.

—Malcolm X, *The End of White World Supremacy*

They say there is no hope for the youth, but what they mean is there is no hope for the future.

—Tupac Shakur, "Keep Ya Head Up"

There is nothing more painful for me at this stage in my life than to walk down the street and hear footsteps and start to think about robbery and then look around and see it's somebody white and feel relieved. How humiliating.

—Jesse Jackson

Malcolm's words above reflect the utter optimism of the spirit of Bandung, symbolizing the revolt of the third world against white, Western, colonial domination. Yet a mere thirty years later Tupac Shakur's statement seems to summarize the desperation of our own times. Tupac's lament seems to be a stark reversal of Malcolm's hope. Yet appearances are not always what they seem. In this case the apparent re-

versal of hope for Black people and other subjugated peoples is the most misleading signpost of the current era. We are in the midst of a fundamental transformation of our world, but we must beware of hasty generalizations overwhelmed by the pessimism of the moment. The reality is more complex. Malcolm, Tupac, and Jesse all capture a certain reality. We need to look beneath the surface appearance to understand the true relationship between Malcolm's hope and Tupac's lament.

We should note that the medium through which Tupac's sentiments are expressed is almost as significant as the sentiment itself. Tupac Shakur, son of a former member of the Black Panther Party, speaks through rap music, a cultural form that Frank Owen deemed a "brutal form of musical reportage about life in the inner city free-fire zone, a chilling reflection of the boiling rage and loss of hope felt by young, disenfranchised blacks."¹ Indeed there is much discussion about the loss of hope among Black youth. The popular Black public intellectual Cornel West decries a new nihilism among Black youth.² While Jesse Jackson's 1988 presidential campaign urged that our most important task is to "keep hope alive," even he now joins in this chorus, seemingly bringing us full circle.³ Representatives of the civil rights mainstream increasingly argue that a new civil rights movement in the 1990s must have at its heart the issue of "Black-on-Black" crime and violence, as if it can be understood apart from the cruel economic redundancy of many Black youth, the hateful images of Black youth in the minds, hearts, and eyes of white America, and the outright discriminatory behavior to which they are subjected. Intimidated rather than emboldened by the rightward lurch in U.S. political culture since the 1970s, the civil rights mainstream is also seeking the middle ground by increasingly expressing views that are perilously close to President Clinton's claim that Black-on-Black crime is the nation's number one problem, and that if Martin Luther King were alive today his focus would be on Black crime, not on the struggle for equality.

It all seems so clear *now*. The struggle for civil rights was clearly won in the 1960s. The next phase of the civil rights movement should have been for Black people to prepare themselves to enter the mainstream. Many have done just that. Those who still linger at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder do so because it is their own fault. Then comes the revisionist punch line: "*we must have the courage to face these unpleasant truths.*" Courage indeed.

In view of the "triumph of capitalism" circa 1989, revisionist history now argues, with seemingly perfect hindsight, that Malcolm's (and

others') optimism about the spirit of Bandung was clearly misguided. Not only have the national liberation movements that aroused our optimism succumbed to the necessity of a subordinate and dependent position vis à vis Western capitalism, but the socialist states that claimed to be an alternative to capitalism have succumbed to the "magic of the market." The triumphalism of the 1960s and 1970s has turned to dust. The vision of a just and egalitarian world order was a false hope.

According to this revisionist conception, realism demands that we admit that inequality is a natural component of a world in which people are not the same. The failure of the socialist experiments indicates that egalitarianism does not work. Economic prosperity can take place only when the most talented are rewarded for their efforts; the less talented should not be encouraged to aspire to be their equals. The moral philosophy of this new world order is the law of the jungle. Insofar as society elects to include humane considerations in its social policy deliberations, it should be understood that such considerations will inevitably promote a feeling of entitlement among the lower strata and thus should be kept to a minimum and be clearly promoted as a gift of the strong, which the weak should receive gratefully.

Notwithstanding an increasingly conservative consensus that calls for repressive and regressive measures against the poor, the disadvantaged populations are not only *not* grateful, they are positively incensed about continuing injustice and are collectively much stronger than they have been at any time in the past. This combination makes for political dynamite; the conservative backlash has its match in the multifaceted resistance of the oppressed. That this resistance does not take familiar forms means that we tend not to understand its depth until it materializes as it did in South Central Los Angeles.

The protagonists of 1989 in Eastern Europe were fond of pointing out that '89 was '68 turned upside down. The essence of this imagery is that the revolutionary events of 1968 are being reversed by the counterrevolutionary events of 1989. While 1968 might be viewed as a worldwide revolt against U.S. and Western hegemony in the world, 1989 is seen as an affirmation of the values and practices of the capitalist West. I will argue here that this imagery is a misperception of reality, but we should note that the same imagery can be applied to domestic affairs in the United States. I hold that 1989 in the United States is a continuation of 1968, as indeed it was on a world scale. The revolutionary rhetoric of the 1960s is the reality of the 1990s.⁴

The systems of power that were relatively entrenched and secure in the 1960s, and that proved their security with the largess with which they responded to some of the demands of the insurgents, are much less strong in the 1990s. The mature global liberalism of a hegemonic world power has given way to a mean-spirited conservatism on one hand and a Janus-faced neoliberalism on the other. Neoliberalism as a political philosophy is indeed a sign of our times. It is a confusing brew in which politicians seek to act liberal while looking conservative or act conservative while looking liberal, playing to different audiences, as most politicians are wont to do in our political culture. Yet neither approach represents anything more than a holding pattern, incapable of solving the fundamental problems of racism, social polarization, and economic decline on the one hand, and an impending collapse of civil society on the other. We are now entering a time of difficulties that will be as frightening for some as it will be potentially liberating for others. Some of the oppressed possess a fighting spirit and an open disregard for the civilization and system that have demonized them—an attitude that the activists of the 1960s only hoped would come to exist among the masses. As Arrighi, Hopkins, and Wallerstein argue, 1968 was just a rehearsal.⁵

What then is the time of troubles to which I refer? There is widespread concern about violent crime, racial violence, religious violence, and what some feel to be a veritable culture of violence that is wracking the cities of the United States. At the same time the polarization of wealth and income proceeds apace. The crimes of the powerful who are deeply implicated in this state of affairs are often dutifully reported but seem to incite very little media fanfare, except as spectacle (witness the lack of an effective outcry regarding the savings and loan debacle as compared to the public furor about violent imagery in rap music). Moreover, homelessness, joblessness, underemployment, and a veritable war against the poor are the economic essence of our time. It seems clear that the long-festering contradictions of our historical system (of race, class, and poverty; of imperialism and war; of social polarization and economic underdevelopment) are undoing the moorings of our civil society.

This should not surprise us. The concept of contradiction as used here implies that certain practices simultaneously represent the ongoing evolution of a given entity *and* the transformation of that entity. The extent to which any entity evolves in a systemic manner is definitive of that entity. This consistency over time reaffirms the entity's essential nature. But everything also changes over time, and therefore is in a process of

transformation. Thus our historical system is stronger than ever by its own light, but this very strength is undermining the foundations of the system. A simple example is the extent to which the increasing mechanization of production is creating massive joblessness.

