

History and black consciousness: the political culture of black America.

by Manning Marable

The history of black America is defined by the struggle to overcome racial barriers, which fundamentally derive from class domination. The two main approaches to the struggle have been to seek more inclusion in white America or to pursue more separatist goals of black nationalism.

© COPYRIGHT 1995 Monthly Review Foundation, Inc.

The central theme of black U.S. history has been the constant struggle to overcome the barriers of race, and the reality of unequal racial identities between black and white. This racial bifurcation has created parallel realities or racial universes, in which blacks and whites may interact closely with one another, but perceive social reality in dramatically different ways. These collective experiences of discrimination, and this memory of resistance and oppression, have given rise to several overlapping group strategies or critical perspectives within the African-American community, which have as their objective the ultimate empowerment of black people. In this sense, the contours of struggle for black people have given rise to a very specific consciousness, a sense of our community, its needs and its aspirations for itself. The major ideological debates which map the dimensions of the political mind of black United States have always been about the orientation and objectives of black political culture and consciousness. The great historical battles between Booker T. Washington, the architect of the "Tuskegee Compromise" of 1895, and W.E.B. Du Bois, the founder of the NAACP, or the conflicts between Du Bois and black nationalist leader Marcus Garvey, were fought largely over the manner in which the black community would define for itself the political and economic tools necessary for its empowerment and future development. Sometimes the battle lines in these struggles for black leadership and for shaping the consciousness of the African-American community were defined by class divisions. More generally, the lines of separation had less to do with class than with the internalized definitions of what "race" meant in the context of black political culture to African-Americans themselves.

Ironically, the historical meaning and reality of race was always fundamentally a product of class domination. Race, in the last analysis, is neither biologically nor genetically derived. It is a structure rooted in white supremacy, economic exploitation, and social privilege. It evolved in the process of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. Racism has power only as a set of institutional arrangements and social outcomes which perpetuate the exploitation of black labor, and the subordination of the black community's social and cultural life. But all of this is masked by the prism of race to those who experience the weight of its oppression. The oppressed perceive domination through the language and appearance of racial

forms, although such policies and practices always served a larger class objective. As a result, the political culture of black United States is organized around racial themes, either an effort to overcome or escape the manifestations of institutional racism, or to build alternative institutions which empower black people within environments of whiteness. The approach of political empowerment is distinctly racial, rather than class oriented.

Most historians characterized the central divisions within black political culture as the 150-year struggle between "integration" and "separation." In 1925, this division was perceived as separating Du Bois and the NAACP from the Garveyites. In 1995, the division is used to distinguish pragmatic multicultural liberals such as Henry Louis Gates, Director of Harvard University's Afro-American studies department, from the architect of Afrocentrism, Temple University Professor Molefi Asante. However, there are serious limitations in this theoretical model. The simple fact is that the vast majority of African-American people usually would not define themselves as either Roy Wilkins-style integrationists or black separatists such as City University of New York Black Studies director Leonard Jeffries. Most blacks have perceived integration or black nationalism as alternative strategies which might serve the larger purpose of empowering their community and assisting in the deconstruction of institutions perpetuating racial inequality. As anthropologist Leith Mullings and I have argued in a recent essay in *Race and Class*, a more accurate description of black political culture would be to identify three strategic visions, which can be termed "inclusion" or integration, "black nationalism," and "transformation."

Since the rise of the free Negro community in the North during the antebellum era, inclusion has been the central impulse for reform among U.S. blacks. The inclusionists have sought to minimize or even eradicate the worst effects and manifestations of racism within the African-American community. They have mobilized resources to alter or abolish legal restrictions on the activities of blacks, and have agitated to achieve acceptance of racial diversity by the white majority. Essentially, the inclusionists have operated philosophically and ideologically as "liberals": they usually believe that the state is inherently a "neutral apparatus," open to the pressure and persuasion of competing interest groups. They have attempted to influence public opinion and mass behavior on issues of race by changing public policies, education, and cultural activity. But the theoretical guiding

History and black consciousness: the political culture of black America.

star of the inclusionists has been what I term "symbolic representation." They firmly believed that the elevation and advancement of select numbers of well-educated, affluent, and/or powerful blacks into positions of authority helps to dismantle the patterns and structures of racial discrimination. The theory is that if blacks are well-represented inside government, businesses, and social institutions, then the traditional practices of inequality and patterns of discrimination will diminish. Black representatives within the system of power will use their leverage to carry out policies benefiting the entire African-American population.

