The Historiography of the Struggle for Black Equality Since 1945

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At the dawn of the twenty-first century, there can be little argument that while the historical study of the black freedom struggle has flourished over the past two decades, the moral authority of the cause of racial justice has been eroded by the ascendancy of the political right. An enumeration of conservative attempts to dismantle the movement’s achievements of voting rights, anti-discrimination laws, and affirmative action over the past three decades would require many more pages than this essay contains (Franklin, 1993; Berry, 1994; Guinier, 1998). During the 1990s, historians have fared badly in the national debate over the meaning and legacy of the movement; the best of their work has been drowned out by the inflammatory soundbites of conservative politicians and pundits. The disfranchisement of thousands of African American voters in Florida in the presidential election of 2000 is only the most recent blow against the legacy of the postwar freedom movement. Issues of voting rights and democracy were slighted by the mass media, which covered the deadlocked election primarily as a matter for adjudication in the courts. It remained for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), movement veterans, and historians to break this silence, situating this violation of the Voting Rights Act in the context of the South’s disfranchisement of blacks and poor whites a century ago. That the majority of Americans have evidently reconciled themselves to such a patently undemocratic electoral process and outcome signals the triumph of conservative revisionists whose skillful merger of racial symbolism and the myth of a colorblind society has compelled historians of the civil rights movement to set the record straight.

Before conservative pundits raised the stakes by hijacking the national discourse on civil rights, the dispute over the interpretation of the movement pitted liberal historians against their radical counterparts. In 1988, Julian Bond criticized what he regarded as the reigning liberal interpretation of the movement. Speaking as both historian and a participant in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s (SNCC) voting rights campaigns, and referring specifically to the work of Allen Matusow, Bond disputed the tendency to blame SNCC activists for giving up on American liberalism and for their embrace of racial and revolutionary nationalism. In Bond’s view, “[w]e didn’t abandon liberalism; liberals abandoned [SNCC].” When civil rights and Democratic Party leadership closed ranks at the 1964 Democratic Convention against SNCC’s attempt to unseat the all-white Mississippi delegation,
SNCC’s already strained relationship with liberalism soured irreparably (Robinson and Sullivan, 1991, pp. 8–9). Bond criticized top-down, elite-centered accounts pre-occupied with the collapse of what was considered the triumphant southern phase of the movement. These accounts were silent on the role of SNCC and the movement’s antecedents, specifically the role of left-wing groups, including the Communist Party. For Bond, the community forged by SNCC organizers and local people in the lower South warranted further study. He hoped that future scholars would display more interest in the movement’s genesis than its demise.

It is sobering to consider Bond’s remarks in the aftermath of the Florida debacle. Recent history and historical analyses alike have underscored Bond’s view of the betrayal of American liberalism. Experience had taught Bond and his generation of activists that African Americans could not rely on American liberalism and federalism for redress of even the most egregious violations of their rights. Bond’s conclusion then (and one inescapable for us today) was that the impetus for democratic change had come principally from the movement itself, from those at the margins of American society who mobilized against the nation’s indifference to their plight; hence his call for more study of the contributions of the political left and his interest in the secular and religious circumstances that helped sustain a utopian community of resistance against terrifying odds.

As Bond voiced these views in 1988 in the teeth of the Reagan administration’s anti-black agenda and rhetoric (Franklin, 1993) as well as a disturbing increase in incidents of campus racism, other scholars would share Bond’s impatience with top-down, legalistic approaches to the movement (Payne, 1995). Central to this prevailing narrative were the responses of the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson administrations to racial crises, culminating in the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts (Meier and Rudwick, 1973; Brauer, 1977; Burk, 1984). For such scholars as Allen J. Matusow (1984), and later Robert Weisbrot (1990), the unraveling of the liberal consensus for civil rights was attributable to the divisive rhetoric of black militants.

Successive waves of revisionist historians, many of whom came of age during the 1960s, and including a younger generation of scholars radicalized by the unabashed racial retrenchment of the Reagan–Bush era, challenged many of the assumptions of this narrative of liberal good will betrayed by black militancy. Much of the recent scholarship on the movement rejects such triumphalism, doing so in the spirit of Justice Thurgood Marshall’s 1987 speech on the occasion of the bicentennial of the Constitution. Marshall punctured the celebratory mood of tributes to the Framers’ genius by reminding the nation that the Founding Fathers had produced a “defective” document that had compromised with slavery, “requiring several amendments, a civil war, and momentous social transformation to attain the system of constitutional government, and its respect for the individual freedoms and human rights, we hold as fundamental today.” One imagines that if Marshall had witnessed the electoral fraud in Florida, he, too, would have spoken out against the threat it posed to those freedoms and rights. Evidently those freedoms were less cherished than he supposed, certainly among the conservative majority on the Court that handed the Oval Office to George W. Bush.

Having as little patience for liberal triumphalism as Marshall, scholars revising both liberal interpretations and conservative distortions of them have produced narratives
structured by the rise and fall of black and interracial movements and projects. Many of these new studies seek to place persistent inequality and continuing attacks on the rights of minorities in historical perspective, and to recover the movement’s most far-reaching political and economic challenges to American society. Taken together, these studies have given us a more comprehensive vision of the postwar African American freedom movement, encompassing the North as well as the South, calling into question assumptions about periodization, and exploring the relationship between radical ideologies and agendas and those of civil rights liberalism. Moreover, acknowledging the coexistence of movements for African American and women’s rights, scholars have recently incorporated gender and sexuality as important modes of inquiry, fundamentally transforming our understanding of movements, organizational behavior, and leadership. The interest in gender politics has challenged male-centered accounts and granted long-overdue recognition to the contributions of black women to the movement. At the same time, gender analyses have focused attention on the movement’s internal tensions. No longer can scholars ignore the gendered aspects of oppression and resistance.

Given their engagement with the ongoing political and ideological struggles over civil rights, academic historians have been participant observers whose research has often been inseparable from the movement and its legacy. To study the movement for black equality, then, is to study the ways in which movement participants and their intellectual allies (including historians), policymakers, and opponents of civil rights employed competing visions of the history of race in America. While the participants may change, the contest within the courts, the mass media, and the academy over the meaning of the racial past and future, as analysis of the complicated racial demographics of the 2000 census proceeds, remains fundamental to American political culture.

With this in mind, I will examine some of the major interpretive trends in the study of the modern black struggle for equality in five interrelated areas. First and foremost, recent scholarship has foregrounded black agency and autonomy, disclosing the movement’s foundations in a tradition of African American resistance dating from Reconstruction onward. Second, this recovery of black agency has led scholars to examine the movement’s antecedents in the New Deal, liberal–left coalition from the 1930s to World War II, within which the labor movement provided an important social base for civil rights activism. Third, following the spate of studies of the movement and its leadership at the level of national politics, scholars have turned their attention to local and rural sites of the movement, emphasizing the struggle for voting rights and bottom-up organizing for black empowerment. Fourth, scholars have recently explored the international dimensions of the movement. Here, seemingly disparate local and international perspectives have merged in some scholars’ accounts of the movement. Indeed, the studies discussed in this section stress the interconnectedness in the minds of movement activists between local, national, and international settings.