This is not unique to the particular time during which I sit down to write these words (winter 1997–98). I am not speaking here in terms of what Fernand Braudel calls the time frame of the event.⁶ Indeed, the events that could be presented as evidence of a societal (and global) crisis are regularly and dizzyingly evident. The events multiply as we speak—in fact much faster than we can speak: the uprising in South Central Los Angeles following the Rodney King verdict; the conflagration between Blacks and Jews in Crown Heights, Brooklyn (involving the accidental killing of seven-year-old Gavin Cato and the [suspected] revenge murder of Yankel Rosenbaum); the murder of Michael Griffith in Howard Beach, Queens; the murder of Yusuf Hawkins in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn; Colin Ferguson’s attempt to gain retribution against white society by gunning down suburbanite commuters on the Long Island Railroad; the assassinations of rap artists Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G.; widespread concern about the popularity of Louis Farrakhan and his controversial (former) lieutenant Khallid Abdul Muhammad (who came to widespread public awareness as a consequence of remarks made at Kean College);⁷ the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City; Baruch Goldstein’s rampage against Palestinians as they prayed, the revenge shooting of Hasidic youth on the Brooklyn Bridge, allegedly by a Lebanon national; the appearance of one million Black men in the streets of the nation’s capital at Farrakhan’s call; and the appearance of more than one million Black women in the streets of Philadelphia. The list is endless.

I do not deny the significance of any of these events, but our most pressing imperative is to look at their meaning and understand to what extent they are signposts of an impending sea change in the political culture of the United States and the modern world.

I intend to argue that the trajectory of African American social movements throughout U.S. history certainly has had some bearing on our current state of affairs, but not in isolation from other factors. That is why it is crucial to situate any review of African American social movements in the context of the larger social world. We need to know the story of the African American freedom struggle, but we will also benefit from understanding it against the backdrop of the ongoing centralization of capital and polarization of wealth, and the crisis of legitimacy of the states in the

capitalist world-economy. In this context the practice of the social movements will largely determine how we negotiate this societal or civilizational crisis.

Thus the history of African American social movements is consequential not so much because of the victory of the civil rights movement, but because of its impact on the overall balance of power between the dominant and subordinate groups both in the United States and on a world scale. Some movements that have been failures organizationally and institutionally have been of enormous import for world rapports de force. The revolution of 1848 spread throughout large parts of Europe but was decisively defeated in country after country for the most part within the year. But the Manifesto of the Communist Party was a product of this revolutionary period, and most subsequent revolutions have carried forward the tradition and lessons of 1848. I will argue that the world revolution of 1968 had much the same impact. As George Lipsitz argues, failures in the war of maneuver (the holding of state and other institutional power, control over resources, etc.) do not necessarily mean a failure in the war of position (the struggle for hegemony). Bourgeois hegemony is inherently unstable. The struggles of the oppressed result inevitably in the accumulation of sensibilities that we call a culture of opposition, which survives any individual episode of struggle.⁸ At the same time as this culture of opposition builds and deepens among the oppressed, there occurs an evolution or devolution of the capitalist world-economy, ultimately presaging a denouement that substantially strengthens the ability of subordinate strata to contest their domination by the ruling elite. It is therefore important that we do not consider our contemporary crisis merely or primarily a cyclical downturn in the economy. Although the cyclical downturn has been a crucial aspect of the world-economy since the early 1970s, we cannot understand what is happening if we do not also consider the consequent restructuring of production processes and thus of labor markets and labor forces the world over, and the ongoing broadening and deepening of the capitalist process in our society and in the world. It is precisely the broadening and deepening of the capitalist process and not its weakening that sharpens the contradictions of the system and will create the social conditions that will make fundamental social transformation possible.

Although an understanding of the social, economic, and political processes is essential for the telling of our story, this will not be the focus of the story I will seek to tell. It is, however, the crucial framework, the

only means by which we can truly grasp the dynamics of the struggle of the African American people for peace, justice, and equality.

There is and has been great consensus regarding the radical democratic nature of the American experiment. It was in the United States that classical liberalism was to achieve its full unfolding. Classical liberalism held that the good of all would best be served if each individual were left as free as possible to pursue their own ends.⁹ Classical liberalism came to be so widely identified with the United States that few contested the notion that the United States was indeed the land of opportunity. Yet the claim that the United States is the land of the free and the home of the brave did not apply to all of America's population. For all of the partially justified pride in the greatness and the glories of the United States and the achievements of its civilization, there are few who would dispute that the sorry history of racial injustice, particularly toward Black people, has been the Achilles heel of U.S. democracy.

Nevertheless, there was a period in the late 1970s when there seemed to be an emerging consensus in the middle part of the political spectrum, encompassing most of the Right and the moderate Left as well, which argued that for the most part the civil rights movement had abolished racial discrimination. Henceforth the residue of social inequality as it affected Blacks and other racially subordinate groups was due to other more impersonal "economic" or "cultural" factors. Thus the system worked; equality for all was now guaranteed, except for those who were not prepared to take advantage of it. This was canonized in the late 1970s not by the conservatives, but by a bona fide social democrat, William Julius Wilson, in his award-winning book *The Declining Significance of Race*.¹⁰

From the mid-1980s with the rise of racist violence—especially in New York City, the bastion of liberalism—the wide consensus about the "declining significance of race" notion collapsed. On the contrary, there was now abundant and clear evidence that racism is stronger than ever. At the very moment of the presumed triumph of capitalism over any competing mode of organization of society (communism, socialism, and national liberation), race remains the most divisive issue in the United States. One might argue that the specter of an intractable, hostile underclass composed mostly of people of color has become the new threat to American society.

Following George Bush and Dan Quayle, President Clinton (in his November 13, 1993, speech at the convention of the all-Black Church of God in Christ in Memphis) has declared that the most significant prob-

lem of our time is the lack of morals and values among the African American poor. The liberal *Washington Post* and the neoconservative *Commentary* declared this to be the most important speech of Clinton's presidency. The consensus across the political spectrum of the defenders of the status quo can be matched only by the lack of consensus about what is to be done among that significant portion of the U.S. population who truly believe in freedom and justice for all.

This is due in no small part to the character of the age in which we are living. War and counterrevolution appear to be wiping out the progressive gains of our era, while the struggles of the impoverished majority whose dignity and courage both inspired and brought out the best instincts in the rest of us seem to have subsided, and the oppressed have sunken deeper into a seemingly hopeless poverty.

We inhabit a world that increasingly seems to have come unhinged.

Across town, in white America, the same angst expresses itself in somewhat different terms. Most whites share a strong sense of alarm and dismay about the rise of nationalist consciousness among large sections of the African American population, and about the popularity of leaders such as Minister Louis Farrakhan and Professor Leonard Jeffries. For many if not most white people, this nationalistic attitude among Black youth is part and parcel of the crime and disorder that seem so pervasive. These same people often cannot be bothered with talk about the racist humiliation to which white society has subjected Black people, particularly young Black males and females.

White America's fear of "slave revolts" is widespread. This fear has underwritten a fortress mentality, which closes many whites off from a more objective assessment of the status and nature of race relations in the United States. Rather than an open and nondefensive assessment of race relations and racism, too many whites have reconstructed themselves as victims and have often lost sight of the cruel and brutal victimization of Blacks and other people of color, who are increasingly viewed as "animals" or as people so deficient in character and cultural values that they are beyond the pale of society.