Embedded deeply within the logic of inclusionism were two additional ideas. First, the intellectual foundations of inclusionism drew a strong parallel between the pursuit of freedom and the acquisition of private property. To unshackle oneself from the bonds of inequality was, in part, to achieve the material resources necessary to improve one's life and the lives of one's family. This meant that freedom was defined by one's ability to gain access to resources and to the prerequisites of power. Implicitly, the orientation of inclusionism reinforced the logic and legitimacy of America's economic system and class structure, seeking to assimilate blacks within them. Secondly, inclusionists usually had a cultural philosophy of integration within the aesthetic norms and civil society created by the white majority. Inclusionists sought to transcend racism by acting in ways which whites would not find objectionable or repulsive. The more one behaved in a manner which paralleled whites, the less likely it was that one might encounter the negative impact and effects of Jim Crow. By assimilating the culture of whites and by minimizing the cultural originality and creativity of African-Americans, one might find the basis for a "universalist" dialogue transcending the ancient barriers of color.

Historically, the inclusionists can be traced to those groups of former slaves in the colonial United States who assimilated themselves into majority white societies, who forgot African languages and traditions, and who tried to participate fully in the social institutions which whites had built for themselves. In the nineteenth century, the inclusionists' outstanding leader was Frederick Douglass. Today, the inclusionists include most of the traditional leadership of the civil rights organizations such as the NAACP and the National Urban League, the bulk of the Congressional Black Caucus and most African-American elected officials, and the majority of the older and more influential black middle class, professionals, and managerial elites.

On balance, the inclusionists' strategy sought to transcend race by creating a context where individuals could be

judged on the basis of what they accomplished rather than on the color of their skin. This approach minimized the extensive interconnectedness between color and inequality; it tended to conceive racism as a kind of social disease rather than the logical and coherent consequence of institutional arrangements, private property, and power relations, reinforced by systemic violence. The inclusionists seriously underestimated the capacity and willingness of white authorities to utilize coercion to preserve and defend white privilege and property. Integration in short was a strategy to avoid the worst manifestations of racism, without upsetting the deep structures of inequality which set into motion the core dynamics of white oppression and domination.

Although the inclusionist perspective dominates the literature which interprets black history, it never consolidated itself as a consensus framework for the politics of the entire black community. A sizable component of the African-American population always rejected integration as a means for transcending institutional racism. This alternative vision was black nationalism. Black nationalism sought to overturn racial discrimination by building institutions controlled and owned by blacks, providing resources and services to the community. The nationalists distrusted the capacity of whites as a group to overcome the debilitating effects of white privilege, and questioned the inclusionists' simpleminded faith in the power of legal reforms. Nationalists rejected the culture and aesthetics of white Euro-America in favor of what today would be termed an Afrocentric identity. Historically, the initial nationalist impulse for black group autonomous development began with those slaves who ran away from the plantations and farms of whites, and who established "maroon communities," frontier enclaves or villages of defiant African-Americans, or who mounted slave rebellions, Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey, among others, are within this cultural, intellectual, and political tradition. However, like the inclusionists, the nationalists often tended to reify race, perceiving racial categories as static and ahistorical, rather than fluid and constantly being renegotiated and reconfigured. They struggled to uproot race, but were themselves frequently imprisoned by the language and logic of inverted racial thinking. They utilized racial categories to mobilize their core constituencies, without fully appreciating their own internal contradictions.