Finally, surely some of Julian Bond’s misgivings about the field as he saw it stemmed from the absence, despite the proliferation of studies, of the rich milieu of black scholarship and activism that he had known as the son of the social science scholar and president of Lincoln University, Horace Mann Bond. Revisionist writers in the spirit of Bond’s challenge have begun to mine the analytical contributions of
an earlier generation of pioneering black studies intellectuals that were instrumental to freedom struggles. Indeed, these scholars’ and creative writers’ critiques of liberalism in the urban North during the 1940s and 1950s, along with their indictments of a reactionary segregated South, anticipated certain aspects of the Black Power phase of the movement.

**From the Nadir of Segregation and Disfranchisement to the Second Reconstruction**

It is impossible to do justice to the reflexive character of historical writing on the postwar movement without reference to the longer history of racial subordination in the South. During the 1960s, the historian C. Vann Woodward termed the modern civil rights movement the Second Reconstruction, noting that its reforms had restored the first Reconstruction’s short-lived commitment to voting rights and full national citizenship for African Americans. As a national policy, Reconstruction had ended with the Republicans’ withdrawal of federal troops from the South in 1877 as part of the settlement of the disputed presidential election of the previous year. Southern authorities resorted to violence and election fraud to elect Democrats hostile to African American rights throughout the region. The democratic potential of Reconstruction persisted, however, in biracial coalitions of Republicans and Populists, who throughout the 1880s and 1890s achieved electoral successes by promoting an economic agenda responsive to impoverished tenant farmers. The region’s ruling class and their political allies put an end to this challenge by disfranchising African Americans through appeals to white supremacy. But the disfranchisement amendments to state constitutions throughout the South between 1890 and 1906 also deprived many poor whites of the vote as well, consolidating the hegemony of powerful whites.

The historian Rayford Logan certainly had disfranchisement in mind in the 1950s when, following the crushing defeat of the wartime struggles for equality, he referred to the post-Reconstruction period as the nadir, or lowest point, of African American history. Logan’s term encapsulated the brutal system of racial domination that followed Reconstruction’s demise. That system was characterized by disfranchisement, legal segregation, and the widespread practice of lynching – the mob execution of African Americans in absence of the rule of law. Segregation, or its informal designation Jim Crow, described a network of state and local ordinances enforcing strict separation of blacks and whites in all spheres of public life, including schools, restaurants, movie theaters, public restrooms, and even cemeteries. Jim Crow constituted a total system of political, economic, and social domination. Under it, African Americans labored on plantations or in white households under conditions not far removed from slavery. In the South, the courts, juries, and police were controlled by powerful whites, maintaining the racial and economic status quo. To be sure, the North had its own history of racial subordination dating back to the transplanting of Africans as slaves in the colonial period. But by the late nineteenth century, while blacks in the North were plagued by racial and economic discrimination, prohibitions on rights were not as comprehensive, nor as deadly, as in the South.

The legal restrictions on blacks’ access to public accommodations were only part of the system of Jim Crow; its endemic violence shadowed the psyches of blacks as
well. Under segregation, the white South devised elaborate and mandatory rituals of racial deference to eradicate the spirit of freedom exhibited by blacks during Reconstruction. Terror was intrinsic to the system. The ghastly institution of lynching was the ultimate expression of white dominance. From the 1880s until 1964, it is estimated that almost 5,000 blacks died by mob violence, the overwhelming majority of those deaths occurring in the South. As if to obscure the lynching campaign’s political motivation, the white South rationalized its violence by projecting its own history of sexual misconduct onto black men. Statutes outlawing marriage between blacks and whites throughout the South bolstered both lynching and concubinage, the practice by which many white men claimed the rape of black women and girls as their birthright.

In 1896, when the Supreme Court held in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that state laws mandating segregation were “separate but equal” and thus constitutional, nine out of ten African Americans lived in the South. At its height, from the 1890s to 1964, the system of Jim Crow segregation exercised such total dominion over African Americans that for many years their only recourse was migration from the rural South, where poverty and repression were most severe. At the dawn of the modern civil rights movement during the 1950s, it remained for the one half of the nation’s population of 15 million African Americans still residing in the South to help usher in the Second Reconstruction that would restore the constitutionally sanctioned citizenship and voting rights destroyed under Jim Crow.

As an illustration of the inseparability of scholarship and activism, W. E. B. DuBois’s landmark study, *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), gave an eloquent defense of African American political participation, challenging the dominant accounts of pro-southern apologists, who, in scapegoating black citizenship, were nakedly propagandizing on behalf of the segregationist status quo. Du Bois’s study affirmed the democratic influence of African Americans on southern politics during Reconstruction. While the profession generally dismissed DuBois’s study, a handful of younger historians, including Woodward, communicated their appreciation to its author. While it remained fashionable for consensus historians of the 1950s to disparage the work for its Marxist content, DuBois had cleared a path not only for the scholarly rehabilitation of Reconstruction by John Hope Franklin and Kenneth Stampp during the 1960s, but also for the subsequent work of Thomas Holt, Nell Irvin Painter, and Eric Foner, all of whom highlighted African American political behavior as central to the era’s democratic promise.

Recent studies of the gendered dimension of African American responses to the crisis of Jim Crow have strongly suggested their continuity with modern freedom struggles. As Paula Giddings, Glenda Gilmore, and others have shown, African American women at the turn of the century organized in opposition to racial oppression, their efforts constituting a tradition of struggle linking them to the student sit-in demonstrators who revitalized the movement in 1960. Giddings’s groundbreaking work (1984) responded to the lacunae in both African American and women’s history that neglected black women’s activism. Her work contributed to scholarly investigation of the gender dynamics of the modern freedom movement. Gilmore’s work (1996) in particular was informed by some of the innovative work on black resistance to Jim Crow. Gilmore’s analysis placed black women suffragists in North Carolina at the vanguard of struggles for equal rights, thereby exposing the limitations
of earlier accounts of southern politics that were all too content to exclude marginalized groups who were, in fact, the main catalysts for social transformation.

African American Agency, Black Autonomy, and the Movement

In the 1930s, W. E. B. DuBois was a lone voice in emphasizing the indispensable contributions of the freedpeople to Reconstruction. Some generations later, with the democratization of the academy after the social movements of the 1960s, DuBois’s vision would be refined by many other scholars. Sociologist Aldon Morris challenged the tendency, even among some progressive scholars, to slight African American agency (Morris, 1984). Against the view of liberal scholars that Brown and other external factors initiated the modern civil rights movement, and contrary to radical scholars’ claims of the spontaneity of black protest, Morris emphasized “indigenous” organization and the strategic acumen of leadership as enabling the movement to command national attention through disruptive mass protest. Mass mobilization developed within a highly organized, autonomous black public sphere of churches and civil rights organizations, allowing the movement’s leadership to draw on a substantial reservoir of spiritual and material resources. Morris argued that the unsuccessful boycott against the segregated bus system in Baton Rouge in 1953 demonstrated that the modern civil rights movement was already underway, predating Brown. The ministers who led the Baton Rouge campaign drew up a blueprint that was to be followed by the leaders of the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955. Morris highlighted the sharing of tactical knowledge and resources among civil rights activists in different cities, and the importance of charismatic leadership. At the national level, as well as within the South, black churches were crucial centers for organization and fundraising. The culmination of black churches’ involvement was the Birmingham campaign orchestrated by Reverend Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC, a campaign that captured worldwide attention and compelled a reluctant President Kennedy to endorse sweeping civil rights legislation). In emphasizing the black community’s indigenous resources and strategizing, Morris criticized those accounts that focused on external influences and “third parties” (i.e., white liberal support), as well as the federal government, as dominant or determining actors in the movement. By foregrounding black organizational initiative and by calling attention to cross-generational traditions of struggle, Morris laid the foundation for much of what followed in civil rights historiography.