Racial and ethnic discrimination has long been the basis of nationalist mobilizations among those who have been its victims. This is especially the case when these groups feel that the dominant group is absolutely opposed to granting them real equality of opportunity. This indicates to me that white myopia about and absolute intolerance of Black nationalism (despite approval of other peoples' ethnic nationalism, such as that of

Jews, Irish, Poles, etc.) is exceptional, and thus in need of much deeper analysis than it has heretofore received.

The rising antagonism between Black political leaders and organizations and Jewish political leaders and organizations seems to exemplify the contradictory treatment accorded to the ethnic nationalisms of white and Black groups.

Both African Americans and Jewish Americans include in their number people whose political and ideological beliefs reflect variants of nationalist *and* assimilationist views. The range of views in each group is probably similar (although concentrations of people in certain ideological categories probably vary). However, the United States is a capitalist society, characterized by vast discrepancies in wealth and power among peoples, groups, and classes (regardless of how a particular social group identifies itself). Jews are concentrated largely in the intermediate strata of society, and constitute a substantial portion of the wealthy. Blacks are concentrated in the working class, and have only a handful of moderately wealthy people (mostly entertainers and athletes), despite the fact that the Black middle class increased substantially from 1965 to 1980.

In nationalist terms the Black community has reached a level of consciousness and has developed sufficient resources to be able to establish Black control of their own communities. Yet those non-Black people who hold positions of power in the economic and institutional spheres on which African American communities depend, as with almost all privileged groups, are not ready to give up their power and wealth. Thus as the distinguished Afrocentric historian John Henrik Clarke argues, we have a power struggle, pure and simple.¹¹

The people most likely to press for Black economic and political control of Black communities are those who are most able to take the positions now held by other racial and ethnic groups. Thus the Black petty bourgeoisie, which seeks to gain influence in sectors of the economy and labor force where Jews are most prominent will likely be at the forefront. The fact that this power struggle is led by the Black middle class, however, does not negate the legitimacy of the grievances that are put forward. That they represent the class interest of a small proportion of the Black community is not relevant to a struggle waged on the terms that normally prevail in bourgeois society: individual and group competition.

The terms of this struggle are rather straightforward, and confirm the principles of nationalist and ethnic group assertion everywhere. It is extremely disingenuous for white public figures and writers to act as if the

nationalism of African Americans is totally outside the bounds of reasonable discourse. This is especially and ironically true when we consider that Jewish nationalism at least partially animates those who have unfortunately become some of the primary antagonists of African American nationalism.

In a bourgeois capitalist society (the ideological framework of which is shared by most nationalist and liberal thinkers and activists) there can be no right answer or resolution to this problem; it is inherent in the very nature of a system whose bottom line is competition between individuals and groups, no matter what their social location.

Nationalist movements that have emerged in opposition to the structural inequalities of peoples in the capitalist world-economy have sometimes been able to increase the power of some people in the states that they have formed, but have not been able to affect the continued structural inequality of the world-system. As national liberation movements have come to power in more and more countries in the third world, they have not been able to alter the fundamental inequality of core and periphery and have not been able to lift their countries out of the poverty to which peripheral status in the world-economy consigned them.

Like their socialist and communist cousins, these movements have to be considered failures, and all the formerly egalitarian movements have become resigned to the necessity to submit to the austerity conditions of structural adjustment demanded by the International Monetary Fund. While the reasons for the widespread failure of these strategies for modernizing and catching up with the West are profoundly structural, populations who had hoped to be elevated through these strategies have attempted to understand what *they* did wrong.

Since socialist, communist, and nationalist ideologies were the means of articulating their grievances and fighting to change their conditions, attention has initially focused on the weakness of these ideologies. Religious fundamentalism and ultranationalism have emerged in some cases as guiding ideologies; identity-based politics is a means of attempting to guarantee group cohesion in a world where state authority is increasingly disintegrating.

In the devastated landscape of U.S. inner cities, where the impact of conservative and neoliberal policy has led to the increasing withdrawal of state services, the emergence of nationalist movements such as the Nation of Islam makes unequivocal sense. If the community cannot depend on state services for maintaining social order and cohesion, then it

will be necessary to “do for self.” This should be an unremarkable conclusion.

But white America’s historical memory tends to lead whites more often than not to see only their own fears. Unprecedented levels of public frustration about violent crime are generating very different responses by groups at different ends of the economic ladder. For many African Americans the “do for self” philosophy of the Nation of Islam seems a way out. While this view overlaps with the calls of the conservative and neoliberal public officials for the Black poor to stop “whining” and take responsibility, the implications could not be more different.

Many at the annual meeting of the liberal United Jewish Appeal were said to have booed Martin Peretz, editor in chief of the *New Republic*, when he argued that “so many people in the black population are afflicted by deficiencies, which Jews, for example, didn’t (have),”¹² but one wonders whether his thoughts were not more representative of the *white* mainstream. The conception of a Black community brimming with deviants seems to have suffused white America, including the academic community, which should know better. Rather than ask, why do we have the poor, they asked, how are the poor different from you and me. This manner of posing the questions leads in short order to a rather self-evident answer. They are poor *because* they are different from you and me.¹³ They operate within a different cultural framework, one that is inferior to the culture of white middle-class America. They are poor and they are culturally deficient. Oscar Lewis’s concept of the culture of poverty fit the bill perfectly, although he did not intend the concept to be used (abused) in this manner.¹⁴

The sociological concept of the culture of poverty enabled social scientists to blame poverty on the poor, and to designate a culture for them that encapsulated their essence, and from which they were able to escape only very slowly, individually, and in exceptional cases. The concept of deviance within which social scientists operated deprived the poor of the dignity of willful disobedience. The poor are deviants, but the deviance itself is structured by their lack of the cultural traits of their white middle-class superiors. Social scientists seem to have no comprehension that we are often dealing with the willful disobedience of human beings who deliberately break the rules to compensate for having been dealt a bad hand.

If we are to move beyond our current stalemate we need to break through to a fresh understanding of the situation. We need a much more profound grasp of our time than the simplicities about a culture of vio-

lence, a culture of poverty, the hopeless and hapless underclass, the disincentives of liberal social policy, and indeed the belief that elites on their own can alleviate the crisis that we face. One need not be apocalyptic to understand that the crisis is indeed a profound one, something other than a simple B-phase of economic stagnation worldwide. The economic stagnation will be medium-term (twenty-five to thirty years), but it is temporary; the cycle will swing upward again in time. Economic stagnation is a systemic feature of the capitalist world-economy. The cyclical alternation between stagnation and expansion might be called the breathing of the system. But our contemporary crisis is not simply a response to economic stagnation; it involves changes that correspond more to the deepening of the capitalist process, and thus the slow undoing of the system. This crisis will not go away, as I will argue in greater detail in my concluding chapter.

Only a social revolution of profound proportions can address the momentous difficulties we face, the marginalization of the majority of the earth's population (including larger and larger segments of the populations of the core states, who have often been designated a third world within). Here I do not use "revolution" in the traditional or Leninist sense of the seizure of power by a revolutionary party, which then presumably operates the state on behalf of the working class and popular classes. By revolution I mean a profound *social transformation* that not only redistributes power but democratizes it; empowers ordinary people to participate in and help determine the affairs of state, economy, and society; challenges the law of value that impels all production to center ultimately on the profit motive; establishes a cooperative commonwealth in which production for human needs takes priority over production for exchange.

