

# THE PANTHERS CAN'T SAVE US NOW

*Anti-Policing Struggles & the Limits of Black Power*

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**I**n early December 2013, Senegalese artist Issa Samb donned a black leather jacket and beret, grasped a spear in his left hand and a M1 carbine rifle in his right, and settled into a rattan throne. Samb's live performance replicated the 1967 photo of Huey Newton, carefully staged by Eldridge Cleaver in the *Ramparts* magazine office, that would become the most iconic representation of Black Panther Party militancy and internationalism. Samb chose to recreate the famous image in an abandoned storefront that had previously housed a Harold's Chicken restaurant, along Chicago's Garfield Boulevard. His performance was part of a weeklong series of events hosted by the University of Chicago to commemorate the 1969 police killings of Illinois Panthers Mark Clark and Fred Hampton and to encourage reflection on the party's legacy. Titled "The Best Marxist is Dead," Samb's performance might be read as a commentary on the perils of Black Power nostalgia and as a call for the renewed critique of capitalism within black public life and a radical left politics keenly attuned to new historical conditions.

Samb's performance is an homage that evokes Newton's notion of revolutionary suicide — the true show of radical commitment is the willingness to dedicate one's full energy and time, and potentially one's life, to revolutionary struggle. The performance title and Newton's radical pledge are both in keeping with the Panther quip, "The only good pig is a dead one." If the police constituted an "occupying army," then liberating the ghetto from their grip would require an equal magnitude of force and sacrifice.

Samb's performance recalled Newton, but it did not copy him. Samb's grey beard and locks contrasted sharply with Newton's clean-shaven, youthful appearance. And where Newton sits with his feet firmly planted, meeting his onlookers with a militant, unflinching gaze, Samb's legs were crossed and his countenance was more introspective, his eyes sullen. He was the old man who has outlived the revolution, or maybe he's a ghost. We worship long-dead heroes because they are no longer a part of the difficult tug and pull of historical forces that make our own world. Samb presented us with the revolutionary in the glass case — perhaps a reference to the macabre practice of embalming state socialism's founders in perpetuity. The revolutionary is entombed, walled off from our own cultural and social world, no longer a part of our sense of living political possibilities.

Sitting on the edge of some of Chicago's most impoverished and violent neighborhoods, the abandoned storefront itself signals death — yet another casualty in the cycles of divestment, real estate speculation, and displacement afflicting central cities across the United States. Not long into Samb's performance, these looming urban realities interrupted the celebration, after a scuffle broke out between groups of young men assembled in an upstairs art gallery for the opening reception. Within minutes, police cruisers careened onto the sidewalk, flak-jacketed officers rushed inside to quell the disturbance, and many attendees, some of them Panther veterans, were left shaking their heads in disbelief. In its juxtaposition of movement nostalgia and lingering urban misery, Samb's performance inspired revival, the revolutionary apparition staring back once again from a blighted corner of the ghetto.

The slogan "Black Lives Matter" rose to prominence the summer before Samb's storefront performance. Three black feminist activists created the Twitter hashtag after the 2012 vigilante killing of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teen in Sanford, Florida. Over the past few years thousands have embraced the slogan, protesting sporting events, staging die-ins on sidewalks, occupy-

ing public offices, and shutting down highways. Such actions have forced the undeserved deaths of black civilians into the public conscience and created a crisis of legitimacy for the dominant approaches to urban policing. Although struggles against policing have a much longer lineage, the current renewal of antiracist organizing crystallized out of discrete historical conjunctures — the comprehensive surveillance of society through private and public security video feeds and smartphone cameras, the advent of social media networks that connect millions of users worldwide and enable instantaneous circulation of information, the hollowing out of the social welfare state and further deterioration of inner-city life in the wake of the subprime mortgage crisis and ensuing recession, and the debates over postracialism that accompanied the Obama presidency.

Despite the frequency and power of mass demonstrations, at the time of this writing, we are no closer to achieving concrete, substantive reform that might curtail police violence and ensure greater democratic accountability. To be frank, if we are going to end this crisis and achieve genuine public safety and peace, the current struggles must grow beyond street demonstrations to build popular consensus and effective power. The road to reaching those ends is currently blocked. Part of the problem resides in the prevailing nostalgia for Black Power militancy and the continued pursuit of modes of black ethnic politics. Such nostalgia is underwritten by the vindicationist posture of recent scholarly writing on the subject and is abetted by the digital afterlife of movement imagery, which preserves the most emotionally impactful elements of the movement but is consumed in ways that forget Black Power's historical origins and intrinsic limitations.

At the heart of contemporary organizing is the notion of black exceptionalism. Contemporary Black Lives Matter activists and supporters insist on the uniqueness of the black predicament and on the need for race-specific remedies. "Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise," #BlackLivesMatter co-founder Alicia Garza explains "It is an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity and our resistance in the face of deadly oppression."<sup>1</sup> "When we say black lives matter," Garza continues, "we are talking about the ways in which Black people are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity. It is an acknowledgement [that] Black poverty and genocide

<sup>1</sup> Alicia Garza, "A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement," *Feminist Wire*, October 7, 2014, <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2>.

[are] state violence.” This essay takes aim at this notion of black exceptionalism and lays out its origins and limits as an analysis of hyperpolicing and, more generally, as an effective political orientation capable of building the popular power needed to end the policing crisis.

We begin by revisiting the social and ideological roots of black ethnic politics as we know it. Black Power unfolded within a context of class fragmentation; the decline of the left-labor militancy of the Depression, wartime, and the post-World War II years; and the transformation of metropolitan space after the 1949 Housing Act, which produced suburban homeownership and upward mobility for many whites and inner-city ghettoization and exploitation for the black poor. The combination of shifting urban demography, rising black political efficacy created by the Southern civil rights/desegregation campaigns, and the liberal statecraft of Lyndon B. Johnson’s administration framed the turn to Black Power and associated demands for black control of political and economic institutions. In the Black Power era, we can see the origins of contemporary hyper-ghettoization and intensive policing of the black poor as well as the ascendancy of postsegregation patron-client relations between an expanding black professional-managerial class and the mainstream parties, corporations, and private foundations. This evolution of Black Power as an elite-driven ethnic politics ultimately negated and transcended the revolutionary potential implied in calls for black self-determination and socialist revolution. If you believe that the “Movement for Black Lives” is the second coming of Black Power, this historical process may give us some sense of where it is going.

The notion of black ethnic politics remains at the heart of Black Lives Matter protests and falsely equates racial identity with political constituency. Black Power and Black Lives Matter as political slogans are rooted in racial-standpoint epistemology — that is, the notion that, by virtue of the common experience of racism, African Americans possess territorial ways of knowing the world and, by extension, deeply shared political interests. This common-sensical view is a mystification that elides the differing and conflicting material interests and ideological positions that animate black political life in real time and space.

The second part of this essay examines these differences and conflicts in light of the celebrated release of the *Vision for Black Lives* agenda, which contains a set of progressive policy demands but is guided by the counterproductive

assumptions of black unity politics, which have historically facilitated elite brokerage dynamics rather than building effective counterpower. Just as readily as it can be used to advance left social justice demands, the Black Lives Matter slogan can — and on occasion already has — become a vehicle for entrepreneurial branding and courting philanthropic foundations. Similarly, it can express bourgeois interests (e.g., “Black Wealth Matters”) and education-privatization agendas just as easily as it can express working-class interests and the promotion of public education.