Clayborne Carson’s pioneering 1981 study of SNCC inaugurated a deeper interest in the southern radical wing of the movement, based largely in Mississippi, where the forces of white supremacy were arguably the most organized and violent. Carson also redirected attention to the rural sites of movement organizing, challenging the image of the movement as predominantly urban. Where Morris had identified charismatic leadership in the person of King and other ministers as an indigenous asset for the civil rights movement, Carson’s SNCC activists saw such charisma as at best double-edged, a power subject to compromise with the establishment, and as a fleeting presence within rural communities continually besieged by segregationist violence. As an alternative to the charisma manifested in the direct action campaigns of King and SCLC, which targeted segregation in selected cities in the hope of amass-
ing public support for federal civil rights legislation, SNCC’s grassroots organizing for voting rights sought the direct empowerment of blacks kept at the bottom of southern society. Moreover, a reliance on charismatic leadership clashed with the group-centered leadership philosophy of SNCC and its main exponents, Ella Baker and Robert Moses. In Carson’s nuanced account of the demise of SNCC, he argues that the organization’s embrace of black separatism pushed aside highly effective women leaders, especially Fannie Lou Hamer and Ruby Doris Robinson. While perhaps inevitable (in the sense that black separatism was imposed on SNCC from the outset, given the totality of white supremacy and racial subordination in Mississippi), the declaration of Black Power displaced SNCC’s movement culture, including its Freedom songs, which had been vital in forging community and helping conquer the fear generated by white violence. While Carson’s critique was more balanced than most, more sympathetic appraisals of Black Power would have to await scholarly inquiry into northern sites of movement activism.

**Labor, the Left, and African American Traditions of Resistance**

Aldon Morris’s and Clayborne Carson’s emphasis on group-centered leadership and rural activism sparked further investigation of traditions of black resistance. Their interest in black agency and the search for pre-Brown origins also led to influential work locating the southern movement’s beginnings in the progressive liberal–left alliances of the Depression era and World War II. A host of community studies of black politics, including those by Mark Naison (1983), Cheryl Greenberg (1991), Joe William Trotter (1985), and Earl Lewis (1991), rooted black activism in the urban migrations of black working people and their encounters with labor and the left. Many of these studies also highlighted community traditions of independent black politics dating back to Reconstruction. In these traditions of resistance scholars found a precedent for some of the initiatives in the 1930s against lynching and unemployment, including the “don’t buy where you can’t work” boycotts. The popularity of economic nationalism among African Americans during the Depression enhanced the appeal of trade unions and other left-wing organizations, including the Communist Party, as organizational vessels for African Americans’ ongoing agitation for racial and economic justice.

A productive tension developed between these seemingly disparate historical approaches emphasizing either internal or external factors within the study of black activism. The role of organized black workers as harbingers of the southern civil rights movement raised further questions about a black working-class consciousness that predated organizational activity. Precisely who were these people who eventually joined the NAACP, or such working-class organizations as unions and the Communist Party? What cultural practices, family histories, and memories of resistance did working-class African Americans bring with them into these organizations? An emerging synthesis merged community-based studies of the movement, scholarship on the roots of civil rights struggles in the campaigns of black workers and biracial unionism, and careful attention to the historical, cultural, and religious background that informed African American workers’ activism (Kelley, 1990; Honey, 1993).

Perhaps reflecting Cold War protocols, most previous scholarship on the movement had devoted cursory attention, if any, to the left and the Communist Party. Or,
on those rare occasions when scholars examined the relationship between civil rights and communism, they were unable to imagine African Americans with left-wing affinities as anything but the factotums of world communism (Record, 1951; Cruse, 1967). Such disregard for black agency and the totality of black struggles ensured their misrepresentation or erasure.

Moving beyond a Cold War mindset blind to the autonomy of black activism, Robin D. G. Kelley’s study of the Communist Party in Alabama before the Depression demonstrated that the unlettered black working people who joined the party in Alabama brought with them their own histories and cultural practices of resistance. Kelley explored “a culture that enveloped and transformed the Party into a movement more reflective of African American radical traditions than anything else” (Kelley, 1990, p. 99). Kelley noted the divergence between the left literati, the party’s proletarian writers whose stories depicted heroic workers in violent showdowns against anti-labor forces, and those pragmatic black communists in Alabama for whom guile and the evasive ways of trickster figures were essential survival tactics against potentially violent adversaries. Similarly, black communists cleaved to African American folk religion, updating traditional church hymns with radical lyrics in a synthesis far more relevant to their lives than party doctrine. Devout black communists thus inhabited an entirely different world than radical musicologists who were determined to extract secular “complaining” folk blues songs from black informants, not to mention those noncommunist black migrants to such northern cities as Detroit or Cleveland who were moved to save memorable editions of the Daily Worker or any encouraging news items from the black press. (My grandmother, whose family migrated to Cleveland from Birmingham in the 1940s, preserved several clippings, one of which exulted, upon the demise of the arch-segregationist Mississippi senator, BILBO DEAD!)

In acknowledging the contribution of the left, including such progressive organizations as the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC), in paving the way for subsequent struggles for civil rights, Kelley linked these organizations to an indigenous black culture of resistance dating back to Reconstruction. Kelley’s subsequent work drew on the political scientist James Scott’s notion of infrapolitics, through which Kelley characterized black working-class resistance in Birmingham since World War II as a hidden transcript of subaltern consciousness that motivated working-class African Americans’ sporadic acts of protest. Regardless of whether it dealt with blacks within or outside such organizations as unions or the Communist Party, the concept of infrapolitics brought the matter of black agency to the fore (Kelley, 1994). Kelley’s analysis of the ways in which black subjects remade putatively nonblack organizations in their own image was an invaluable advance beyond the simplistic and falsely racialized dichotomy of nationalism versus integration that hobbled both liberal and black nationalist accounts of the movement (Cruse, 1967; Weisbrot, 1990).

Along with Kelley, other scholars working at the crossroads of labor, southern, and African American history were exploring the roots of black struggles in the labor movement. In the late 1980s, Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein identified the urbanization of black America during the 1940s as the catalyst for the modern civil rights era. Sparked by wartime labor demands, the migration of over 2 million blacks to northern and western cities, and approximately 1 million from farms to cities within the South, fostered a group commitment to channel increased voting
strength into demands for equal rights. Within the South the number of black registered voters quadrupled, and membership in the NAACP skyrocketed, growing from 50,000 in 1940 to almost 450,000 in 1946. Drawing on research on urbanization, voting rights, and labor relations with the federal government, Korstad and Lichtenstein (1988) located black workers in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) at the vanguard of this early civil rights activism. Members of the alliance between labor unions and civil rights organizations had seized the opening provided by pro-labor New Deal legislation. Led by A. Philip Randolph’s March on Washington Movement, black workers had applied the political leverage that elicited President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Executive Order 8802 in 1941 calling for fair employment in war industries. But the conservative limits of federalism compelled exponents of this “workplace-oriented civil rights militancy” to push for racial justice against the government’s failure to endow the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) with enforcement powers. Here, as was the case after Brown, black activists would bear the burden of implementing the government’s anti-discrimination policies.