I believe that the struggle of the African American people, particularly the lower strata (or what Malcolm X called the "field Negroes") is central to this revolutionary transformation of the United States, and by extension of the capitalist world-economy as a whole.

From Black Rage to a Vision of the Future

The epigraphs at the beginning of this chapter, from Malcolm X in 1963 and Tupac Shakur in 1993, appear to be polar opposite projections, but in fact represent different versions (or angles of vision) of the same social reality.

Malcolm X is the central figure in the political imaginations of African American youth in the 1980s and 1990s. Many critics of African American youth deplore what they feel to be the superficiality of Black youth's attachment to Malcolm X. They argue that today's Black youth do not really know what Malcolm is all about; for them he is simply an icon of Black rage. But why is the 1960s and 1970s generation so disdainful and dismissive toward Black youth's embrace of the revolutionary tradition that Malcolm represented? There are probably more than a few reasons. Some of these critics are people who always feared or were ambivalent about what William Sales calls the tradition of field Negro revolt that Malcolm X represented.¹⁵ Others no doubt honestly feel that Black youth have not really done their homework. But if this is the case, we need to get on with the political education instead of haughtily dismissing youth and claiming that our generation truly grappled with the full complexity of the issues while their generation is not fulfilling its historic mission. Challenge is needed, but dismissal sinks all our boats. There is no doubt a considerable amount of plain old generation gap mentality at work here. The attitude of many African Americans over thirty-five toward hip hop music (i.e., it isn't really music, it all sounds the same, just a bunch of kids cursing) confirms my suspicion on this issue. Dismissive sniping by the elders, lamenting youth's failure to follow the trail that *we* blazed, has always generated more heat than light.

Black rage is not trivial. Icons are not unimportant. But where do we go from there? Clearly we are still groping for a direction. The revolutionary movements of the last 150 years are today in crisis. This is not an issue unique to the Black movement. However, the need for dialogue among us is more urgent than ever. While we urgently need a direction, we more urgently need to be able to talk to one another so that we can establish a collective agenda. We do not need more ideological struggle; we have had far too much already. People with different ideologies but similar goals need to be able to sit down and talk about how we achieve these goals.

In the late 1960s and through the mid-1970s ideological struggle between revolutionary nationalists and cultural nationalists occupied much of the movement's energy, and with the frequent provocation of local and federal police agents, sometimes broke out into gunfire. This debate is still simmering below the surface. Today many of the revolutionary nationalists have moved toward some variation of Marxian analysis. Yet there are still signs of the old sectarianism, which we should try to nip in the bud.

After all, the debate itself has been overtaken by events. Most of the young revolutionary-minded people of today are dramatically impacted by cultural practices. In fact what is most significant about this generation of young Black people is precisely the extent to which their cultural practices and preferences are *overtly* oppositional, and pose a direct challenge to the system of racial and social subordination that Black people have suffered in the United States.

There is a special intensity to the cultural productions and practices of Black youth. Given the intensity and ferocity of white America's antagonism to these youth, it is not at all unfathomable that there would emerge a strong countermovement, the substance of which is a proud assertion of Blackness and Afrocentricity. Those who so lightly dismiss these concerns cannot be mindful of the powerful inducements for this attitude in the depth and intensity of societal racism, a system of oppressive humiliation that is unmatched in the history of the world in terms of the psychic scars it leaves on its victims. Sylvia Wynter has called our attention to a radio news report shortly after the acquittal of the police officers involved in the Rodney King beating. According to Wynter, this report stated that "public officials of the judicial system of Los Angeles routinely use the acronym N.H.I. to refer to any case involving a breach of the rights of young, jobless, black males living in the inner city ghetto. N.H.I. means 'no humans involved.'"¹⁶

The characterization of Black people as subhuman in the popular ideology of white America (see Raymond Franklin's excellent treatment of this issue) has called forth a strong countermovement based on Black pride, Afrocentrism, and ghettocentrism.¹⁷ This has been accompanied by a strong emphasis on authenticity. In the emerging debate about cultural nationalism, then, there is considerable focus on the problematic aspects of the concept of authenticity.

Although the quest for authenticity is often representative of a righteous stand for full justice for the oppressed, critics point out that with regard to culture the concept is problematic because it is so often steeped in essentialist logic. The bedrock of this essentialist logic is the notion of cultural purity, an essence unique to a particular group that is not shared by other groups or that has not included the input of any other group. This is of course just the opposite of what has happened historically.

Most cultures are hybrids in the sense that they are *constructed* from disparate elements; they do not simply reside in a people. As Stuart Hall argues, Black popular culture stems in part from our common African

inheritance *and* from our experience under the diasporic conditions in which we have lived. “Selective appropriation, incorporation, and rearticulation of European ideologies, cultures, and institutions, alongside an African heritage . . . led to linguistic innovation in rhetorical stylization of the body, forms of occupying an alien space, heightened expressions, hairstyles, ways of walking, standing, and talking, and a means of constituting and sustaining camaraderie and community.”¹⁸

In Hall’s view the weakness of essentialism is that it dehistoricizes difference, and thus mistakes what is historical and cultural for what is natural, biological, and genetic. A cultural politics is not automatically authentic just because the signifier “Black” is applied to it. Note the Clarence Thomas phenomenon.

Notwithstanding the deeply problematic aspects of essentialism and thus to some extent of the new Black nationalism, the essence of Afrocentrism is a response to cultural imperialism. This we can never lose sight of, for it is precisely here where the traditional national liberation movements have been weak.

Thus even if it is important to point out the problematic aspects of essentialism, the purveyors of the new cultural criticism in the United States (of which Henry Louis Gates is the leading example) are on weak grounds because they have no corresponding criticism of liberalism. Indeed, they are often all too eager to tie their own pronouncements to a liberal framework. They do not seem to understand that liberalism as a political philosophy is moribund.

It is precisely on this count that Afrocentrism is correct in its basic impulses. It is a response precisely to the failure of the national liberation movements on a world scale in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to liberate their peoples from exploitation and oppression, and the failure of the civil rights movement in the United States to meaningfully change the lives of the masses of African Americans outside the South. Intrinsic to the failure of these two movements is their faith in liberal universalism as a tool of *deliverance* (I use this term advisedly and deliberately), despite the otherwise much more radical tenor of the national liberation movements in the peripheral zones of the capitalist world-economy in the twentieth century.

The essence of the Farrakhan debacle can be captured here. Farrakhan is upset about what he believes to be inordinate control over Black professionals, intellectuals, and public figures in athletics and entertainment

by Jews. He wants to break that hold and reconstruct the relationship along lines of reciprocity, fairness, and equity.¹⁹ But while the specter of Jewish control over the Black intelligentsia and professional-managerial strata has some basis in fact, as Adolph Reed argues, it is more complicated than is usually indicated by critics like Farrakhan.²⁰ The control alluded to is not always direct; some examples are Jewish participation and sometimes leadership of such organizations as the NAACP and the National Urban League, and Jewish contributions to philanthropic organizations that fund Black advocacy organizations. On the larger societal level this illusion results primarily from Jewish concentration in the intermediate strata. Jews are the most visible representatives of the white power structure, although Koreans and Arabs are widely felt to be replacing Jews as merchants in Black communities. Thus the particular location of the intermediary means they are often the target of the wrath of both the lower strata and that stratum of the community that will benefit most if they leave the community.