The third section of this essay develops a critique of black exceptionalism, the central premise of contemporary discussions of inequality and campaigns against police violence. The current policing crisis and carceral state are not a reincarnation of the Jim Crow regime. They are, rather, core features of post-welfare-state capitalism, where punitive strategies for managing social inequality have replaced benevolent welfare-state interventions and where managing the surplus population has become a key function of law enforcement and the prison system. Allusions to a new Jim Crow racism continue to have moral sway in some corners and retain the capacity to mobilize citizens in large numbers, but the analysis that underpins them is inadequate to provide the foundations for building left politics. If the current struggles are to become an aggregate force powerful enough to win concrete gains in terms of social justice, a critical first step is for activists to abandon this tendency to substitute analogy for analysis. The premise of black exceptionalism obscures contemporary social realities and actual political alignments and forestalls honest conversations about the real class interests dominating today’s neoliberal urban landscape.

### *The Roots of Black Ethnic Politics*

The familiar leftist lore of Black Power is one of a heroic movement, a time when black denizens rose up in insurrection against imperialism on foreign shores and in the heart of the nation’s cities, a movement where revolutionary dreams of black liberation were crushed by state repression. The broad outlines of this story are true, but the history of Black Power is more complex. The origins of Black Power rest in the unique social and demographic realities of black urban life after World War II and, equally, in the social consequences and limits of the Second Reconstruction: liberal policy reforms produced by the interplay of

civil rights movement pressure and the presidential administration of Lyndon B. Johnson, which abolished legal segregation in the South and integrated blacks as consumer-citizens.

Black mass migration after World War II and the segregative dynamics of housing policy under the Harry Truman presidency created the social preconditions for this era of reform and black urban empowerment. A manifestation of real estate industry power, the 1949 Housing Act set in motion the radical spatial transformation of American cities, earmarking funds for urban renewal and public housing construction and creating federally insured mortgages for suburban single-family-home purchases — measures that combined to produce the urban-suburban wealth inequality that would define American public life for more than a half-century.

Housing discrimination and ethnic-enclave settlement patterns limited most blacks to the same proximal urban neighborhoods, even though those black ghettos were internally stratified along class lines, with the black middle class occupying better, safer housing stock.<sup>2</sup> Postwar urban renewal further concretized this residential apartheid, as federal interstate highways and other massive public projects bisected black neighborhoods, dispersing residents, destroying the urban fabric, devaluing adjacent property, and often serving as physical walls dividing black areas from those of other ethnicities. Slum clearance and the construction of tower-block housing, which were widely supported by downtown commercial interests and social reformers, momentarily improved the environs of those previously relegated to dangerous, unsanitary tenement conditions, but these developments were in effect a form of vertical ghettoization.

During the same epoch, the peacetime industrial demobilization undermined many black workers' attempts to find gainful employment and earn a living wage. Given their status as newcomers in many industries, they were among the first to be handed pink slips during cyclical downturns. The relocation of manufacturing facilities from city centers to suburban greenfields and the ongoing adoption of labor-saving production technology further diminished job prospects for less skilled and less educated black urban newcomers. Chrysler

2 Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940–1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Preston H. Smith II, *Racial Democracy in the Black Metropolis: Housing Policy in Postwar Chicago* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2012); Beryl Satter, *Family Properties: How the Struggle over Race and Real Estate Transformed Chicago and Urban America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009); N.D.B. Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Making of Jim Crow South Florida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

autoworker James Boggs was among the first black intellectuals to offer a critical left perspective of industrial automation, cybernetics, and their political implications within and beyond the factory gates.<sup>3</sup> Boggs referred to the black men he increasingly saw standing idle on Detroit street corners as “outsiders,” “expendables,” and “untouchables,” those who were among the first to experience technological obsolescence and had little hope of industrial integration. This figure of black unemployed youth during the late fifties and early sixties should have served as a miner’s canary, a harbinger of the precarious conditions produced by labor arbitrage and technology-intensive production, as well as plain and simple prolonged recession and rationalization of the work force by way of speed-up. But their plight was drowned out in the high tide of postwar economic prosperity during the 1960s and early 1970s; in liberal circles, their condition was explained in a manner that disconnected the black urban poor from the rest of the working class. Black Power militants would speak directly to these conditions of unemployment and ghetto isolation, but their movement did not only emerge from below in response to the oppressive conditions facing the ghetto/black urban population, as is commonly asserted. Rather, it was also encouraged by liberal statecraft from above.

Historians of the Black Power era tend to neglect the relationship between its popular manifestations and Johnson’s War on Poverty initiative. This is an unfortunate oversight that may stem in part from the desire of some scholars to valorize black self-activity. But the resulting interpretive bias has no doubt stalled the development of analyses that fully appreciate the complex origins and built-in limitations of Black Power as a sociopolitical phenomenon. Even before “Black Power” became a popular slogan, one that was simultaneously edifying to many blacks who desired real self-determination and frightening to some whites who associated it with violent retribution, liberals in the Johnson White House were retailing their own version of black empowerment: one that addressed class inequality, but in a language of ethno-cultural exceptionalism.

Johnson’s assistant secretary of labor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, took the lead in this regard, authoring his report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* to build support for progressive legislation addressing urban poverty. In his 1965 Howard University commencement address, Johnson best summed up the core assumption of the Moynihan report when he asserted, “Negro poverty

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3 James Boggs, *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker’s Notebook* (New York: Monthly Review, 1963).

is not white poverty.”<sup>4</sup> Working under this notion of Negro exceptionalism, Moynihan argued that black poverty amid white prosperity was due to a combination of institutional racism and the alleged cultural pathology of the black poor themselves. This “culture of poverty” sentiment was widely embraced by Moynihan’s contemporaries, including such diverse figures as anthropologist Oscar Lewis, sociologist Kenneth Clark, and even democratic socialist Michael Harrington.<sup>5</sup> Yet some Black Power elements would also accept this culturalist argument, even if their politics were more radical — recall the Black Panthers’ formative position on the lumpenproletariat, which cast this substratum as dysfunctional but potentially revolutionary. This Cold War turn toward cultural explanations of minority poverty within the liberal wing of the New Deal coalition marked a rejection of the class-centered politics that had defined both the labor militancy of the interwar period and the political orientation of the postwar civil rights movement.

The shifting terrain of working-class consciousness and politics within American life during the sixties was the direct result of decades-long inter-related processes. Progressive labor activism was undermined in part by the rise in wages and benefits that resulted from the high levels of investment and employment that came with the long postwar boom, and which provided the basis for the expansion of a normative middle-class ideal of homeownership and leisure consumption. It was tamed, too, by the anticommunist witch-hunts that targeted unions, left parties, civil rights organizations, and Hollywood. Reflecting the balance of class forces during the 1930s, the New Deal was a tangible expression of the interests of particular blocs of capital as well as the outcome of constraints that workers and popular movements imposed on capitalism.<sup>6</sup> The National Recovery Administration sought to address the capitalist contradictions that led to the 1929 stock-market crash and ensuing crisis, the weak regulation of the financial markets, and the surplus-absorption problem stemming from the lack of effective demand for manufactured goods. The 1935 Wagner Act’s formal recognition of the right to organize was intended to stabilize labor-management relations and provide a means for resolving disputes in a manner that did not disrupt production and capital flows. This legislation

4 Lyndon B. Johnson, “Commencement Address at Howard University: ‘To Fulfill These Rights,’” June 4, 1965, <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/650604.asp>.