Korstad and Lichtenstein focused on two local union-based struggles for economic and racial justice, waged by tobacco workers in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and members of the United Auto Workers (UAW) in Detroit. Just as the war galvanized black aspirations nationwide, so it fostered among Winston-Salem’s black workers an expansive vision of struggle that extended beyond workplace issues to voter registration campaigns. Local initiatives produced the election of congressional and local representatives sympathetic to labor and civil rights causes, and the first black city official to be elected against a white opponent in the twentieth-century South. In Detroit, black members of the UAW Local 600 in the River Rouge Ford plant demanded more defense jobs. In 1942, they also defended black occupants of the federal housing facility, the Sojourner Truth Homes, against violent white opposition to integrated housing. Their numbers also swelled the ranks of the Detroit NAACP. After the war, black working-class insurgency was silenced by anti-communist purges, and the adoption by unions and civil rights organizations of a bureaucratic, or legal-administrative civil rights strategy. Korstad and Lichtenstein thus imagined an alternative, counterfactual course for the civil rights movement, an economic agenda linking both the North and South that might have spared the nation the chaos of urban rebellions and the controversy over the domestic war on poverty, whose cost was minuscule compared to the wasteful and catastrophic war in Vietnam. The authors noted that when Martin Luther King and others confronted the issue of economic inequality after 1965, they “were handicapped by their inability to seize the opportunities of a very different sort of civil rights movement found and lost twenty years before” (Korstad and Lichtenstein, 1988, p. 811).

The result of this work, taken together, was an account of a movement with deeper roots in traditional subcultures of African American resistance and white southern radicalism. In another synthesizing move, Patricia Sullivan highlighted the interaction between federal policy and movement activism in her account of the origins of the southern movement (Sullivan, 1996). For Sullivan, the crisis of the Depression and the New Deal’s federal relief programs created a wedge against southern states’ rights ideology. New Deal pro-labor policies energized southern liberals, and fostered a movement culture of progressive whites and black activists determined to extend the federal government’s involvement in the region’s economy to a more explicit
commitment to civil rights. From the 1930s through the wartime years, progressives and liberals targeted the system of disfranchisement, the denial of voting rights to most blacks and many poor whites, as the bulwark of the economic exploitation of the South’s black and white workers. The removal of suffrage restrictions, activists contended, coupled with voter education and registration campaigns, would revolutionize southern economic relationships, replacing conservative officials with representatives sympathetic to organized labor and New Deal reforms. New Deal labor-organizing drives, the democratic ideology of World War II, and such legal victories as *Smith v. Allwright* (1944), in which the Supreme Court declared unconstitutional the whites-only primary election for statewide office, lent momentum to this early incarnation of the southern movement.

By granting voting rights a central place in her narrative, Sullivan illustrated the continuities linking activism in the 1940s with the post-Montgomery movement that had been obscured by *Brown*-centered accounts. In 1944, the South Carolina Progressive Democratic Party elected its own slate of delegates to the Democratic National Convention in a challenge to disfranchisement and that state’s all-white delegation. Although it failed, this unprecedented challenge to the national Democratic Party’s collusion with Jim Crow was a strategy revisited by SNCC at the 1964 Convention. The guiding wisdom of Ella Baker was evident across generations of struggle. SNCC organizers embraced Baker’s group-centered leadership philosophy in their voter registration campaigns. Years before, in 1946, Baker had led an NAACP leadership training workshop that numbered Rosa Parks and E. D. Nixon (known for their involvement in the Montgomery movement in 1955) as participants. Nixon, a Pullman Porter, had become politically active during the New Deal, and during the 1940s led abortive voting rights marches to the Alabama board of registrars (Payne, 1995). Such continuities of struggle remain, however, part of a larger story of the adaptability of white racial hegemony and the fleeting nature of black progress.

With the advent of the Cold War, segregationists regained the upper hand, as the wartime rhetoric of racial inclusion was quickly discarded. The white South added anti-communist hysteria to its litany of racial and sexual epithets and taboos invoked to justify its violent defense of white supremacy. Sullivan concludes with the image of Progressive Party nominee Henry Wallace attempting to shout down hate-filled and menacing crowds while touring the South during his campaign for the presidency in 1948. Despite Truman’s verbal support for a civil rights platform in the 1948 presidential campaign, the postwar demands for voting rights raised by African American war veterans and others were thwarted in these years by the white South’s own tradition of violence, this time bolstered, in part, by Truman’s anti-communism.

**International Perspectives on the Movement**

Like the interpretation of Korstad and Lichtenstein, Sullivan’s work suggests that the Cold War was a major watershed. More than a devastating blow to the movement’s labor–left alliance, Cold War anti-communism imposed limits on much of the subsequent language and tactics of civil rights politics. Indeed, by writing against the prevailing Cold War logic, Patricia Sullivan and others revealed the limitations of viewing the movement solely within a liberal or “domestic” analytical frame. The
exclusion of left-wing influences impoverished our understanding of not only the movement itself, but the character of American liberalism as well. With recent studies placing African American civil rights struggles in the context of international relations and the Cold War, including those of Gerald Horne (1986), Brenda Gayle Plummer (1996), Penny Von Eschen (1997), and Mary Dudziak (2000), we have a better understanding of black activism, North and South, within the global developments of the Cold War and the decolonization of Asia and Africa.

In her study of the intersections of anti-colonialism, the struggle for civil rights, and the Cold War, Penny Von Eschen vividly recaptured the internationalism that shaped black public culture during the 1940s (Von Eschen, 1997). African American newspapers avidly reported the wartime collapse of European empires and campaigned for victory against Jim Crow in the United States as they supported the allies’ struggle against fascism overseas. In addition to a thriving black press, a host of middle-class black institutions, from churches, college fraternities and sororities, and civil rights organizations, supported the cause of African independence. Readers of the nationally circulated Pittsburgh Courier and the Chicago Defender, as well as a substantial segment of black leadership, were conversant with “the politics of the black diaspora,” characterized by the wartime linkage of African and African Americans’ movements for freedom. The leading exponent of this politics was the Council on African Affairs (CAA), a lobby publicizing colonial conditions, headed by the renowned singer and actor Paul Robeson, the doyen of black intellectuals W. E. B. DuBois, and the scholar and activist Alpheaus Hunton. Members of the CAA also included such prominent liberals as Mary McLeod Bethune, president of the National Council of Negro Women, and Walter White, executive director of the NAACP.