The black nationalist tradition within black political culture was, and remains, tremendously complex, rich and varied. At root, its existential foundations were the national consciousness and collective identity of people of African descent, as they struggled against racism and class exploitation. But as in any form of nationalism, this tradition of resistance and group consciousness expressed itself

History and black consciousness: the political culture of black America.

politically around many different coordinates and tendencies. Within black nationalism is the separatist current, which tends to perceive the entire white community as racially monolithic and articulates racial politics is starkly confrontational and antagonistic overtones. Today, one could point to educator Len Jeffries's controversial descriptions of European Americans as "ice people" - cold, calculating, materialistic - and African-Americans as "sun people" - warm, generous, humanistic - as a separatist-oriented, conservative social theory within the nationalist tradition. The Nation of Islam's theory of Yacup, first advanced under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad, projected an image of whites as "devils," incapable of positive change. At the other end of the nationalist spectrum were radicals like Hubert H. Harrison, Cyril V. Briggs, and Huey P. Newton, and militant groups such as the League of Revolutionary Black Workers from the late 1960s, who incorporated a class analysis and the demand for socialism within their politics. For this radical tendency, black nationalism had to rely on the collaboration of other oppressed people regardless of the color of their skin, languages, or nationalities. Between these two tendencies is the nationalism of the rising black petty bourgeoisie, which utilizes racial segregation as a barrier to facilitate capital accumulation from the mostly working-class, black consumer market. Nationalist rhetoric such as "buy black" becomes part of the appeal employed by black entrepreneurs to generate profits. All of these contradictory currents are part of the complex historical terrain of black nationalism.

The basic problem confronting both inclusionism and black nationalism is that the distinct social structure, political economy, and ethnic demography which created both strategic visions for black advancement has been radically transformed, especially in the past quarter century. Segregation imposed a kind of social uniformity on the vast majority of black people, regardless of their class affiliation, education, or social condition. The stark brutality of legal Jim Crow, combined with the unforgiving and vicious character of the repression which was essential to such a system, could only generate two major reactions: a struggle to be acknowledged and accepted despite one's racial designation, or a struggle to create an alternative set of cultural, political, and social axioms which could sustain a distinctly different group identity against "whiteness." But as the social definition of what it means to be "different" in the United States has changed, the whole basis for both of these traditional racial outlooks within African-American society becomes far more contentious and problematic.

Many people from divergent ethnic backgrounds, speaking various languages, and possessing different cultures now share a common experience of inequality in the United States - poor housing, homelessness, inadequate health

care, underrepresentation within government, lagging incomes and high rates of unemployment, discrimination in capital markets, and police brutality on the streets. Yet there is an absence of unity among these constituencies, in part because their leaders are imprisoned ideologically and theoretically by the assumptions and realities of the past. The rhetoric of racial solidarity, for instance, can be used to mask class contradictions and divisions within the black, Latino, and Asian American communities. Symbolic representation can be manipulated to promote the narrow interest of minority elected officials who may have little commitment or interest in advancing the material concerns of the most oppressed sectors of multicultural America.

What is also missing is a common language of resistance. Race as a social construction generates its own internal logic and social expressions of pain, anger, and alienation within various communities. These are often barriers to an understanding of the larger social and economic forces at work which undermine our common humanity. From the cultural threads of our own experiences, we must find parallel patterns and symbols of struggle which permit us to draw connections between various groups within society. This requires the construction of a new lexicon of activism, a language which transcends the narrow boundaries of singular ethnic identity and embraces a vision of democratic pluralism.