Moreover, Black professionals and intellectuals, as well as public figures in sports and entertainment, are overwhelmingly liberal in persuasion. American liberalism is tied inextricably to and stems largely from Jewish liberalism. For much of the twentieth century liberalism has played what most Black people see as a positive role in the United States vis à vis Black people. With the victory over Jim Crow and the delegitimation of overt discrimination, however, the most pressing issue in Black communities has become the struggle against structural (or institutional) racism. Unlike bigotry or simple discrimination by individual actors, institutional racism refers to arrangements and practices in our basic social institutions that perpetuate favorable treatment toward one group and unfavorable treatment toward another or other groups. It is possible, and it often happens, that institutional racism operates without the conscious intent to discriminate against specific groups (although in such cases there is often a conscious intent to gain advantage for some group). Institutional racism also operates, according to Stephen Steinberg, through the cumulative effects of past discrimination, which places Blacks in a disadvantageous position to compete with others.²¹ It is clear that this type of racism is much more deeply entrenched and much more difficult to eradicate than simple discrimination. State intervention is required here on a much larger scale against a phenomenon that is all too systemic.

Here liberalism was of little help. Many of the liberal Jews who fought sincerely against discrimination oppose steps taken to ameliorate structural racism; they see affirmative action as a quota system that would potentially restrict Jewish participation in certain desirable labor markets.²² Institutional racism affects all Black people but has a much more profound effect on the Black working class, especially its lowest strata.

The old relationship between Blacks and liberalism is thus profoundly changed, although liberalism retains a powerful hold on most Black professionals, intellectuals, and public figures. This is of course understandable in some sense, since liberalism has played such a key role in the advancement of this stratum.

But the crisis of liberalism and the challenge from the Black liberation movement did not begin with Farrakhan and Khallid Abdul Muhammad. In 1964 Malcolm X captured the mood of African American communities in a manner that is most striking and that I think is most illuminating to this issue. In a speech at Harvard University he told the audience that “Black people in this country have become frustrated, disenchanted, disillusioned and probably more set for action now than ever before—not the kind of action that has been set out for them in the past by some of their supposedly liberal white friends, but the kind of action that will get some immediate results.” One who is oppressed is not

looking to the oppressor to give him some system or form of logic or reason. What is logical to the oppressor is not logical to the oppressed. And what is reason to the oppressor is not reason to the oppressed. The black people in this country are beginning to realize that what sounds reasonable to those who exploit us doesn’t sound reasonable to us. There just has to be a new system of reason and logic devised by those of us who are at the bottom, if we are to get some results in this struggle.²³

In light of what we are calling the crisis or collapse of liberalism, we might want to recast the arguments that several authors have made regarding the crisis of Black leadership. One might point out that what they are really addressing is the age-old disjunction between the political program of the Black middle class as a class-for-itself and the needs of the lower strata of the Black population, whose demands the system cannot meet. In contrast to those who lament the iconic uses to which Malcolm X has been put, I think it is all too clear that youth are reaching out for what Malcolm contributed as a leader over and above what seems possi-

ble from the thoroughly compromised leadership of the civil rights establishment and their faith in liberal integrationism.

The Continuing Legacy of Malcolm X

The emergence of Malcolm X as a leader of the Black freedom struggle rearticulated and deepened the *revolutionary* tradition of the African American people. William Sales, Jr., contends that while the civil rights movement had been largely a regional movement focused in the South and based in the church, once Jim Crow had been defeated, the movement was not able to relocate and confront the more trenchant conditions of the largely impoverished urban masses.²⁴ With the victory of the civil rights law and the voting rights law, the conservative fractions (the NAACP and the Urban League) declared victory and the moderate militants (the SCLC and Martin Luther King, Jr.) argued for the continuation of the struggle in the streets through nonviolent direct action. The radical militants who ultimately became the advocates of Black Power (SNCC and CORE), partially from the influence of Malcolm X, began to argue that nonviolence does not seem to work.

The new mood among the radical militants of the civil rights movement was part of an overall restive mood emerging among Black people as a whole. Lerone Bennett argues that this new mood was a buildup of pent-up frustration and rage against oppression, detonated by the violent repression of peaceful, nonviolent demonstrators in Bull Connor's Birmingham in 1963.²⁵ The route of the moderate civil rights leadership (the SCLC and King) in Chicago and the shooting of James Meredith in Mississippi during his march against fear contributed to this new, more radical mood. During the impasse in the movement brothers and sisters in the street started to set torch to one city after another, beginning in 1963 with Birmingham.

Malcolm had both articulated and personified this new mood. Indeed Sales argues that nationalism is the political orientation of ordinary Black folk.²⁶ Malcolm gave that mood a coherent ideological expression.

As the civil rights movement floundered about in search of a new direction, those people, sectors of the African American population who had not been a part of the civil rights movement, were moving out on their own using tactics much different from those of the old civil rights coalition. In fact Robin D. G. Kelley has pointed out that the rebellion

in Birmingham in 1963 was an expression of working-class revolt in support of the civil rights movement. However, the Black working class responded to the repression of the Bull Connor regime in its own terms.²⁷

The traditional civil rights leadership no longer had the initiative. The Black working classes of the urban areas were running ahead of it. Malcolm X had developed the most comprehensive critique of the civil rights movement. He spoke much more to the needs of the urban Black masses than the established civil rights movement, yet he argued for a coalition with the militant wing of the civil rights movement in SNCC and CORE. Unlike the civil rights leadership, Malcolm placed himself squarely in the tradition of field Negro revolt, a tradition that was anti-assimilationist and based on ordinary Black folk. He vigorously fought against the subaltern tradition of the Black middle class and attempted to win Black intellectuals to a revolutionary position. Malcolm X, like perhaps no Black leader before or after him, possessed the unique ability to accomplish these goals.²⁸

His story clarifies the centrality of the tradition of field Negro revolt and the significance of the lower stratum of the Black population in the transformation of the structures of oppression and exploitation for all people in the United States, and those victims of U.S. imperial and Western imperial domination throughout the world.²⁹

Malcolm X was cut down by assassins' bullets before he could lead this movement into its fuller unfolding. However, there were many who heard Malcolm's message and attempted to implement it. The Black Panther Party, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, the Black Workers Congress, the Congress of African People, the Youth Organization for Black Unity, Malcolm X Liberation University, Peoples College, the African Liberation Support Committee, the Black New York Action Committee, the Young Lords Party, the Brown Berets, and the African People's Socialist Party were among the many who responded to Malcolm's message.

This self-consciously revolutionary tradition, which coexisted for a while with intense grassroots unrest and activism, was a combustible mixture that provoked strong anxieties among the defenders of the status quo and for a while some sympathy among ordinary white folk. The defenders of the status quo initiated a massive campaign of law and order, which with some variations has continued up to this time.