5 See Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1962); Kenneth Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

6 Rhonda Levine, *Class Struggle and the New Deal: Industrial Labor, Industrial Capital and the State* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1988).



responded to the massive pressure from below that came with the explosion of labor militancy that culminated in three great urban general strikes in 1934. Those strikes had the effect of stimulating a wave of shop-floor organizing led by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which was founded in 1935 as a breakaway from the more conservative, craft-oriented American Federation of Labor. Through militant tactics and vigorous organizing, the CIO succeeded in unionizing workers in factories, steel mills, shipyards, docks, and packinghouses throughout the United States and Canada. In response to a wave of CIO-led strikes after the war, Congress passed the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act, which criminalized solidarity and the general strike, signaling the effective end of the era of CIO militancy — the organization was reunited with the AFL in 1955 — and ushering in a period of mostly business-centered labor relations.<sup>7</sup>

Contrary to the popular view of the fifties as an era of mass quiescence, labor unrest continued through the decade, but the expansion of the consumer society and the growth of suburbia weakened progressive unionism. The hearts and minds of many American workers were won over to capitalist growth imperatives through the promise of rising wages, spacious tract housing, the personal mobility of automobile culture, and the enlarged leisure industries reflected in television, drive-in theaters, and shopping malls. The pastoral and technological comforts of suburbia reminded Americans of capitalism's virtues, while active state repression prescribed clear social consequences to those who dared openly criticize the system's contradictions and faults.

Beginning with the Palmer Raids of 1919 and 1920, where socialists and anarchists were rounded up, arrested and deported, the US state and local police took a more prominent role in repressing workplace organizing. With the creation of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the national state consolidated, enlarged, and rationalized the policing of working-class militancy that in earlier moments of class struggle had been undertaken by Pinkerton saboteurs and hired guns. Reliance on repressive forces at the state and local level played an important part in limiting the impact of workers' mass militancy in the early New Deal years. After World War II and as US-Soviet tensions sharpened with the instigation of Truman, the ruling class undertook a concerted campaign to extinguish Communist influence within domestic trade unions. The campaign against the radical left, led by Congressman Joseph McCarthy's House Committee on Un-American Activities, blacklisted and harassed scores of citizens suspected of

<sup>7</sup> Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 114–120.

Communist sympathy and took an obsessive interest in rooting out reds in the Screen Actors Guild, given the enlarged role of television and movies in shaping American leisure culture, romantic sentiments, and political dispositions.

McCarthyism was especially consequential for the struggle to defeat Jim Crow, since the Communist Party (CP) had played a pivotal role in addressing the “Negro question” during the interwar period through the Scottsboro Boys trials, the formation of the National Negro Congress (NNC), and organizing black sharecroppers in the Deep South. Black and white leftists with ties to the CP and the union movement also built powerful support networks and activist training programs, such as the Highlander Folk School. Red-baiting destroyed careers and reputations, bred suspicion and distrust within the Left, and had a chilling effect on the postwar civil rights movement, bolstering liberal integration as the most viable option for black emancipation within the Cold War context. Liberal antiracism found traction in this context of defeated labor militancy, one where open class analysis and commitment to socialist revolution often spelled financial and personal ruin for those who dared stray from the emergent Cold War rules of acceptable political discourse.

In his analysis of how liberals like Moynihan came to separate race and class, historian Touré Reed reminds us that during the interwar period, through World War II, and well after, organizing based on class was widely accepted as an effective way for blacks to amass power and secure economic gains — specifically participation in the dynamic labor movement of the era. Civil rights leaders like A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters union and the wartime March on Washington Movement, Lester Granger of the National Urban League, Walter White of the NAACP, and John P. Davis of the NNC all “frequently argued that precisely because most blacks were working class, racial equality could only be achieved through a combination of anti-discrimination policies and social-democratic economic policies.”<sup>8</sup> Some latter-day Black Lives Matter activists, Reed notes, might well reject such a position, which was commonly held by labor and civil rights veterans during the sixties, as “vulgar class reductionis[m].” Although he would increasingly embrace a politics of insider negotiation during the sixties, veteran activist Bayard Rustin insisted

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8 Touré F. Reed, “Why Liberals Separate Race from Class,” *Jacobin*, August 22, 2015, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/08/bernie-sanders-black-lives-matter-civil-rights-movement>; Touré F. Reed, “Why Moynihan Was Not so Misunderstood at the Time: The Mythological Presence of the Moynihan Report and the Problem of Institutional Structuralism,” *Nonsite* 17, September 4, 2015, <http://nonsite.org/article/why-moynihan-was-not-so-misunderstood-at-the-time>; William P. Jones, *The March on Washington: Jobs, Freedom and the Forgotten History of Civil Rights* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013).

that black progress could only be achieved through the development of broad, interracial coalitions dedicated to social democracy, a position that drew the ire of some Black Power radicals.<sup>9</sup> The social-democratic perspective touted by Randolph, Rustin, and others was clearly expressed in their 1966 *Freedom Budget* and actually continued to resonate throughout the decade — perhaps most famously in the 1963 March on Washington but also, for example, in the Memphis sanitation workers' strike actively supported by Martin Luther King. But this political tendency was ultimately eclipsed by the liberal Democratic focus on racial discrimination and the culture of poverty as distinct problems, separate from the labor-management accord, unionization, and matters of political economy.<sup>10</sup>

The liberal decoupling of race and class supplanted more radical versions of working-class left politics with far-reaching political consequences, operating now as a form of common sense. During the sixties, this view of Negro exceptionalism filled the vacuum left by interwar labor militancy. It gained traction with the deepening physical separation of black and white workers, which came with the spatial transformation of cities that sent white workers and much industry to the suburbs and left blacks in the urban ghettos. Moreover, by framing the problem of black poverty in terms of discrimination and alleged cultural pathology, liberals, who were now strongly allied with capital, systematically failed to address structural unemployment and the prevalence of nonunion, unprotected employment, two of the root causes of durable poverty among urban blacks. Liberal antipoverty efforts were limited, as many black activists readily pointed out at the time. Unlike the New Deal legislation, which expanded collective bargaining rights and public works, the Johnson administration's Great Society legislation took care not to upset the lucrative patronage relations between the federal government and private contractors in the construction and defense sectors, central motors of the postwar economic boom. The Great Society was limited in its capacity to end black urban poverty but powerful in terms of its political impact, as it subsidized and legitimated the expansion of a postsegregation black political elite.

The Johnson administration oversaw a period of domestic social reform that restored black civil rights and went a step further in providing various forms of targeted aid to address racial and urban inequality. Historian Kent

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9 Bayard Rustin, "'Black Power' and Coalition Politics," *Commentary* (September 1966): 35–40; Bayard Rustin, "The Failure of Black Separatism," *Harper's*, January 1970.