The immediate factors which require a general strategic rethinking of the paradigms for U.S. black struggle are also international. A generation ago, U.S. blacks with an internationalist perspective might see themselves as part of the diverse nonaligned movement of Third World nations, strategically distanced between a capitalist United States and communist Russia. Like legal racial segregation, the system of Soviet Communism and the Soviet Union itself no longer exist. Apartheid as a system of white privilege and political totalitarianism no longer exists, as the liberation forces of Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress struggle to construct a multiracial democracy. The Sandinistas of Nicaragua lost power, as their model of a pluralistic, socialist-oriented society was overturned, at least for the time being. Throughout the rest of the Third World, from Ghana to Vietnam, socialists moved rapidly to learn the language of markets and foreign investment, and were forced to curtail egalitarian programs and to accommodate themselves to the ideological requirements of the "New World Order" and the demands of transnational capital. Millions of people of color were on the move, one of the largest migrations in human history. The globalization of capitalism radically transformed agricultural environments and indigenous political economies. Rural and agricultural populations migrated to cities in search of work and food; millions traveled from the Third World periphery to the metropolitan

History and black consciousness: the political culture of black America.

cores of Western Europe and North America to occupy the lowest levels of labor. In many instances, these new groups were socially stigmatized and economically dominated in part by the older categories of "race" and the social divisions of "difference," which separated the newest immigrants from the white "mainstream."

Nevertheless, within this changing demographic/ethnic mix which increasingly characterizes the urban environments of Western Europe and North America, the older racial identities and categories have begun in many instances to break down, with new identities and group symbols being formulated by various "minorities." In the United Kingdom by the 1970s, immigrants from the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa of radically divergent ethnic backgrounds and languages began to term themselves "black," as a political entity. In the United States, the search for both disaggregation and rearticulation of group identity and consciousness among people of color is also occurring, although along different lines due to distinct historical experiences and backgrounds. In the Hawaiian islands, for example, many of the quarter million native Hawaiians support the movement for political sovereignty and self-determination. But do native Hawaiians have more in common culturally and politically with American Indians or Pacific islanders? What are the parallels and distinctions between the discrimination experienced by Mexican Americans in the U.S. Southwest and African-Americans under slavery and Jim Crow segregation? Do the more than 5 million Americans of Arab, Kurdish, Turkish, and Iranian nationality and descent have a socioeconomic experience in the United States which places them in conflict with native-born African-Americans, or is there sufficient commonality of interest and social affinity which provides the potential framework for principled activism and unity?

Similar questions about social distinctions rooted in mixed ethnic heritages and backgrounds could be raised within the black community itself. At least three out of four native-born Americans of African descent in the United States have to some extent a racial heritage which is also American Indian, European, Asian, and/or Hispanic. Throughout much of the Americas, racial categories were varied and complex, reflecting a range of social perceptions based on physical appearance, color, hair texture, class, social status, and other considerations. In the United States prior to the civil rights movement, with a few exceptions, the overwhelmingly dominant categorization was "black" and "white." In the late 1970s, the federal government adopted a model for collecting census data based on four "races" - black, Asian, American Indian, and white - and two ethnic groups - Hispanic and non - Hispanic, which could be of whatever "racial" identity. Today, all of these categories are being

contested and questioned. Some of the hundreds of thousands of African-Americans and whites who intermarry have begun to call for a special category for their children - "multiracial." By 1994, three states required a "multiracial" designation on public school forms, and Georgia has established the "multiracial" category on its mandatory state paperwork. The "multiracial" designation, if popularized and structured into the state bureaucracy, could have the dangerous effect of siphoning off a segment of what had been the "black community" into a distinct and potentially privileged elite, protected from the normal vicissitudes and ordeals experienced by black folk under institutional racism. It could become a kind of "passing" for the twenty-first century, standing apart from the definition of blackness. Conversely, as more immigrants from the African continent and the Caribbean intermarry native-born black Americans, notions of what it means to be "black" become culturally and ethnically far more pluralistic and international. The category of "blackness" becomes less parochial and more expansive, incorporating the diverse languages, histories, rituals, and aesthetic textures of new populations and societies.