This diverse association of independent black radicals and civil rights liberals under the banner of anti-colonialism and desegregation collided head-on with the Cold War, which drastically altered the terms and tactics of civil rights activism. The CAA became a casualty of Cold War repression, which ostensibly targeted communists and their sympathizers, but which had an equally chilling effect on dissent in all forms, even from liberal quarters. Yet it was not anti-communism, per se, that explained the crackdown on the CAA. Rather, that organization and its leaders were targeted for linking US struggles against lynching and Jim Crow to the plight of darker peoples worldwide, an anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist vision that not only challenged the legitimacy of the United States, but also demanded economic and political democracy in America and abroad. Even the fervently anti-communist Richard Wright found that his support for anti-colonial movements, and his similar criticisms of the United States from self-imposed exile in France, made him an enemy of the US state. Paul Robeson had his passport revoked by the State Department, denying him the international forums from which he might have protested ongoing practices of lynching and disfranchisement. To shield the NAACP, and especially the Legal Defense Fund’s assault on “separate but equal,” from official suspicion, Walter White abandoned the linkage of civil rights to African independence and cleansed the NAACP of such potentially damaging radical voices as DuBois. In this bulldozed ideological landscape, all that remained was a liberal argument that advocated civil rights reform to rid the nation of the “Achilles heel” of racial segregation that undermined America’s claim to leadership of the “Free World.” In hoping to bend the repressive situation to their advantage, White and other African American liberals were important architects of
Cold War liberalism. Thus the scholarly emphasis on internationalism highlights the initiative of black protest, including black radicalism, as the catalyst for an essentially reactive, though no less hegemonic, US policy (Von Eschen, 1997; Dudziak, 2000).

The consequences of the Cold War era dismantling of a black radical democratic movement were profound, entrenching the movement’s subsequent reluctance to broach issues of economic inequality. That decisive turn of events, coupled with persistent poverty in the urban North exacerbated by deindustrialization and residential segregation, provides an important context, as well, for understanding the urban rebellions of the 1960s.

“Local People” on the National and Global Stage

Several important studies of the desegregation campaigns in local communities, including those by William Chafe (1980) and Robert Norrell (1985), have challenged the grand national narratives of consensus for civil rights, producing a clouded picture of uneven successes, protracted struggles, and the persistence of racism. These studies, along with Carson’s work on SNCC, paved the way for work on the local sites of the Mississippi movement that foregrounded voting rights as a direct challenge to Jim Crow. Much of this work was guided by the view that movements pre-dated and created leadership. In addition, the turn away from an emphasis on elite, national leadership and anti-discrimination campaigns, and toward the study of grassroots activism and struggles for voting rights in rural locations, opened up the question of the movement’s gender politics. This scholarship raised the long-submerged issue of sexism in the movement, including the male monopoly on leadership and the consignment of women to the invisible labor of clerical work, organizing, and fundraising. That said, this reappraisal of the movement framed by issues of gender has yielded revealing studies of such important and resourceful women leaders as Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, and Ruby Doris Robinson (Crawford et al., 1993; Lee, 1999). Along with the emphasis on group-centered leadership, the study of the movement’s gender politics has challenged the messianism of male-centered narratives that blinded earlier scholars and potential activists to the movement’s diversity and egalitarian promise.

For historians earning their doctorates during the 1980s as attacks on civil rights and the welfare state increasingly scapegoated black women, an analysis of the gender contradictions within the freedom movement was essential. In addition, the Reagan–Bush administrations promoted powerful black conservatives disdainful of the movement’s achievements (exemplified by Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas), and encouraged the divisive conservative rhetoric on race, poverty, and civil rights entering the 1990s, epitomized by Clint Bolick, Dinesh D’Souza, and Stephen and Abigail Thernstrom. Undoubtedly, these polarizing trends informed efforts by Charles Payne, John Dittmer, Vincent Harding, and other revisionist historians to display the movement’s moral and political achievements, and universal humanism. Reminding readers of the extraordinary courage with which organizers and local people confronted mortal danger, these historians explored the dynamic relationship between structural, historical, and subjective factors that made numbers of individuals “ready to move” in the face of white terror and intimidation and in defiance of calls from federal authorities and some local black leaders to “go slow.”
The confluence of domestic and global affairs in the Montgomery movement, the Little Rock school desegregation crisis, and the independence of several African nations helped spark an act of protest that galvanized black college students throughout the South. On February 1, 1960, four freshmen at North Carolina A&T college in Greensboro, North Carolina, demanded service at the whites-only Woolworth’s lunch counter. At Woolworth’s blacks could purchase the dime store’s merchandise, but were refused service at lunch counters. The students were not served and stayed until closing. Word of this and subsequent protests rapidly spread to black colleges throughout the South, generating hundreds of similar protests against segregated public facilities in southern cities involving over 70,000 students over the next year and a half. In that period over 3,000 were arrested. Prompted by this upsurge in student militancy, Ella Baker, then executive director of SCLC, convened a conference in April 1960 in Raleigh, North Carolina, to aid students in planning future efforts. In the early issues of SNCC’s newspaper, the Student Voice, young activists linked their demand for an end to segregation to African independence with the mordant observation that Africans would be free before African Americans could have a cup of coffee downtown.

SNCC’s involvement with the voting rights struggles of Mississippi sharecroppers and domestic workers was not the inevitable outcome of the student sit-in movement that gave rise to the organization. SNCC’s attempts to persuade local people to challenge the system of disfranchisement were guided by activists involved in the voting rights campaigns of the previous generation. Such veteran activists as Mrs. Baker, and Mississippi NAACP leaders Aaron Henry and Medgar Evers, provided indispensable assistance to SNCC’s young organizers. Political self-interest lay behind the Kennedy administration’s pledge of funds for SNCC, as it preferred behind-the-scenes voter education efforts to direct action protests certain to culminate in mob violence. By supporting SNCC’s local organizing, the administration hoped to minimize embarrassing international press coverage of such demonstrations as the Freedom Rides. In 1961, an integrated group of Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) activists staged a bus tour through the South to test a recent federal law desegregating interstate transportation facilities. In Alabama, one of the buses used by the activists was bombed and disabled; later, in Birmingham and Montgomery, riders were attacked and viciously beaten by white vigilantes in collusion with local police.

As Mary Dudziak (2000) has shown, US authorities were acutely sensitive to the adverse effect of racial crises on world opinion. When authorities in Birmingham resorted to the use of water cannon and attack dogs against demonstrators, indignation at home and abroad led Kennedy to champion civil rights reform in a televised address from the Oval Office. Secretary of State Dean Rusk became a leading supporter for civil rights legislation. Yet the patience of SNCC organizers was wearing thin. If anything, the work of Carson (1981), Charles Payne (1995), John Dittmer (1995), Chana Lee (1999), and others shows that historiographical attention to local struggles illuminates the ambiguous (to put it mildly) role of the federal government, specifically, the Kennedy Justice Department’s reluctance to commit federal power to the protection of movement organizers or to prosecution of known perpetrators of violence. With the federal government’s failure to provide solace to organizers, one can scarcely wonder why local activists embraced internationalism as a balm for
their sense of abandonment. As Dittmer and others have shown, this had been the case for some time. Black World War II veterans like Evers had been at the vanguard of voting rights challenges during the late 1940s, seeking to enact at home the global ideals of democracy. Trying to revitalize movement activity as field secretary of the NAACP in Mississippi at the height of massive resistance in the 1950s, Evers (who was slain the day after Kennedy’s speech) was sufficiently inspired by the armed struggle of Kenyan nationalists to mull over the prospects of armed self-defense during the lonely struggles of the 1950s against segregationists’ reprisals (Dittmer, 1995).