10 A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, *A Freedom Budget for All Americans: A Summary* (New York: A. Philip Randolph Institute, 1967).

Germany examines how War on Poverty reforms were implemented in New Orleans and their consequences for the growth of the black professional-managerial class there. He characterizes the War on Poverty approach as a soft state, “a loose set of short-term political and bureaucratic arrangements that linked together federal bureaucracies, neighborhood groups, nonprofit organizations, semipublic political organizations, social agencies, and, primarily after 1970, local government” to distribute federal funding to predominantly black neighborhoods.<sup>11</sup> The Community Action Program, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), Head Start, and Job Corps, as well as the 1966 Demonstration Cities legislation, were especially supportive of Black Power’s genesis and evolution.

These various programs of the War on Poverty encouraged black political incorporation along the established lines of ethnic patron-clientelism and nurtured a discrete form of bourgeois class politics, one that mobilized and rewarded the most articulate elements of urban communities of color. The Community Action Program sought the “maximum feasible participation” of the urban black and brown poor in devising solutions to their collective plight. The result was a form of ethnic empowerment that eventually enabled black constituencies to wrest control from white ethnic-dominated governments in many cities, but which also averted a working class-centered politics by institutionalizing the view that racial identity and political constituency were synonymous.

As it turned out, Black Power militancy and the managerial logic of the Great Society were symbiotic. Figures as diverse as Newark mayor Kenneth Gibson and Black Panther Party co-founder Bobby Seale participated in and led anti-poverty programs. The Community Action Agencies provided established black leadership, neighborhood activists, and aspiring politicians with access, resources, and socialization into the world of local public administration. Moynihan later claimed that “the most important long-run impact” of the Community Action Program was the “formation of an urban Negro leadership echelon at just the time when the Negro masses and other minorities were verging towards extensive commitments to urban politics.” Recalling the quintessential political machine of Gilded Age New York, Moynihan concluded that “Tammany at its best (or worse) would have envied the political apprenticeship provided

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<sup>11</sup> Kent B. Germany, *New Orleans after the Promises: Poverty, Citizenship and the Search for the Great Society* (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 15–16.

the neighborhood coordinators of the anti-poverty programs.”<sup>12</sup> Although Black Power evocations of Third World revolution and armed struggle carried an air of militancy, the real and imagined threat posed by Black Power activists helped to enhance the leverage of more moderate leadership elements, facilitating integration and patronage linkages that delivered to them urban political control and expanded the ranks of the black professional-managerial stratum. The threat of black militancy, either in the form of armed Panther patrols or the phantom black sniper evoked by public authorities amid urban rioting, facilitated elite brokerage dynamics and political integration. Instead of abolishing the conditions of structural unemployment, disinvestment, and hypersegregation that increasingly defined the inner city, Black Power delivered official recognition and elite representation.

Two of the most influential texts of the period, Harold Cruse’s *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* and Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton’s *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, both published in 1967, naturalized the rise of Black Power as entailing the black electoral takeover of urban politics by interpreting it in terms of the so-called ethnic framework, which saw the integration of successive waves of immigrants into American life by way of city government and its fruits.<sup>13</sup> In his opening chapter, “Individualism and the Open Society,” Cruse, implicitly adopting a liberal pluralist perspective, argued that American society was essentially organized through various social groups, with “ethnic blocs” being the most powerful.<sup>14</sup> He claimed that civil rights were a meaningless abstraction outside of the formal, influential political groups that could give them material and practical force. Following this logic, blacks possessed few rights, according to Cruse, because black leadership had failed to act in the nationalistic manner historically pursued by other ethnic groups. Carmichael and Hamilton concluded, in a similar vein, that “group solidarity is necessary before a group can operate effectively from a bargaining position of strength in a pluralistic society.”<sup>15</sup> Many argue that the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense represented a more revolutionary alternative to this more conservative black ethnic politics, and to a considerable extent it did. But it must be pointed out that the embrace by some

12 Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding: Community Action in the War on Poverty* (New York: Free Press, 1970).

13 Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: William Morrow, 1967); Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).

14 Cruse, *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, 9–10.

15 Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 44–45.

Panthers and other black radical organizations of the colonial analogy and other versions of black exceptionalism abided the same logics.

Organizations like the Black Panther Party fought against police violence, hunger, and slum landlords and mobilized local communities in solidarity with Third World liberation struggles. Creative intellectuals, artists, and musicians affiliated with the Black Arts Movement also unleashed a short-lived urban renaissance in which local black communities dreamed of a world where ghettos were seen not as zones to be escaped and abandoned, but as spaces that might be reborn, giving rise to a popular democratic urbanism not possible under the segregation and exploitation most blacks endured. Unlike the civil rights movement, however, which over the course of decades amassed the resources and popular support needed to wage a successful fight to defeat Jim Crow segregation, Black Power's radical tendencies attained mass resonance but never achieved truly national popular support for the revolutionary projects they advocated.

This crucial distinction between movement notoriety and actual popular power is conflated within the scholarship and folklore of Black Power.<sup>16</sup> Certainly, during the sixties and seventies, some whites supported the Panthers during their highly publicized court cases; many also funded the legal defense of jailed Panthers, because such imprisonment was on false grounds and threatened the rule of law and judicial due process. Others rallied alongside Panther cadre in opposition to the Vietnam War or supported specific initiatives, like their survival programs. But how many middle-class or working-class Americans fully embraced the party's call for socialist revolution, as they had the civil rights movement? And was this perspective, one inflected with Third Worldism and allusions to armed struggle, at all suited to the affluent, advanced industrial society in which it was propagated? These are questions that latter-day historians and fans of the Black Power movement have, for the most part, failed to answer or even to pose.

The interplay of patronage, solidarity, and surrogacy that defined relations between Black Power radicals and New Leftists obscured the deeper challenges that pervasive anticommunism and the intimate relation between commercial Keynesianism, local economic growth, and middle-class living standards and cultural expectations all posed for the development of a left revolutionary politics during this period. Mass demonstrations, urban rebellions, police

<sup>16</sup> Cedric Johnson, "Panther Nostalgia as History," *New Labor Forum* 23 (2): 112-15.

repression, and assassinations signaled a crisis of legitimacy for the nation's governing institutions and gave the impression of imminent revolution, but these events and the rhetorical excesses of the age also concealed the depth of social cleavages, the resiliency and unity of the ruling class, and the extent of conservative political commitments within the broader populace. In this context, black revolution was political theater for too many white Americans, rather than a project that connected effectively with their anxieties, daily struggles, and desires.

The failure to build powerful working-class solidarity during this particular historical juncture, of course, does not fall solely on the shoulders of Black Power radicals, who were often more courageous than any other political element in naming the system's failures and advancing a critique of imperial power, even under the threat of repression and death. If Black Power radicals tended to see urban black life as fundamentally distinct from that of whites, organized labor failed in the same regard, proving to be either unable or unwilling to invest in both cross-sectoral and intercommunity organizing — in other words, organizing the working class as a class *for itself*. This was, of course, a legacy of Taft-Hartley and the turn to K Street-oriented unionism, but it was an especially acute problem during the seventies and eighties, when the ruling class set about organizing to break the power of unions and roll back redistributive social policy.