Inside the United States, other political and social factors have contributed to reframing debates on race and our understanding of the social character of the black community. In just the past five years, we have experienced the decline and near-disappearance of Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition and efforts to liberalize and to reform the Democratic Party from within; the explosive growth of a current of conservative black nationalism and extreme racial separatism within significant sections of the African-American community; the vast social uprising of the Los Angeles rebellion in April and May 1992, triggered by a not-guilty verdict on police officers who had viciously beaten a black man; and the political triumph of mass conservatism in the 1994 Congressional elections, due primarily to an overwhelmingly Republican vote by millions of angry white males. Behind these trends and events, from the perspective of racial history, was an even larger dilemma: the failure of the modern U.S. black freedom movement to address or even to listen to the perspectives and political insights of the "Hip Hop" generation, those African-Americans who had been born and/or socialized after the March on Washington of 1963 and the passage of the Civil Rights Act a year later. The Hip Hop generation was largely pessimistic about the quality and character of black leadership, and questioned the legitimacy and relevance of organizations like the NAACP. Although the Hip Hop movement incorporated elements of black nationalism into its wide array of music and art, notably through its iconization of Malcolm X in 1990-1993, it also failed to articulate a coherent program or approach to social change which addressed the complex diversities of black civil society. Both inclusionism and black nationalism

History and black consciousness: the political culture of black America.

had come to represent fragmented social visions and archaic agendas, which drew eclectically from racial memory. Both ideologies failed to appreciate how radically different the future might be for black people, especially in the context of a post-Cold War, postmodern, postindustrial future. The sad and sorry debacle surrounding the public vilification and firing of NAACP national secretary Benjamin Chavis in 1994, for example, illustrated both the lack of internal democracy and accountability of black political institutions, as well as the absence of any coherent program which could speak meaningfully to the new social, political, and cultural realities.

The urgent need to redefine the discourse and strategic orientation of the black movement is more abundantly clear in the mid-1990s than ever before. Proposition 187 in California, which denied medical, educational, and social services to undocumented immigrants, as well as the current national debates about affirmative action and welfare, all have one thing in common - the cynical and deliberate manipulation of racial and ethnic stereotypes by the far right. White conservatives understand the power of "race." They have made a strategic decision to employ code words and symbols which evoke the deepest fears and anxieties of white middle-class and working-class United States against African-American issues and interests.

The reasons for this strategy are not difficult to discern. Since the emergence of Reaganism in the United States, corporate capitalism has attempted to restrict the redistributive authority and social program agenda of the state. Many of the reform programs, from the legal desegregation of society in the 1960s to the Johnson administration's "War on Poverty" were created by pressure from below. The initiation of affirmative action programs for women and minorities, and the expansion of the welfare state, contributed to some extent to a more humane and democratic society. The prerogatives of capital were not abolished by any means, but the democratic rights of minorities, women, and working people were expanded. As capitalist investment and production became more global, the demand for cheap labor dramatically increased. Capital aggressively pressured Third World countries to suppress or outlaw unions, reduce wage levels, and eliminate the voices of left opposition. Simultaneously, millions of workers were forced to move from rural environments into cities in the desperate search for work. The "Latinization" of cities from Los Angeles to New York is a product of this destructive, massive economic process.

In the United States since the early 1980s, corporate capital has pushed aggressively for lower taxes, deregulation, a relaxation of affirmative action and

environmental protection laws, and more generally, more favorable social and political conditions for corporate profits. Over the past twenty years, this has meant that real incomes of working people in the United States, adjusted for inflation, have fallen significantly. Between 1947 and 1973, the average hourly and weekly earnings of U.S. production and nonsupervisory workers had dramatically increased - from \$6.75 per hour to \$12.06 per hour (in 1993 inflation-adjusted dollars). But after 1973, production workers lost ground - from \$12.06 per hour in 1979 to \$11.26 per hour in 1989 to only \$10.83 per hour in 1993. According to the research of the Children's Defense Fund, the greatest losses occurred among families with children under the age of eighteen, where the household head was also younger than the age of thirty. White households in this category fell 22 percent in inflation-adjusted income between 1973 and 1990. For young Latino families with children, the decline during these years was 27.9 percent. For black young families, the drop was a devastating 48.3 percent.