Crime, Civil Disorder, and Rebellion

Due in no small part to the prevalence of law-and-order rhetoric among public officials, politicians, and the media, the most palpable fear among the public at large seems to be of crime. For the most part conceptions about crime and disorder are steeped in the imagery of inner-city, Black, underclass “tangles of pathology.” Ray Franklin’s *Shadows of Race and Class* is a sensitive and insightful treatment of this issue. Most treatments of this issue, however, totally ignore the political economy of crime. Moreover, sociological treatments tend to greatly minimize the extent to which so-called deviants are actually willful actors who are involved in their own personal rebellion. This should not be underestimated because there is the appearance of individualism. This rebellion reflects the values and actions of an entire social stratum.³⁰

Frances Fox Piven has argued quite persuasively that the defiance of rules is not necessarily simply an instance of the failure of the socializing mechanisms of a society, as presented in classical sociological work of the societal reaction school. Defiance of the rules can also be a challenge to the system of domination on which a social order rests. “Domination and challenge, and thus conformity and deviance are at the center of the history.” They are the expressions of a dialectical movement through which societies change or fail to change.³¹ In opposition to the Hobbesian notion of a drive to power, classical sociology posited a theory of pure domination in the form of the societal reaction school. This theory denied that conflict was at the center of group life, focusing instead on the consensus achieved via a shared normative orientation through socializing agents. Society thus took the form of a reified consensus from which rules simply emanated. The consensus, such as it is, normally comes from a process of contention whereby the dominant strata seek to rein in rule breakers who broke rules not blindly but with forethought and purpose. Defiant people are thus part of the dynamic through which societies change. Domination is not total.

The critique Piven developed in “Deviant Behavior and the Remaking of the World” is elaborated in a later article entitled “Normalizing Collective Protest.”³² Here Piven and Cloward take resource mobilization theorists to task for overreacting to the malintegration theorists of social movements by blurring the distinction between normative and nonnormative collective behavior. While resource mobilization theorists are

attempting to show the rationality of collective action by subordinate strata, what they end up doing is ignoring the powerful role that norms play in the regulation of social life, including relations of domination and subordination. Rule making is a strategy for power.

However, on a daily basis people seek to address in the best way they can what seem to be the main problems of their communities. The issue of drugs is key to Black communities' conception of crime; there has been a great deal of effort to get drugs out of the community. The current influence of the Nation of Islam among mainstream Black leadership is due in no small part to the traditional Black leadership's view (reinforced by African American popular perceptions) that the Nation of Islam has developed by far the most effective strategy in combating drugs.

The African People's Socialist Party, however, has argued that the war on drugs is a subterfuge for criminalizing and repressing low-income Black communities. It argues that Black organizations that become involved in these activities risk becoming an arm of the police forces and thus undermine their ability to pursue a revolutionary solution to the crisis of Black communities in the United States.

It might help if we attempt to put the issue of drugs in perspective as an economic force and as a social psychological force. Juliet Ucelli and Dennis O'Neil point out that cocaine was the definitive drug of the 1980s, reflecting the prevailing social psychology of large segments of the "artistic and technical intelligentsia—advertising and entertainment executives and writers, lawyers, computer programmers."³³ In this era of a culture of aggressive individualism and luxury consumption there occurred a rising and escalating demand for cocaine among this stratum of the population. While the 1980s could be said to have been a party for the upper strata, the lowest strata of the population suffered the opposite fate. Yet the manufacture of crack cocaine by drug dealers in New York City was a stroke of marketing genius in that it made the "master of the universe feeling" universally accessible in the much cheaper variant of cocaine. For those who feel their lack of power most sharply, this drug had wide appeal.

But beyond the problems presented by the users of crack and heroin is of course the business end of the drug problem, the drug economy. Escalating rates of unemployment and underemployment make the drug business an attractive option for many. Because penalties for children under sixteen are far less harsh than for adults, dealers rely to an unprecedented extent on youth as lookouts and runners. Traditional power

relations are reversed when youth become the main source of income. The community loses its ability to transmit its values when adults cannot serve as role models and are in fact dependent on youth for cash, often to buy drugs.

For the political elite the drug crisis exacerbates and deepens the legitimization crisis that has wracked all levels of government in the United States and elsewhere. The essence of the legitimization crisis is that not only do things not work, the populace perceives that things are not working. People believe that state institutions and employees, from elected officials and national security officers to cops on the beat and immigration officials, are either complicit in the drug trade or simply incapable of stopping it. What else must people think of a system that cannot do anything about hundreds of thousands of citizens who are homeless and sleeping in the streets?

The drug economy of \$150 billion annually is important to banking sectors in Florida and California, and is important in maintaining sales of consumer durables during a time when fewer and fewer people can depend on the formal economy, that is, on formal employment.³⁴ In part the key to understanding the social situation in our inner cities lies in understanding the impact of these powerful economic forces (which are the underside of the larger formal economy, not a separate and independent entity) and their corresponding impact on community, not the pathologies of the Black and Latino poor.³⁵

Nihilism or Opposition?

The conditions of life in the inner cities have led to the widespread adoption of a culture of opposition among Black youth as a means of dealing with the white supremacist beliefs that daily attack Black intelligence, Black ability, Black beauty, and Black character in subtle and not so subtle ways;³⁶ and as a means of dealing with the harshness of street life (in part a by-product of the drug economy and in part a by-product of the pervasive powerlessness of the inner-city poor).³⁷ Yet the culture of opposition itself is a statement that the inner-city poor are not simply helpless victims of racism and poverty. I would thus oppose Cornel West's notion that there is a rampant nihilism in Black America, which suffers from a collective clinical depression.³⁸ In West's presentation one hears echoes of Michael Harrington's suspicion of Black anger. (see Introduction)

West properly notes the central role of the structural dynamics of corporate market institutions and the “ontological wounds and emotional scars inflicted by white supremacist beliefs and images permeating U.S. society and culture.” He argues, however, that these wounds and scars have produced “a deep-seated anger, a boiling sense of rage, and a passionate pessimism regarding America’s will to justice.”³⁹

We have here not the peaceful, well-dressed, disciplined, middle-class-oriented civil rights activists of the 1950s and 1960s, but the children of the working class, increasingly marginalized and mired in desperate conditions, who can only begin to evoke the kind of transcendental meaning that West implies in his politics of conversion in the process of struggling to transform the social system that so brutally subjugates them. The Black Panther Party and the Nation of Islam articulated their own versions of a transcendent vision, and the resulting sense of revolutionary mission attracted tens of thousands of the most marginalized members of the Black community into their ranks. One need not agree with every particular of their vision to understand the implications of this phenomenon.

Instead he engages in the age-old myopia of Black socialists and social democrats, whose antinationalist rhetoric has consistently moved them to the right, toward an essentially prosystemic stand.⁴⁰ He argues that the crisis in Black leadership has created a vacuum into which have stepped bold and defiant Black nationalist figures “with even narrower visions.”⁴¹ West does not consider for a moment his own presumption in using the term “vacuum,” as though Black nationalists are somehow interlopers or usurpers.

I fear that West’s concern about nihilism in Black America can more accurately be conceived as a fear of the spontaneous, unguided rebellious impulses of African American youth. Here we see again the ambiguity about the tradition of field Negro revolt. The rebellion in South Central Los Angeles proved that the impulse and spirit of rebellion still exist. Those who brand such acts as mere riots miss the essence of such rebellion and the strategic and tactical consensus that they represent. The radicals of the 1960s were antisystemic in their ideology, but the capitalist economy was at the height of the most vigorous expansion in its history. During this time the ruling class promoted a program of liberal reform that promised to expand the benefits to all in due time. Thus, in part, the rebellions of the 1960s reflected impatience at the pace of change. By the 1990s not only had the capitalist economy entered a long phase of stag-

nation, but also the ruling class had shifted to a decidedly conservative stance, openly calling for limited expectations and proclaiming the existence of an underclass (often Black) that could not be integrated into the economic mainstream.