For local people and organizers who bore the brunt of segregationist terror, self-protection militated against their professed commitment to nonviolence. Tim Tyson’s work on the Monroe, North Carolina, NAACP leader Robert Williams sheds light on an important yet neglected strain of black leadership, and further illustrates the continuum between the local and the international. Williams, an ex-serviceman who had revived his town’s moribund NAACP chapter by organizing an all-black militia to defend the community against Ku Klux Klan raids, was suspended by the NAACP for a statement threatening black retaliation against unpunished white assaults. Williams’s ideology of armed self-defense, Tyson argues, was an amalgam of his family’s history of armed resistance dating back to Reconstruction, with additional inspiration drawn from anti-colonial and third world revolutions of the day. Williams received material assistance, including guns, from northern black militants who supported Williams in his debate with Martin Luther King over the merits of nonviolence. Through Williams, who made speaking and fundraising appearances at a number of northern college campuses, one can discern a connection between the northern and southern movements that warrants further exploration. Significantly, Tyson suggests that the movement’s tactical nonviolence was actually a deviation from black southern traditions of armed self-defense. This view of armed self-defense as the norm squares with anecdotal evidence that King himself, amid the cross burnings and bombings during the Montgomery campaign, had to be talked out of keeping his own cache of weaponry by the Gandhian pacifist Bayard Rustin (Branch, 1988, p. 179). Tyson’s work demonstrates that Black Power had deeper historical (and even rural southern) roots than suggested by the prevailing wisdom.

There was no room within the movement or American political culture for a militant like Robert Williams. Williams eventually went into exile in Cuba after eluding a federal manhunt on a trumped-up kidnapping charge. He thus joined the ranks of African American expatriates, some of whom had been radical activists in the States. W. E. B. DuBois had exiled himself, becoming a citizen of Ghana and joining the Communist Party in a final gesture of anti-American defiance. Evading police roadblocks and a federal manhunt, the Harlem novelist Julian Mayfield had accompanied Williams on his flight North. Mayfield fled authorities by relocating to Ghana, as did Preston King, who as a graduate student in England, had his passport revoked after he had defied his local draft board in his hometown of Albany, Georgia, in protest of its racist mistreatment. Williams, Mayfield, and King were, in effect, political refugees from Jim Crow America. Ghana became an expatriate haven for a range of radical and idealistic African Americans. Its president, American-educated Kwame Nkrumah, had invited blacks from the diaspora to lend the new nation their intellectual and technical skills. For those who were pessimistic about the racial situation in the United States, Nkrumah’s invitation was a welcome opportunity. Not all black
expatriates in Ghana were politically active, but for those who were, they sought political alliances with Ghanaians by exposing the brutal facts of American racism to African audiences. The group of “revolutionary returnees,” as one of their number, Maya Angelou, later termed them, staged a demonstration at the US embassy in Accra timed to coincide with the March on Washington in August of 1963. The demonstrators submitted a petition meant for President Kennedy that denounced his administration’s broken promises on civil rights. The petition also denounced the administration’s foreign policy, including its support for the apartheid regime in South Africa, the failed “Bay of Pigs” invasion of Cuba, and the initial phase of American involvement in Vietnam. The demonstration also became a tribute to DuBois, who had died the previous evening.

Certain that their enemies resided comfortably within the US government, many of the black expatriates harbored a thorough disillusionment with American racism at home and abroad. The political pressure brought to bear on radicals in SNCC in Atlantic City in 1964, in addition to their isolation in the field, was enough to send many of these local people into exile, as well. From accounts of the relationship between the movement and the FBI, we know that much of the activists’ sense of abandonment was justified. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover’s correspondence on civil rights activities suggests that the Bureau’s surveillance was motivated as much by racial animosity as by anti-communist ideals (Garrow, 1986; O’Reilly, 1989). Of course, blacks were not the only targets of federal surveillance and suspicion of subversion. Nevertheless, Hoover’s surveillance against King, and his determination to prevent the advent of a “black messiah” with the capability of uniting black and student movements, suggests that the Cold War, while central in many accounts, may only partly explain the antagonistic relationship between the government and the movement.

Even as local people, virtually alone, took their stand against segregation and its attendant violence, SNCC leaders were swept up in national and international issues and ideologies. Eric Burner’s study (1994) of Robert Moses goes further than most in capturing Moses’s linkage of the plight of blacks in Mississippi with the abuses of American military power overseas. Departing from accounts that portray Moses as a dreamy eccentric, Burner credits Moses as a brilliant organizer and gives a trenchant analysis of SNCC’s international concerns. By 1965, Moses withdrew from the schisms in the organization and became involved in the anti-war movement. Even before that, SNCC, which had long resisted Cold War dictates, had articulated a more radical vision of foreign policy than the NAACP and SCLC. After the setback at the 1964 Democratic Convention, Moses and other SNCC leaders vacationed in the West African nation of Guinea. There, they observed US propaganda seeking to convince Africans that the terror and voting rights violations SNCC confronted in the South did not exist. Like black anti-colonial activists of the 1940s, and later, Malcolm X, Moses and SNCC activists came to view US domestic and foreign policy as two sides of the same racially oppressive coin. Drafted into the army at the height of the Vietnam War, Moses believed that he was being targeted for his dissent. Moses fled the country with his wife and resided in Tanzania, where other disillusioned and exhausted SNCC workers had exiled themselves. That exile – and assassination – proved to be the common fate of black radicals attests to the magnitude of their indictment of the violence and bad faith inherent in American liberalism. Their
marginalization by the government affirmed that their political vision was anything but marginal.

The Recovery of Black Studies and New Perspectives on the Urban Dimension

Throughout the 1990s, racial polarization and the rightward drift of American politics demanded a response from historians of the movement. President Clinton withdrew his nomination of Lani Guinier to head the Civil Rights division in the Justice Department, after conservative opponents branded her “Quota queen.” A dedicated and well-organized Christian-right constituency, led by history Ph.D. Newt Gingrich, captured the majority in the House of Representatives in 1994. Discussions of race and inequality reached their nadir with the appearance in that same year of *The Bell Curve* (sponsored by the Pioneer Fund, an extremist group with historical links to Nazi-era racism), whose claims about the genetic inferiority of minorities supported further attacks on the welfare state. The protest tradition of black nationalism associated with Malcolm X (whose legacy had been, by then, mass-mediated and commodified beyond recognition) had culminated in the cathartic, but ephemeral, Million Man March of 1995. The assault against affirmative action and voting rights waged by such conservative revisionists as D’Souza and the Thernstroms continued with public university systems in Texas, California, and Washington State outlawing race-conscious admissions policies.

As the end of the twentieth century approached, historians began to answer the conservatives’ fantasy of the end of racism with narratives of the making, through the human agency of public policy, of institutional racism in the urban North (Sugrue, 1996). Such narratives do more than disabuse us of the myth of northern “de facto” segregation; they also challenge longstanding assumptions of liberal consensus and of the essential perfectibility of American institutions. In making such claims, historians sympathetic to the freedom movement have availed themselves of the critical perspectives of an earlier generation of black intellectuals and social science scholars who were participant-observers in the struggle.