During the Reagan administration, the United States witnessed a massive redistribution of wealth upward, which was unequalled in our history. In 1989, the top 1 percent of all U.S. households received 16.4 percent of all U.S. incomes in salaries and wages; it had 48.1 percent of the total financial wealth of the country. In other words, the top 1 percent of all households controlled a significantly greater amount of wealth than the bottom 95 percent of all U.S. households (27.7 percent). These trends produced a degree of economic uncertainty and fear unparalleled since the Great Depression for millions of households. White working-class families found themselves working harder, yet falling further behind. "Race" in this uncertain political environment easily became a vehicle for orienting politics toward the right. If a white worker cannot afford a modest home in the suburbs, which his or her parents could have purchased thirty years ago, the fault is attributed not to falling wages but to affirmative action. If the cost of public education spirals skyward, white teenagers and their parents often conclude that the fault is not due to budget cuts but because "undeserving" blacks and Hispanics have taken the places of "qualified" white students.

As significant policy debates focus on the continuing burden of race within society, the black movement is challenged to rethink its past and to restructure radically the character of its political culture. Race is all too often a barrier for understanding the central driving role of class in shaping personal and collective outcomes within a capitalist society. Black social theory must transcend the theoretical limitations and programmatic contradictions of the old assimilationist/integrationist paradigm on one hand, and of separatist black nationalism on the other. We have

History and black consciousness: the political culture of black America.

to replace the bipolar categories, rigid racial discourse, and assumptions of the segregationist past with an approach toward politics and social dialogue which is pluralistic, multicultural, and nonexclusionary. In short, we must go beyond black and white, seeking power in a world which is increasingly characterized by broad diversity in ethnic and social groupings, but structured hierarchically in terms of privilege and social inequality. We must go beyond black and white, but never at the price of forgetting the bitter lessons of our collective struggles and history, without failing to appreciate our unique cultural and aesthetic gifts, or lacking an awareness of our common destiny with others of African descent. We must find a language which clearly identifies the role of class as central to the theoretical and programmatic critique of contemporary society. And we must do this in a manner which reaches out to the newer voices and colors of U.S. society - Latinos, Asian Americans, Pacific Island Americans, Middle East Americans, American Indians, and others.

We have entered a period in which our traditional definitions of what it has meant to be "black" must be transformed. The old racial bifurcation of white vs. black no longer accurately or adequately describes the social composition and ethnic character of the United States. Harlem, the cultural capital of black United States, is now more than 40 percent Spanish-speaking. Blackness as an identity now embraces a spectrum of nationalities, languages, and ethnicities, from the jamaican and Trinidadian cultures of the West Indies, to the Hispanicized blackness of Panama and the Dominican Republic. More than ever before, we must recognize the limitations and inherent weaknesses of a model of politics which is grounded solely or fundamentally in racial categories. The diversity of ethnicities which comprise the urban United States today should help us to recognize the basic common dynamics of class undergirding the economic and social environment of struggle for everyone.

Historically, there is an alternative approach to the politics and social analysis of black empowerment which is neither inclusionist nor nationalist, and which takes into account the fundamental dynamics of class. This third strategy can be called "transformationist." Essentially, transformationists within the racial history of the United States have sought to deconstruct or destroy the ideological foundations, social categories, and institutional power of race. Transformationists have sought neither incorporation or assimilation into a white mainstream, nor the static isolation of racial separation, but the restructuring of power relations and authority between groups and classes in such manner as to make race potentially irrelevant as a social force. The transformationist analysis recognizes that black economic

empowerment is impossible in the long run without a complete shift in the pattern of ownership, the expansion of the rights of labor, and the democratization of the relations of production within U.S. society. This critical approach to social change begins with a radical understanding of culture. The transformationist sees culture not as a set of artifacts or formal rituals, but as the human content and product of history itself. Culture is both the result and the consequence of struggle; it is dynamic and ever changing, yet structured around collective memories and traditions. The cultural history of U.S. blacks is, in part, the struggle to maintain their own group's sense of identity, social cohesion, and integrity, in the face of policies which have been designed to deny both their common humanity and particularity. To transform race in U.S. life, therefore, demands a dialectical approach toward culture which must simultaneously preserve and destroy. We must create the conditions for a vital and creative black cultural identity in the arts and literature, and in music and film, which also has the internal confidence and grace of being which draws parallels and lines of convergence with other ethnic traditions. But we must destroy and uproot the language and logic of inferiority and racial inequality, which sees blackness as a permanent caste and whiteness as the eternal symbol of purity, power, and privilege.