The economic polarization of the 1960s seemed to be a thing of the past. The liberal reform program of the time seemed to pose a credible threat to poverty. The economic polarization of the 1990s, however, was a consequence of present economic difficulties with little or no hope of alleviation in the foreseeable future. It seemed to portend a deepening of racialized poverty that would become increasingly intractable in tandem with the deepening of the capitalist process. Moreover, the social struggles of the last fifty to sixty years had produced a cumulative political psychology throughout large sectors of the population, which, despite differences, expected more, not less real democracy.

In the 1960s thus some observers began to detect a level of instability at the very height of capitalist civilization such that the mighty United States of America had itself entered into the first stages of a revolutionary situation. This situation was not seen as cataclysmic, but likely to be of long duration. The following indicates a popular statement of this sentiment:

The rhetoric of the sixties has become the reality of the nineties. The revolution is here—it's just less ideological and more fragmented than predicted. It isn't really against the system but against the white men who mostly run it. Now everyone is sick of white men: the white man who destroyed Native American culture, the white man who practiced slavery and fought to preserve it, the white men with clubs in Birmingham, the white men who beat up gays and raided their bars, the white men with briefcases who launch and carry out every war, the white men on campus who cling to self-serving curricula and control tenure, the white men who dismissed Anita Hill's complaints, the white men who talk about family values while overseeing policies that ravage the lives of millions of American family members, the white men who beat Rodney King.⁴²

Wallerstein argues that the decline in the efficiency of the State structures in the core zones and the increasing mass of the "third world within" in the core zones, leading to unprecedented demographic shifts, will be the occasion of increasing social disorder. The situation that has evolved is not merely conjunctural; it is structural. In the late twentieth century, he argues, social disorder will become the norm in the core zones once again, especially in the United States with its very large and

increasing complement of the “third world within.” This has already started but has been widely misunderstood as simply an increase in crime. In reality what we are seeing is civil warfare.

As we proceed deeper and deeper into our “time of troubles,” people will become ever more dismayed because the forms of opposition will not be the forms to which we have become accustomed. Thus there will be an increasing scramble for protection that cannot be provided by the state, which lacks the financial resources and also the necessary legitimation. In New York City supporters of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, a recently elected law-and-order centrist with strong connections to the police, will no doubt begin to see that the tough policing they desire is beyond the capability of the city.

Arrighi, Hopkins, and Wallerstein have best elaborated on this argument. They detect a declining significance of states as sovereign entities that are key organizing centers of historical capitalism’s patterns of development.⁴³ State networks, they argue, are abridged by trans-state networks, state authority is defied by sectional and secessionist (and drug lord) interests, business and consumerist interests serve as intermediaries in the election of lawmakers and the construction of the law. The state as a site for the betterment of all is increasingly losing legitimacy in this context. These phenomena are intertwined with the ongoing centralization of capital and polarization of wealth in historical capitalism.

The individual states have increasingly been unable to protect their citizens from the ravages of the world-economy and have not been able to guarantee their citizens an increasingly higher standard of living. On the other hand social movements have increased people’s expectations of the state in terms of democracy, human rights, equality, and quality of life. It is this crunch that serves as such a severe threat to the legitimation of the state. The Old Left movements, they argue, were not simply organizations with leaders and cadres but were moral communities. The legitimacy these movements claimed carried over when they participated in state power, but it tended to erode over time as national communities themselves tended to disintegrate. New national communities are being formed out of the disintegration of the communist bloc, but they are not an alternative to stateness. Fundamentalist religious movements for whom secular legitimation is a contradiction in terms provide the only alternative to stateness.

According to Arrighi, Hopkins, and Wallerstein,

in between a nationalist movement's replication of stateness and a fundamentalist movement's negation of stateness come various intermediate alternatives, which would appear to pose no long-run alternative to stateness but which promise to remain and to grow as definite locales within the formal jurisdiction of the states and well within the evolving terrain(s) of the movements. These are locales where an "informal economy"—i.e., not state-measured, let alone state-regulated—integrates people in a place, and forms the relational substratum of their moral community.⁴⁴

Such communities grow as state power recedes. The power of the state over them decreases further as they become more and more self-provisioning, and especially as they become better able to protect themselves. Such communities are outside the law and therefore outside civil society itself. They are centers for all types of illegal activities whose spheres of circulation reach throughout the larger society, "but they occupy a territory and that makes them a substitute for state power, not just another source of its corruption. As outsiders we know them by such names as 'inner cities,' 'drug-lord domains,' 'shanty-towns,' and 'warlord fiefs.'"⁴⁵

The Resurrection of Black Nationalism

It is in the context of the contemporary crisis that we must examine the resurrection of Black nationalism as a widespread ideology in Black communities, especially among youth. Khallid Abdul Muhammad's venomous, insensitive remarks have served to divert us from a proper appreciation of the power and depth of nationalist consciousness in the Black community by associating it with anti-Semitism.

Yet when all is said and done, we are called on to examine the content of *any* nationalist program, and ask what is so unique about Black nationalism that it inspires such opprobrium. The strategy of nationalist movements in a multinational state is nation against nation. If indeed Jews, Koreans, and Arabs occupy the positions in the Black community that should by the logic of national development or even simply ethnic pluralism be occupied by Blacks, one would expect antagonism toward these middle-ranking groups. To emphasize that the United States is a "pluralist society" does not satisfactorily deal with this issue, for pluralism in practice has been hierarchical.

The anti-assimilationist groups that have emerged in the third world in the wake of the failure of national liberation movements are of course the analog to the return of the Nation of Islam to popularity and the increasing popularity of Afrocentric ideas. The traditional national liberation movements had some faith in the progressive ideologies of the core zones of the world-system, socialism and liberalism. The extent to which socialism became increasingly liberal socialism, even in the hands of the most radical socialists, Lenin and the Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union, can be seen as a harbinger of the fate of the national liberation movements, which, like the movements of other oppressed strata, succumbed to the lure of Western liberalism.

But liberalism has today collapsed, as have the liberal socialisms of the East, South, and West. All reformist illusions have thus been dashed. It is not the socialist project that has come to an end, but a socialist reformist project that was tied to the coattails of liberalism, which in essence believed in the capacity of the system to reform itself to meet the needs of (some) oppressed strata. Historically liberalism has been about the process of orderly reform as a normal part of the operation of our social, political, and economic institutions. This process of orderly reform is reinforced by the ideology of universalism, a worldview that allows members of all racial and ethnic groups to aspire to high positions in the system if they have the proper educational and social class experience.

The end of the liberal hope gives rise to an assortment of nationalist movements seeking to make their own way into a world that is forever destroyed. Yet there is something very old about nationalist movements among African Americans, and the logic of it is rather straightforward. African Americans are a racially oppressed group, originally brought to the Western Hemisphere as slaves, as cheap labor for the needs of the expanding capitalist world-economy. As long as African Americans remain a racially oppressed group, they will form a community, and thus nationalist consciousness is to be expected. Liberal integrationists may be dismayed, but all the hand wringing about nationalism is counterproductive; it only exposes the bankruptcy of the historical position of liberalism.