Writing at the dawn of the Nixon era, Bay Area-based writer and activist Robert Allen was especially perceptive in grasping the nascent political realignments occurring underneath the pronouncement of the most militant demands of Black Power, and the role that the black professional-managerial class would play in the emerging political-economic order. Allen concluded that

the white corporate elite has found an ally in the black bourgeoisie, the new, militant black middle class which became a significant social force following World War II. The members of this class consist of black professionals, technicians, executives, professors, government workers, etc. . . . Like the black masses, they denounced the old black elite of Tomming preachers, teachers, and businessmen-politicians. . . . The new black elite seeks to overthrow and take the place of this old elite.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Robert Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America: An Analytic History* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 18–19.

To accomplish this, Allen continued, “it has forged an informal alliance with the corporate forces which run white (and black) America.”<sup>18</sup> Limited but significant political integration had changed the face of public leadership in most American cities, with some having elected successive black-led governing regimes. In retrospect, the Black Power movement was a transitional stage where black popular discontent diversified the nation’s governing class.

The process of black Democratic Party incorporation was already under way but still in flux when Johnson signed omnibus civil rights reforms and initiated the political recruitment strategies of the War on Poverty. The previous generation of black political elites like Chicago’s William L. Dawson and Archibald Carey Jr., who began their political careers before World War II, had done so in the “Party of Lincoln.” A few, like Massachusetts senator Edward Brooke, remained in the Republican ranks even as the Southern desegregation campaigns gave way to the demand for Black Power. Already, during the 1960s, some black Democrats were being elected in those cities where the postwar migration had expanded the black population into a coveted voting bloc, and this first generation of black elected leadership remained largely committed to protecting the gains of the civil rights movement and what remained of the social welfare state.

During the seventies and eighties, many black-led city regimes actually succeeded in reducing incidences of police brutality against black citizens.<sup>19</sup> But that success in regulating police misconduct was short-lived, produced by the contingency of liberal black political leadership, integrating police departments, and the presence of activist black publics. This period of reform was largely brought to an end with the onset of the Reagan years, which witnessed the escalation of the War on Drugs, the horrifying rates of drug-related and gang violence that accompanied the crack epidemic, and the concomitant expansion of the carceral state. The achievements of the brief era of black-led police reform should remind us of the possibility of effective public remedy, but also of the limitations of Black Power. The efforts of black mayors and city-council majorities to curb police violence in the seventies and eighties were overrun by national and state-level forces that sought to manage growing inequality and impoverishment through incarceration; black politicians and constituencies who supported the War on Drugs were instrumental in legitimating and advanc-

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Adolph Reed Jr., “Black Urban Regime: Structural Origins and Constraints,” in *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Postsegregation Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 97.



ing those efforts. The turn to neoliberalism within the Democratic Party and the parallel collapse of the New Deal coalition have since transformed black political life, rendering appeals to big-tent race unity and the pursuit of traditional racial redress anachronistic. Such changes have facilitated the rise of a new black urban political leadership that has been consolidating its power through forging ever more extensive commitments to Democratic Party neoliberalism. This is the historical terrain of the Movement for Black Lives: one where reform is possible, but the forces arrayed in support of the carceral state cannot be explained in black and white.

### *The Movement for Black Lives and the Neoliberal Landscape*

The contemporary Movement for Black Lives is a diverse phenomenon — horizontal, decentralized, and driven by organizations like #BlackLivesMatter; the Dream Defenders; the Black Youth Project 100; Assata's Daughters; Freedom, Inc.; Southerners on New Ground; Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle; and dozens of other youth groups, black student unions, and community-based organizations. Contemporary protests have found broad support among liberals, black nationalists, socialists, clergy, politicians, and civil-liberties advocates. More than their predecessors, the activists now leading the fight against police and vigilante violence have foregrounded feminist and queer-affirming perspectives, demanding a culture of respect and participation to redress the historical dominance of civil rights and black political activism by heterosexual, male, and often religious leadership. As these struggles have grown in size and in their capacity to disrupt the normal order, like all social struggles they have developed their own subculture, with dedicated protest chants, memes, songs, and tactical styles and with youth activists sometimes referring to themselves as the new vanguard. As with the turn to Afrocentricism and black-nationalist-inflected rap music during the waning years of the Reagan-Bush era, the aesthetic politics of Black Power militancy have been resurrected, complete with clenched-fist salutes; talk of black consciousness, self-help, and black love; and an insistence that race unity is a prerequisite for effective political action.

The 2016 *Vision for Black Lives* agenda is a platform containing a battery of demands that connect police violence to broader matters of inequality. It reflects the real potential of the Black Lives Matter tendency but also the

extent to which its activism remains mired in unhelpful assumptions about the liberal-democratic political process. The *Vision* agenda was released by activists in the aftermath of national protests of the police killings of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and Philando Castile near Saint Paul, Minnesota. The agenda also appeared after two black snipers killed police officers en masse in two separate incidents, after which Black Lives Matter protestors faced a wave of denunciation by “Blue Lives Matter” reactionaries. The agenda’s preamble boldly declares, “Black humanity and dignity requires black political will and power . . . We are a collective that centers on and is rooted in Black communities, but we recognize we have a shared struggle with all oppressed people; collective liberation will be a product of all of our work.”<sup>20</sup>

The *Vision for Black Lives* agenda contains an impressive list of left policy planks such as universal basic income, demilitarization of policing, an end to money bail, decriminalization of sex work and drugs, strengthening collective bargaining, and building a cooperative economy. If ever realized, it would go a long way toward creating a more just and civilized society. Some have cheered the agenda’s release as a major step toward consolidating power and as a marked departure from the kind of expressive politics that defined Occupy Wall Street, where anarcho-liberal political tendencies were openly hostile to the idea of making demands on the state. I agree with these observations in part, but the agenda and its underlying political assumptions nonetheless inherit many of the problems of Black Power politics and, quite honestly, fail to learn from the last half-century of black political development.

Not enough of those who have championed the agenda have critically reflected on the problems surrounding the pursuit of similar black agendas historically. Historian Robin D.G. Kelley praises the agenda as “less a political platform than a plan for ending structural racism, saving the planet and transforming the entire nation — not just black lives.”<sup>21</sup> Although he is surely aware of the fate of comparable agenda-setting efforts since the Black Power era, Kelley does not pause to consider the patent limitations of this brand of identity politics and the glaring fact that, even if the black population achieved broad unity around this agenda, which is unlikely, that would not be enough to compel city councils, state legislatures, or Congress to pass any of its demands. Despite its progressive aspirations, the *Vision* agenda will likely succumb to the same prob-

20 Movement for Black Lives, “Vision for Black Lives,” August 1, 2016, <https://policy.m4bl.org>.

21 Robin D.G. Kelley, “What Does Black Lives Matter Want?” Boston Review, August 17, 2016, <https://bostonreview.net/books-ideas/robin-d-g-kelley-movement-black-lives-vision>.

lems as those produced during the Black Power movement because it proceeds from the specious view that effective politics should be built on the grounds of ethnic affinity rather than discrete political interests.