In 1945, St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton wrote that “Negroes are becoming a city people, and it is in the cities that the problem of the Negro in American life appears in its sharpest and most dramatic forms. It may be, too, that the cities will be the arena in which the ‘Negro problem’ will be finally settled” (Drake and Cayton, 1945, p. 755). In retrospect, this was more prescient than Gunnar Myrdal’s influential *An American Dilemma* (1944), whose emphasis on the liberal “American creed” downplayed black demands for equality and displaced racial and social conflict from the structural to the psychological realm. In their sociological study of race relations in Chicago, *Black Metropolis*, Drake and Cayton situated the northern, urban phase of the struggle within the ferment of World War II, thus anticipating Korstad and Lichtenstein’s treatment of a national black-led struggle for economic and racial justice. By contrasting the fates of that city’s segregated African Americans with the upward mobility of foreign-born immigrants, Drake and Cayton pioneered an analysis of institutional racism that would become prominent within Black Power and black studies discourse. Drake and Cayton provided a language for the structural impediments to African Americans’ social mobility in the urban North. The “Job Ceiling”
limited blacks to unskilled and semi-skilled labor, and residential segregation confined blacks to the ghetto. In political and social life, the colorline diminished both human contact between the races and opportunities for advancement. During World War II, blacks revolted against these barriers, demanding full citizenship at the ballot box, through economic boycotts, and in the courts. Recent work on black activism since the war by Martha Biondi (2002) on New York City and Matthew Countryman (Countryman et al., 2002) on Philadelphia demonstrates that contrary to accounts of the southern-based movement, the northern phase of the struggle against employment discrimination and institutional racism was underway long before the emergence of Black Power in 1966.

Along with many of their contemporaries, Drake and Cayton argued that the war internationalized the problem of American racism. They emphasized the global dimension to the plight of African Americans, an implicit condemnation of the unresponsiveness of liberal reform to the structural barriers facing blacks. Conversely, the American black population’s demands for equal citizenship became central to the global political contest between Cold War superpowers and the nonaligned movement comprising the nationalist struggles of the colonized world. Drake participated in National Negro Congress campaigns in Chicago against residential segregation, served as teacher and, later, a political adviser to the SNCC leader James Forman, and was an early and active supporter of African independence from the late 1940s onward. Drake’s career as a member of the founding generation of African and black studies scholars offers a window into the important, and still largely unexplored, relationship between social activism and knowledge production (Gaines, 2002).

**Challenges to Liberalism in Early Black Studies Discourse**

Echoing the concerns of Julian Bond, recent explorations of the roots of inequality in the urban North are at bottom an historical assessment of American liberalism. Pioneering black studies scholars have provided influential critiques of liberalism through their discussions of racism in the urban North. Drake and Cayton redefined the American Dilemma by focusing on its significance for black urban dwellers. For them, the relative freedom of cities heightened the contradiction between the democratic ideology of free competition and the efforts of real estate firms, insurance companies, and financial institutions to maintain exclusionary racial barriers. As if to elaborate Drake and Cayton’s analysis, black writers of the 1950s – the informal historians of their times – wrote extensively of the alienation of those trapped in urban ghetto conditions. Frank London Brown’s novel *Trumbull Park* (1959) was based on contemporary struggles for desegregated housing in that Chicago neighborhood. In *Maud Martha* (1953), Gwendolyn Brooks wrote of the deferred dreams and repressed rage of a black working-class woman struggling to reconcile herself to the stifling conditions of racism and poverty in Chicago. These themes would be further explored in Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), which dramatized a black family’s attempt to leave their Southside ghetto apartment for an integrated suburb and to confront the likelihood of vigilante violence. Undoubtedly more scaring on the imaginations of many, including northern blacks, was the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old Chicago youth murdered while visiting relatives in Mississippi. A combination of mass outrage and national and international
press coverage compelled that state to bring the known perpetrators of the crime to trial. An all-white jury swiftly acquitted Till’s killers, who then went on to sell their story to a national news magazine.

Arguably one of the most influential texts in African American letters in the second half of the century was the work of a sociologist, E. Franklin Frazier’s *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957). At the dawn of the civil rights movement, Frazier’s book galvanized middle-class African American youth, who embraced the book’s indictment of their elders’ apparent acquiescence to segregation and Cold War liberalism. It was the popularity of Frazier’s critique of the black middle class that laid an important foundation for Black Power discourse, as well as the Black Arts movement’s antbourgeois celebration of black folk culture and scorn for high modernism in African American literature.

Frazier aside, African American writers aspired to much more than exposing an uncommitted black bourgeoisie. Such figures as Hansberry, James Baldwin, and others were taking aim at Cold War liberalism. Baldwin’s bestselling essay, *The Fire Next Time* (1963), exposed the racist undertones of northern liberalism, particularly the contention that black people had to prove themselves “acceptable” for equal citizenship. As Drake and Cayton had done, Baldwin wrote of the alienating effect of the North’s institutional racism on blacks. Northern blacks were increasingly restive and enraged; white liberals willfully blind to the ghetto’s corrosive effect on human relationships. Time was running out, Baldwin warned, unless a minority of blacks and whites dedicated themselves to overcoming social and spiritual boundaries.

With the Harlem riot of July 1964, sparked by the police killing of an African American teenager, Baldwin’s worst fears had come to pass. Having witnessed many more urban rebellions, the violent repression of the Black Panther Party, the slaughter of thousands of Vietnamese by saturation bombing, and the assassinations of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Baldwin issued a bitter indictment of American society in *No Name in the Street* (1972). His harrowing account of the New York criminal justice system’s incarceration of his secretary on a homicide charge, despite a complete lack of evidence, is sadly anticipatory of the 1990s’ expansion of the prison system and the spiraling incarceration of the poor and people of color. Baldwin defended the Black Panthers, and eulogized Malcolm X against the distortions of the US press upon his death.

The Panthers had furthered Malcolm’s legacy in their calls for armed self-defense and in their insistence that racist police, white vigilantes, and the US military were the actual purveyors of violence. Like Malcolm, the Panthers sought the psychological emancipation of the masses of African Americans. Yet Malcolm and the Panthers were undone in large part by the very image that they themselves had cultivated. Despite his reincarnation as an advocate of progressive multiracial coalitions, Malcolm had become a tragic prisoner of his mass-mediated image as the fiery Nation of Islam minister and mouthpiece for Elijah Muhammad’s distorted version of Islam. And the Panthers were hopelessly vulnerable against a massive campaign of federal, state, and local surveillance, incarceration, and violence. The sexism and suicidal adventurism prevalent within the organization were criticized by Angela Davis, Toni Cade Bambara, and other black feminist activists and writers whose vision of revolution renounced armed struggle and romantic internationalism, focusing instead on gender relations and local community-building. To their credit, the Panthers were willing to
join coalitions with progressive whites and with other social movements, pursuing their vision of an international revolutionary movement, as Malcolm X had attempted after his break with the Nation of Islam.