On the other hand African Americans are citizens of the United States, and thus are affected by government policies, the legal system, and social institutions. It makes sense for them to make claims on the state. A self-help strategy in and of itself is not adequate, although the building of internal strength is necessary and sensible. Both strategies flow from the

conditions of life of African Americans in the United States. There is more of a need for unity between the two currents than ideological debate, which can never end satisfactorily, since the two approaches are in fact responses to different aspects of a singular historical social system.

Thus there is no simple resolution to the two trajectories of the Black movement. There are in reality more than two, but I respond here to the prototypes presented in much of the literature. The movement for equality also takes the form of a movement for integration. While there are qualitative differences between a movement for integration and one for equality, there are also qualitative differences between a struggle for equality and a struggle for justice. In much the same way, there are different strands within nationalism (the distinction between revolutionary nationalism and cultural nationalism has occupied a good deal of our attention over time).

Yet on the whole, all these strategies flow inexorably from the social structures of the capitalist world-economy. Our task is to cease calling for ideological unity; that is simply a recipe for even more and more endless infighting. Ideological diversity is problematic only insofar as we are driven to seek ideological unity. What is much more important than ideological unity is a common program to which we can all aspire without regard to ideology.

Thus what is needed is just the opposite of democratic centralism, which made the old communist movement so feared by the bourgeois governments of the world. While democratic centralism is a powerful tool in obtaining unity of will and unity of action, the democratic part is most often jettisoned, so that the process, while made that much simpler, strays from the democratic goals that were at the heart of the original objectives of the movements.

We need to be able to explicate the different pressures to which certain types of groups are prone. Where do these pressures lead these different groups? Nationalist organizations are pressed to respond to the need for internal strength; there is thus a logic of narrowing the focus in order to strengthen the group in the face of overwhelming external pressures and dangers. Integrationist organizations and socialist organizations tend toward coalition building, and thus attempt to be somewhat inclusive (at least racially and ethnically, if more exclusive class-wise, that is, exclusive of the lower strata of the working class).

These are not mutually exclusive objectives, but it is difficult for one type of organization to do both, given the logic of their long-term

objectives. Yet both strategies are needed if a strong movement is to be built. That is why there is a need for unity, and that is why the unity we need is not ideological, but has to be built around a program (as Phil Thompson recently argued in *New York Newsday*).

The Radicalization of the NAACP?

Black nationalism has been a recurrent feature of African American political, cultural, and social life. In times when racist practices have become most intense, Black people have routinely looked to Africa or to form their own government separate from and independent of the United States government. The particular form that nationalist movements have assumed in the 1990s may not have been anticipated, although they do follow trends in the “third world without” (in Asia, Africa, South and Central America, the Caribbean, the Pacific Islands, etc.).

What was not anticipated very clearly, and what clearly seems to exercise the U.S. power elite as articulated by the neoconservative mandarins of *Commentary* and the *New Republic*, is that those who have traditionally been thought to be supporters of the liberal integrationist program of the ruling class seem to be deserting ship.

The NAACP, which has a long and proud history of fighting for civil rights, under the leadership of Roy Wilkins had more and more entrenched itself in the moderate—even conservative—wing of the civil rights establishment. Increasingly the NAACP lost the support of young Black people, who saw it as a relic of the past. When he was chosen as chair of the NAACP, the Reverend Benjamin Chavis pledged that the NAACP would redefine the sum and substance of the civil rights movement and provide the leadership to transform the quality of life of Black America. Chavis traveled to Los Angeles before the verdict was announced in the second Rodney King trial to listen to and learn from the residents of South Central Los Angeles. In April 1993 he organized a national gang summit to call for a truce in gang warfare across the nation. Chavis has called for outreach to other people of color, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Asian Americans, and American Indians.⁴⁶

Arch Puddington of *Commentary* thought it particularly and sadly ironic that at the very moment when there seemed to be a developing consensus about the centrality of Black crime to the problems of the nation (as reflected in Clinton’s November 13, 1993, speech before a convention

of Black clergy), the NAACP named Benjamin Chavis its new executive director, a person whose career as an activist and writer personifies precisely the kind of mindset that needs to be overcome.⁴⁷ Puddington was concerned about Chavis's leftist views and his critique of American society as racist and not a truly democratic society for Black and other third world people. Puddington enumerated a number of issues that show that Chavis should not have been selected to head the NAACP. These include the gang leader summit and of course Chavis's move to open the NAACP and the established Black leadership to Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam.

In a presentation at the House of the Lord Pentecostal Church in Brooklyn, New York, Don Rojas, a former editor of the *New York Amsterdam News* who Chavis appointed national director of communications for the NAACP, argued that the NAACP should have been a big tent organization all along. The sectarianism of the NAACP during especially the reign of Roy Wilkins was a serious error. Rojas was hopeful that there would now be a dramatic change in the NAACP in this regard, as befits the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization. He fully and enthusiastically supported Chavis's intent to have the NAACP meet with all members of the Black organized community. Revealingly, Rojas pointed out that the NAACP would return to the Pan African tradition of W. E. B. Du Bois.

With regard to Farrakhan, Rojas pointed out that the much-heralded relationship between Blacks and Jews has been an unequal one. Leaders who are now calling for a relationship between equals are being denounced. The NAACP meets with the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and the American Jewish Committee; they can certainly meet with the Nation of Islam.

Farrakhan is popular among Black people, Rojas asserted, not because of the Nation of Islam's designation of Jews as the "blood suckers" of the Black nation, but because he is perceived as the only national Black leader who stands up to the white power establishment. This is no doubt a commentary on the legitimacy of the established Black leadership in the eyes of ordinary Black folk, Rojas offered, but he (understandably) declined to elaborate in that direction.

Did Chavis's appointment indicate that at that time there was an emerging sentiment in the NAACP about Jews that is moving in the direction of that of Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam? This seems highly unlikely. Benjamin Chavis condemned Khallid Abdul Muhammad's

“demagogic diatribe” in the strongest terms. Rojas argued that although some Jews are members of the ruling class, it is not Jewish power that is responsible for the position of Black people.

In the final analysis the turn of the NAACP to the left proved to be much less sound than Puddington and New York Civil Rights Coalition’s Michael Meyers feared.⁴⁸ The brief tenure of Benjamin Chavis at the head of the NAACP indicates the powerful potential for social transformation in African American social movements, which, if they are to speak meaningfully to their constituencies, must articulate a vision that will have some potential to address their grievances. Such a vision must of necessity transcend the boundaries of the existing historical system, as I shall attempt to show in what follows.

Powerful currents of resistance and opposition are at work in African American communities and other communities of color. This is manifest in such phenomena as the much maligned hip hop music; the truce between two important African American gangs, the Crips and the Bloods; and the rise of new organizations among subordinate groups and peoples, such as MOTHERS ROC (Mothers Reclaiming Our Children), the Coalition Against Police Abuse,⁴⁹ the National Welfare Rights Union, the League for a Revolutionary America, the Campaign for a New Tomorrow, Black Men Against Crack in Brooklyn, and the Community Self-Defense Program, also in Brooklyn.

Our current situation has a history. This history is not simply of interest to the curious, it is part and parcel of our current reality. It is to that history that we will now turn in an effort to deepen our understanding of what has transpired and what we might anticipate for the future of Black liberation and social transformation in the United States.