A comparable agenda was produced by participants at the 1972 National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana. Numbering in the thousands, that delegation was much larger, more politically integrated, and more broadly representative of the black population than the various organizations that produced the recent *Vision* agenda. And unlike today, when neoliberal politics unites both parties on matters of social policy, international trade, and economic development, at the time of the Gary Convention, the US Congress and the Democratic Party were still largely comprised of New Deal liberals and progressive urban politicians who broadly accepted the utility of state power to address racial discrimination and inequality. Despite this more favorable context and the actual political entrée and influence of the Gary delegates, little from their 1972 agenda ever materialized as local or national policy. Even before its closing gavel sounded, the convention delegation was rocked by defections over platform planks that supported Palestinian self-determination and an end to busing as a strategy for achieving school integration. Rather than developing into a means of maintaining black unity and collective power as organizers had hoped, competing groups and individuals marshaled the convention's national media exposure as means for bargaining with the mainstream parties.

The *Vision for Black Lives* agenda is not backed by the same kind of cadre of activists and veteran politicians who produced the 1972 Gary agenda. Those who crafted the *Vision* agenda are younger and less politically integrated, and some are openly suspicious of conventional partisan politics. It remains to be seen whether the Movement for Black Lives can develop a viable political approach capable of leveraging mass demonstrations into actual policy outcomes. In fact, when pressed to deal with this sort of basic tactical and strategic political question, some supporters dismiss them as antiquated and reformist. Yet without addressing these questions, producing a list of demands, no matter how visionary, will do little to end the current crisis and abolish poverty and racial inequality.

There are moments when the *Vision* agenda's framing of specific issues and policy proposals departs from the universal spirit of the 1972 Gary agenda and similar agendas produced during the sixties, like the 1966 *Freedom Budget*. A good illustration of this is where the *Vision* agenda turns to matters of political econ-

omy. In addition to voicing support for stronger workers' rights and protections, progressive taxation, and opposition to the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade bill, the agenda's economic justice section calls for "federal and state job programs that specifically target the most economically marginalized Black people, and compensation for those involved in the care economy."<sup>22</sup> But given the decades of backlash against means-tested social policy, it would seem that there would be some consideration of how to build popular support beyond the black population in our current political context. This would seem to require a willingness to push for universal public-works projects along the lines of the Civilian Conservation Corps — meaning a program that would be publicly financed, publicly managed, and subject to anti-discrimination regulation. The most progressive planks contained within the *Vision for Black Lives* agenda cannot be achieved without popular support and majority coalitions, but this version of identity politics, which aims high but remains narrowly committed to the ethnic paradigm, runs counter to those ends.

With some exceptions, the Movement for Black Lives more generally is guided by an understanding of political life that sees racial affinity as synonymous with constituency. This much is clear when the authors of the *Vision* agenda declare, "We have created this platform to articulate and support the ambitions and work of Black people. We also seek to intervene in the current political climate and assert a clear vision, particularly for those who claim to be our allies, of the world we want them to help us create." This passage assumes a rather simplistic view of black people's ambitions and interests and draws a false dividing line between the interests of blacks and non-blacks — "those who claim to be our allies." Clearly descendant from Black Power thinking, this statement presumes a commonality of interests among blacks and claims authority to speak on behalf of those interests with little sense of irony. Broad acceptance of the myth of a corporate black body politic authorizes the very elite brokerage dynamics that many younger activists dislike about established civil rights organizations.

Despite the insistence of some supporters that there is a progressive pro-working-class politics at the heart of Black Lives Matter activism, the rapture of "unapologetic blackness" and the ethnic politics that imbues various programmatic efforts will continue to lead away from the kind of cosmopolitan,

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22Movement for Black Lives, "Economic Justice," August 1, 2016, <https://policy.m4bl.org/economic-justice>

popular political work that is needed to end the policing crisis. There are, of course, different ideological tendencies operating within the Movement for Black Lives: radical, progressive, bourgeois and reactionary. The spats between Black Lives Matter's founders and those who sought to use the hashtag without their permission reflected a proprietary sensibility more suited to product branding and entrepreneurship than to popular social struggle. If the Gary Convention experience is the model here, then what we might expect is the fracturing of the Movement for Black Lives into different brokerage camps, each claiming to represent the "black community" more effectively than the other but none capable of amassing the counterpower necessary to have a lasting political impact.

Black Lives Matter co-founder Patrice Cullors gives a sense of this problem when she says that she will continue to work with black neoliberals because of their common racial affinity. "That I don't agree with neoliberalism doesn't encourage me to launch an online assault against those who do. We can, in fact, agree to disagree. We can have a healthy debate. We can show up for one another as Black folks inside of this movement in ways that don't isolate, terrorize, and shame people — something I've experienced firsthand."<sup>23</sup> Cullors is right when she asserts that political work involves building bonds of trust and a willingness to respect different opinions. But such work is best undertaken outside the echo chambers of social media, which most often encourage irresponsible rhetoric, amplify identitarian assumptions, and suffocate public spiritedness. Cullors mistakes the core basis of political life, however. Sustained political work is held together by shared historical interests, especially those that connect to our daily lives and felt needs, not sentimental "ties of blood."

Cullors and many other activists embrace the Black Power premise of the necessity of black unity, once expressed in phrases like "operational unity" and "unity without uniformity" and in familial metaphors about "not airing dirty laundry" and settling disputes "in-house." The problem with this sentiment is that it reduces the divergent political interests animating black life at any given historical moment to happenstance, external manipulation, or superficial grievance. As well, this call for black unity is always underwritten by the fiction that other groups have advanced through the ethnic paradigm, a view that is patently ahistorical and neglects the role of interracial alliances in creating a more demo-

23 Patrice Marie Cullors-Brignac, "We Didn't Start a Movement. We Started a Network," Medium, February 22, 2016, <https://medium.com/@patrissemariiecullorsbrignac/we-didn-t-start-a-movement-we-started-a-network-90f9b5717668#.ijqrll79q>.

cratic, just society. This line of thinking always assumes that there is something underneath it all that binds black people together politically, but that reasoning must always rely on some notion of racial essentialism and a suspension of any honest analysis of black political life as it exists.

Just as there were black elites poised to advance a version of Black Power as black capitalism and patron-clientelism, similar forces exist within the contemporary Movement for Black Lives. One schism that has grown more pronounced is between those who support privatizing education and others who view charter schools and market-oriented reforms as attempts to break teachers' unions and diminish accountability, universal access, and equality in public schools. Ferguson activists Johnetta Elzie, DeRay McKesson, and Brittany Packnett have allied themselves with Teach for America, an education privatization group that supplies nonunion, low-wage, and inexperienced teachers to urban school districts. Pro-charter advocate and Saint Paul activist Rashad Anthony Turner renounced Black Lives Matter after national organizers called for a moratorium on charter schools.<sup>24</sup> When we look at local conflicts over education, such as those over the school privatization efforts undertaken by deposed Washington, D.C., mayor Adrian Fenty and education-reform mercenary Michelle Rhee, the formation of the New Orleans Recovery School District, or the 2012 Chicago Teachers Union strike and Mayor Rahm Emanuel's subsequent neighborhood school closures and layoffs, we find blacks on both sides. In the fight to defend and improve public education, there is no unified "black interest" as such. In these instances, the assumptions of common racial interests run headlong into lived black politics and the diverse and conflicting constituencies operating within the black population at any given historical moment.