Scholars are just beginning to study the impact of Black Power in the urban North, and the uneasy coexistence of black cultural nationalism with the establishmentarian electoral politics of urban black regimes. In his discussion of Black Power politics in Newark, and the central leadership role of Amiri Baraka, Komozi Woodard identified Malcolm’s support of African and third world revolution as a strong influence on the movement’s vision of cultural nationalism. Woodard argued that Baraka’s cultural nationalism provided the basis for popular mobilization, not a retreat from activism (though such scholars as Carson and Payne are less positive in their assessment of Black Power; for Payne, it was characterized by younger activists’ ill-advised rejection of the guidance of veteran organizers). Insisting that Black Power in the urban North be treated independently from conventional southern civil rights narratives, Woodard emphasized the pragmatism and the experimental nature of the political formation in Newark that sought to rectify overcrowded housing conditions and to end police brutality. Ultimately, these efforts were unsuccessful, owing to the extreme corruption and racism of a white power structure, which easily co-opted black elected officials (Woodard, 1999). An interesting alternative to Woodard’s account is the memoir of the Detroit movement activist Grace Lee Boggs. Her partnership with James Boggs, whose radical analyses of American politics and Black Power were rooted in his southern African American heritage and his daily experience as an auto worker, eschewed the internationalism so often characteristic of black radicalism for the concreteness of local struggles for justice and community in Detroit (Boggs, 1998).

The Erosion of Voting Rights and the Abandonment of Liberalism

Advocates of Black Power, which generally marked the shift from the southern to the northern movement, demanded redistributive justice and called for control by African Americans of their communities and the public institutions serving them. Influenced by SNCC’s voting rights campaigns, Malcolm X spoke incessantly of African Americans’ need to master power politics, and challenged his northern audiences to claim the ballot as a political weapon. But Malcolm spoke only of power. When the phrase “Black Power” exploded onto the national scene in 1966, many white liberals and conservatives – and some black leaders – condemned the term, expressing a deep antipathy toward black aspirations within American and southern politics. Nowhere was this antipathy more evident than after the passage of the Voting Rights Act. From the late 1960s to the 1980s, white-controlled municipal and state governments throughout the South employed redistricting and modified electoral procedures with the goal of diluting black voting strength (Kousser, 1999). During the period of massive resistance to desegregation, Cold War anti-communism had provided segregationists a pretext for maintaining the status quo. But after 1965, the Voting Rights Act and the prospect of political power wielded by newly enfranchised African Americans were themselves sufficient to motivate powerful whites to change the rules in order to prevent blacks from electing representatives of their own choosing.
During the 1890s the demise of the democratic experiment of black political power had been effected by the disfranchisement of African American (and poor white) voters. A century later, redistricting became the primary instrument for diminishing the political influence of African Americans and Latinos. Both processes relied on radical revisions of history, the first discrediting, if not demonizing, black political participation; the second, more recently, by obfuscating the original intent and purpose of the equal protection clause as protector of the rights of African Americans. The Supreme Court’s ruling in *Shaw v. Reno* (1993) and subsequent voting rights cases reversed the egalitarian guidelines for redistricting that a coalition of civil rights attorneys and lobbyists, including Lani Guinier, had written into the renewal of the Voting Rights Act by Congress in 1982.

In *Shaw*, the Court allowed whites to sue under the Fourteenth Amendment if race were the “predominant factor” in the drawing of election districts. Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, writing for the majority, penned an opinion so fanciful and at variance with history that J. Morgan Kousser acidly termed it “postmodern equal protection theory.” In effect, O’Connor and the court majority reinterpreted the Fourteenth Amendment to protect the interests of powerful whites instead of protecting minorities from discrimination. Plaintiffs were no longer required to demonstrate that they had been harmed, as had been the precedent in vote dilution cases, which was fortunate for them, because as politically advantaged whites, they could not have done so. Nevertheless, Justice O’Connor made the novel argument that “a lasting harm to our society” could be asserted by “white voters (or voters of any other race)” if districting lines suggested a “racial classification.” Although she concluded her opinion with a solemn defense of equality before the law, O’Connor’s radical reinterpretation of the equal protection clause contained a racial double standard: blacks and other peoples of color had to demonstrate injury; for whites, however, the mere appearance of a racial distinction granted them standing.

Justice O’Connor resorted to ahistorical hyperbole in equating districts drawn to achieve racial balance with the evils of segregation, balkanization, and “political apartheid,” even though many of these districts held white majorities, and none were more than two-thirds black. O’Connor asserted that minority-majority districts could be challenged if the boundaries of such districts appeared “irregular” or “bizarre.” No proof of discriminatory injury was necessary. O’Connor’s criteria in identifying racial gerrymandering solely by the irregular appearance of districts failed to conceal what was, at bottom, a racial and partisan bias. She invented “compactness” or “traditional districting principles” (another fiction conveniently blind to the historical use of racial gerrymandering to diminish black political power) as the standard for legitimate districting schemes that might eliminate any suspicion of racial gerrymandering. Unfortunately for her and what Kousser termed “the revolutionary-conservative majority,” not only did O’Connor’s vague notion of “compactness” reside in the eye of the beholder, but also, whatever it was, she neglected to make “compactness” a requirement for relieving majority-white districts (whose boundaries occasionally appeared to be as “bizarre” as those of suspect majority-minority districts) from the suspicion of unconstitutional racial gerrymandering. In short, *Shaw* was revolutionary, overturning the settled principles of the Voting Rights Act, undermining the hard-won citizenship rights of the First and Second Reconstructed, and distorting their legacy to achieve a semblance of formal neutrality. The decision enshrined the
Fourteenth Amendment as protector of white privilege rather than minority rights; used egalitarian language to sanction inequality and exclusion; and upheld racial and partisan biases while claiming to be colorblind (Kousser, 1999, pp. 366–485).

The Clinton administration’s abandonment of Lani Guinier and the principle of voting rights, and the Court’s majority opinion in Shaw v. Reno, resuscitated an antidemocratic tradition rooted in the South’s century-old history of disfranchisement. In retrospect, Clinton’s betrayal of his erstwhile friend, combined with the drumbeat of legal challenges to majority-minority districts, was a portent of the effective disfranchisement of thousands of African Americans in Florida. That event demonstrated how tenuous is the national consensus for the principle of electoral democracy when it is put to the test. Attempts by black leadership and organizations to protest and publicize this undermining of the democratic process received scant media coverage. This disregard also greeted a statement of protest by former SNCC activists. Here is an excerpt from their press release:

We have increasing documentation of thousands of registered voters being turned away because their names were not listed or because their polls closed while they were waiting on line. These are voting injustices that must not be ignored. We are horrified at the prospect that in the year 2000, we Americans would resign ourselves to the results of an election achieved by questionable and undemocratic means. We urge all Americans who believe in the sacredness of honest elections to support the legal battle for a full and fair counting of the votes in Florida and to demand a Justice Department investigation into incidents of voter irregularities. We must not let this happen again!

The recent setbacks to voting rights represent the most far-reaching challenge to the painstakingly won democratic achievements of the movement for black equality, achievements that were dealt a final, telling blow by the Supreme Court’s majority when it invoked the equal protection clause to spare President Bush the harm of further recounts in Florida. Those setbacks insult the memory of those who died working to expand voting rights as the hallmark of American citizenship. Such unabashedly partisan judicial and political attacks on democracy may well galvanize an aroused citizenry to seek true democratic change at the ballot box, as SNCC activists and their forebears had believed. What remains certain is that future scholarship on the movement will derive much of its force and insight from the challenges of the present and future, as well as the lessons and sacrifices of the past.

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