The transformationist tradition is also grounded in a radical approach toward politics and the state. Unlike the integrationists, who seek "representation" within the system as it is, or the nationalists, who generally favor the construction of parallel racial institutions controlled by blacks, the transformationists basically seek the redistribution of resources and the democratization of state power along more egalitarian lines. A transformationist approach to politics begins with the formulation of a new social contract between people and the state, which asks: What do people have a right to expect from their government in terms of basic human needs which all share in common? Should all citizens have a right to vote, but have no right to employment? Should Americans have a right to freedom of speech and unfettered expression, but no right to universal public healthcare? These are some of the questions which should be at the heart of framing the social policy agenda of a new movement for radical multicultural democracy.

The transformationist tradition in black political history embraces the radical abolitionists of the nineteenth century, the rich intellectual legacy of W.E.B. Du Bois, and the activism of militants from Paul Robeson to Fannie Lou Hamer. But it is also crucial to emphasize that these three perspectives - inclusion, black nationalism, and transformation - are not mutually exclusive or isolated from one another. Many integrationists have struggled to

History and black consciousness: the political culture of black America.

achieve racial equality through the policies of liberal desegregation, and have moved toward more radical means as they became disenchanted with the pace of social change. The best example of a shift from integrationism to transformationism is provided by the final two years of Martin Luther King Jr.'s public life: anti-Vietnam War activism, advocacy of a "Poor People's March" on Washington, D.C., the mobilization of black sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, and support for economic democracy. Similarly, many other black activists began their careers as black nationalists and gradually came to the realization that racial inequality cannot be abolished until and unless one transforms the basic power structure and ownership patterns of society. This requires at some level the establishment of principled coalitions between black people and others who experience oppression or social inequality. The best example of a black nationalist who acquired a transformationist perspective is, of course, Malcolm X, who left the Nation of Islam in March 1964, and created the Organization of Afro-American Unity several months later. In the African Diaspora, a transformationist perspective in politics and social theory is best expressed in the writings of Amilcar Cabral, C.L.R. James, and Walter Rodney.

In the wake of the "failure" of world socialism, the triumph of mass conservatism in politics, and the ideological hegemony of the values of markets, private enterprise, and individual self-interests, black politics has to a great extent retreated from the transformationist perspective in recent years. It is difficult if not impossible to talk seriously about group economic development, collective interests, and the radical restructuring of resources along democratic lines. Yet I am convinced that the road toward black empowerment in the multinational corporate and political environment of the post-Cold War requires a radical leap in social imagination, rather than a retreat to the discourse and logic of the racial past.

Our greatest challenge in rethinking race as ideology is to recognize how we unconsciously participate in its recreation and legitimation. Despite the legal desegregation of U.S. civil society a generation ago, the destructive power and perverse logic of race still continues. Most Americans continue to perceive social reality in a manner which grossly underestimates the role of social class, and legitimates the categories of race as central to the ways in which privilege and authority are organized. We must provide the basis for a progressive alternative to an interpretation of race relations, moving the political culture of black United States from a racialized discourse and analysis to a critique of inequality which has the capacity and potential to speak to the majority of American people. This leap for theory and social analysis must be made if black United States is to have any hope

for transcending its current impasse of powerlessness and systemic inequality. As C.L.R. James astutely observed: "The race question is subsidiary to the class question in politics, and to think of imperialism in terms of race is disastrous. But to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental."

Manning Marable is Director of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies and teaches history and political science at Columbia University New York.