### *The Problem with Black Exceptionalism*

The Movement for Black Lives expresses black angst amid economic recession, home foreclosures and evictions, dwindling public relief, intense police violence, and prevailing social meanness, but the antiracist frame is inadequate for explaining the complex sources of this mass unease. We need to clarify the fundamental causes of contemporary inequality and the policing crisis, as well as the role of multicultural political elites and the humanitarian-

24 Beth Hawkins, "The Movement's Been Hijacked: A Black Lives Matter Leader Quits Over Public School Reform," *The 74 Million*, September 7, 2016, <https://www.the74million.org/article/the-movements-been-hijacked-a-black-lives-matter-leader-quits-over-public-school-platform>.

corporate complex in advancing the neoliberal project. To this end, a more critical approach to localized power and the actuality of racial representation might help activists better anticipate the forces and processes that cajoled and contained the 2015 mass protests in Baltimore and Chicago. In both these places, token firings, suspensions, and indictments of police, the dissipation of popular energy by nonprofits, and the opportunistic maneuvers of both black and white political elites of various stripes had the combined effect of deflecting mass pressure and preserving the status quo.<sup>25</sup> Liberal antiracism, with its core assumption of black exceptionalism, helps enable these social management dynamics because it overlooks the integrated nature of contemporary governance in many American cities and the crucial role that black elites can play in legitimating the current neoliberal order.

The hegemony of liberal antiracism stems from how well it stands in for an analysis of capitalist class relations. The spatial-economic reorganization of American cities after the Second World War — the creation of inner-city black public housing and suburban white single-family homes — entrenched black and white as the symbolic referents of class inequality in American public debate. Many whites who had endured tremendous hardship during the Great Depression improved their material condition by way of the historic post-war economic boom and the ensuing birth of the consumer republic, which for the first time made homeownership, quality education, job opportunities, and middle-class lifestyles available to them. During the same period, blacks were nominally integrated into the consumer society through civil rights pressure, anti-discrimination legislation and the arrival of black urban regimes that created a path to the middle class through public employment. During the 1970s, however, economic recession and labor force contraction, abetted by a national policy of urban neglect and ultimately neoliberalization, worked together to produce the hyper-ghettoization of the black poor. In the popular imagination, blackness became a synonym for poor, urban, indebted, uneducated, criminal, imprisoned, and dependent, even though the actual history and demography of the United States since the sixties finds African Americans in the minority for each of these categories, albeit overrepresented.

In that context, the Jim Crow analogy advanced by Michelle Alexander fails to provide an adequate empirical account of the social origins, motives,

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25 Cedric Johnson, "Afterword: Baltimore, the Policing Crisis and the End of the Obama Era," in *Urban Policy in the Time of Obama*, edited by James DeFilippis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 302–21.

and consequences of mass incarceration. Alexander emphasizes how the punitive policies of the War on Drugs were intended to, and did, adversely and disproportionately affect blacks.<sup>26</sup> To grasp this development, the Jim Crow analogy has proven to be a powerful and enduring concept for many activists, one that recalls the nation's undemocratic history and undermines popular claims that the country has reached a postracial epoch where colorblind meritocracy prevails. There are certainly some important parallels between the Jim Crow system and the contemporary prison state, in particular the many ways that convicted felons can be disenfranchised. Even after they have served their prison sentences, ex-offenders can lose the right to vote or participate in jury trials, to receive public assistance and federal student loans, to parental custody and visitation, and to gainful employment due to felon self-reporting requirements on job applications in many states. But the fact remains that the Jim Crow analogy obscures the actual material and social forces that have given rise to the carceral state, specifically the systematic production and reproduction of a surplus population by the contemporary model of capital accumulation that has driven the economy for decades.<sup>27</sup> As the long-term slowdown of investment and GDP growth, beginning in the 1970s, produced increasing numbers of (permanently) unemployed, neoliberals in both parties cut back the welfare state that had initially been established to provide social insurance to the jobless.

Contemporary patterns of incarceration and police violence are classed in a manner that is not restricted to blacks and whose central dynamics cannot be explained through institutional racism. Black professionals can still be subjected to police profiling and abuse; despite their different class position, they remain connected to working-class communities by way of social networks, kinship, and personal origins. These sociological aspects may help to explain the genesis and popularity of the Black Lives Matter hashtag, but they also obscure the essential historical motives of the policing crisis. The urban black poor should not be seen as exceptional because their ruination is an integral part of the broader political economy. Their plight as a reserve of contingent and unemployed labor is the consequence of neoliberal rollback, technological obsolescence, and informal-

26 Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010).

27 For critical treatments of Alexander's work, see Marie Gottschalk, *Caught: The Prison State and the Lockdown of American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 3-7, 119-67; James Forman Jr., "Racial Critiques of Mass Incarceration: Beyond the New Jim Crow," *New York University Law Review* 87 (February 2012): 101-46.



ization, not the revival of Jim Crow racism. The expansion of the carceral state since the seventies has come to replace the welfare state as the chief means of managing social inequality.

Sociologist Loïc Wacquant has used the term *hyperincarceration* rather than *mass incarceration* to more accurately describe what we are witnessing. US incarceration rates dwarf those of other advanced industrial societies, but aggressive policing strategies are not deployed en masse.<sup>28</sup> Rather than a system where all Americans are subject to arrest and incarceration, it is the relative surplus population, often confined to the ghettoized zones of the inner city, blighted inner-ring suburbs, and depopulated Rust Belt towns, who are routinely policed and imprisoned.

The racial justice frame simply does not adequately explain the current crisis of police violence, in which blacks are overrepresented but not the majority of victims. In 2015, there were 1,138 people killed by police in the United States, and of that number 581 were white, 306 were black, 195 were Latino, 24 were Asian or Pacific Islander, 13 were Native American, and the race/ethnicity of the remaining 27 was unknown.<sup>29</sup> Rather than prompting some version of “all lives matter” postracialism, these facts should encourage greater discernment on the part of those who want to create just forms of public safety. The unemployed, the homeless, and those who work in the informal economy or live in areas where that economy is dominant are more likely to be regularly surveilled, harassed, and arrested. Black Lives Matter activists posit universal black injury where, in fact, the violence of the carceral state is experienced more broadly across the working class. What is to be gained from adhering to political slogans that exclude certain victims and truncate the potential popular base for progressive reforms?

When confronted with the figure of the white convict, Alexander has argued that he is in fact “collateral damage,” the unintended victim in what is a fundamentally anti-black War on Drugs. Even when presented with

28 Loïc Wacquant, “Class, Race and Hyperincarceration in Revanchist America,” *Daedalus* (Summer 2010), 78; Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

29 *Guardian*, “The Counted: People Killed by Police in the U.S.” interactive database, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2015/jun/01/the-counted-police-killings-us-database> (accessed October 15, 2016); see also Lester Spence, “Policing Class,” *Jacobin*, August 16, 2016, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/08/baltimore-police-department-of-justice-freddie-gray/>; Adolph Reed Jr., “How Racial Disparity Does Not Help Make Sense of Patterns of Police Violence,” *Nonsite*, September 16, 2016, <http://nonsite.org/editorial/how-racial-disparity-does-not-help-make-sense-of-patterns-of-police-violence>.

the contradiction between the Jim Crow analogy and the class dynamics of incarceration, Alexander doubles down and seems to think that referring to nonblack prisoners as collateral damage is still a politically useful approach. “When a white kid in rural Nebraska gets a prison sentence rather than drug treatment he needs but cannot afford, he’s suffering because of a drug war declared with Black folks in mind,” Alexander contends. “And by describing white people as collateral damage in the drug war it creates an opportunity for us to see the ways in which people of all colors can be harmed by race-based initiatives or attacks that are aimed at another racially defined group.”<sup>30</sup> This is a terrible evasion, an attempt to cling to an ideological faith even when actual social conditions require a different approach. The prison expansion and the turn to militaristic hyper-policing are not motivated principally by racism. Whether in Chicago’s North Lawndale neighborhood or the Ozark country of southern Missouri, the process of policing the poor is orchestrated by the same diverse cast of beat cops, case managers, probation officers, district attorneys, public defenders, prison guards and wardens, social reformers, conservative and liberal politicians, weapons manufacturers, lobbyists, nonprofits, and foundations: a kind of social control complex that has been growing by leaps and bounds as poverty, cynicism, and the surplus population increase and the neoliberal era grinds on.

### *Building Popular Consensus, Organizing for Power*

The root cause of the contemporary policing and incarceration crisis is not then the prevalence of new Jim Crow racism, but rather the advent of zero-tolerance policing and prison as the dominant means of managing a huge and growing surplus population in an age where the nation has abandoned the use of state power to guarantee the most basic material needs and protection from market volatility. Of course, reviving the liberal welfare state is itself inadequate to address the current malaise. Contemporary movements must go beyond the limited social amenities extended by mid-twentieth-century capital and create a society where there are no disposable people and where the right to health care, education, housing, and to one’s creative capacity and time are not determined and circumscribed by compulsory wage labor.

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30 “The Struggle for Racial Justice Has a Long Way to Go: Michelle Alexander interviewed by Matt Pillischer,” *International Socialist Review* 84 (June 2012), <http://isreview.org/issue/84/struggle-racial-justice-has-long-way-go>.

What should, in any case, be clear is that black ethnic politics is not enough to achieve social justice at this historical juncture. The contemporary struggle against policing has inherited many of the assumptions about black political life and Black Power that took shape during the sixties, even as many activists have criticized the lethargy and conservatism of the black establishment. What we know as black politics is not transhistorical, but the result of Southern desegregation campaigns, Cold War liberal statecraft, and party-patronage machinery, which combined to integrate black politicians and local black constituencies into the New Deal Democratic coalition. Even before the end of Jim Crow segregation, black political life always contained internal ideological diversity and expressed varying class interests. Black political development since the sixties has had the effect of both consolidating an elite-driven politics and identifying the expressed interests of that stratum with those of the black population as a whole.

This belief in common black interest has persisted even as the main material-spatial basis for that mode of thinking, the class-diverse black ghetto of the middle twentieth century, has vanished. As the middle class has gained access to better housing options and as national and local elites advance a new revanchist project of public-housing demolition and gentrification, the old racial ghetto has been transformed into a class-exclusive zone. This changing class geography of the black population is reflected in the shifting meaning of the term *ghetto*, which has evolved from a sympathetic social designation in the mid-twentieth century to an epithet most often used to condemn the alleged cultural pathology of the hyper-segregated and over-policed black poor.

Many on the Left have taken a deferential posture toward Black Lives Matter. Some have celebrated this upsurge of activism as the return of black left militancy after decades of movement implosion and stagnancy. Even where they might disagree, many white leftists and some established black figures are clearly uncomfortable airing their ideological and strategic disagreements with millennial black activists for fear of being portrayed as insensitive or unsympathetic.

Those who assert that liberal antiracism is a necessary phase en route to a more viable working-class left politics either suffer from bad faith or are engaging in the worst form of pandering — namely, supporting black-led political tendencies uncritically as a means of demonstrating one's antiracist commitments. Those who trade in such patronizing behavior either have not

taken the time to study the history of black political life since the sixties or are simply willing to ignore the class contradictions that black communities share with the wider population. Those who cling to liberal antiracism and defer to essentialist arguments about black interests fail to see that a politics that builds broad solidarity around commonly felt needs and interests *is* a form of antiracism, one that we desperately need right now if we are to have any chance of ending the policing crisis and creating a more civilized society.

The hegemony of identitarianism has reshaped the terms of left political debate and action in at least three detrimental ways. First, it has engendered popular confusion about political life, leading many to falsely equate social identity with political interests. Second, it has distorted how we understand the work of building alliances not on identity as such, but on shared values and demonstrated commitment. Third, the practice of relying on racial or other identities as a means of authorizing speakers has had a corrupting effect on left political struggles. The result is a degraded public sphere where all manner of landmines prohibit honest discussion and impose limits on political constituency and left imagination, such as notions of “epistemic deference,” “mansplaining,” arbitrary stipulations about “being an ally,” and so forth.

Contemporary battles against police violence and the carceral state address the sharpest edge of late capitalism and represent the struggle of the most submerged segments of the working class to survive under alienated, brutish conditions. Discourses of black difference, whether in the form of Cold War liberal antiracism, the colonial analogy, or contemporary Black Lives Matter rhetoric, forestall the development of an analysis that would treat the black urban poor not as separate and unique but as a dramatic manifestation of the precarity that defines working-class life more generally.

Black Lives Matter protestors have advanced an inspiring set of demands but these will remain in the realm of the imagination without effective power. As popular slogans, Black Power and Black Lives Matter are both significant in opening the door to forms of social struggle that were not relegated strictly to the workplace but addressed to a broader late capitalist geography. To the extent that they remain circumscribed by notions of racial affinity, contemporary campaigns against police violence and the carceral state, like Black Power struggles decades before, will fall short of creating the kind of deep, expansive opposition needed to exact real change. Such struggles must craft broad popular support if they are to succeed where others have failed.

On that December evening when my kids and I joined a dozen or so Chicagoans to watch Samb's performance, I thought back for a moment to the live mannequins who amused the Christmas shoppers of my childhood. Back then, crowds stood fixated on floodlit store displays and wondered aloud how long the performer could remain in character. Samb's performance seemed to pose the question in reverse: Would *we* break from character? His haunting imagery urged us to separate historical process from nostalgia, and political life from consumerism. Without the kind of protracted political engagement and real commitment that stretches beyond cadre and mass demonstrations, we run the risks of reducing social struggle to expressions of consumer niche identity, like the T-shirts, viral memes, and nouveau race films that Black Lives Matter has already spawned. As Samb's provocation reminds us, we can draw inspiration from past heroics, but the solutions we need must be worked out in and for our times. The actual demography of hyper-incarceration and the policing crisis requires that we organize against inherited urban-suburban political divisions, daily habits, clichéd thinking, and familiar social relations to discover common interests and popular power. There can be no end to hyper-incarceration, the policing crisis, and the underlying inequality without the difficult work of taking power and imposing a more democratic and humane order.✧