

THE
ABOLITION
OF
WHITE
DEMOCRACY

JOEL OLSON

Introducing the White Democracy

Racial discrimination has no place in a democratic society. There is little disagreement with that. It embodies inequality, intolerance, exclusion, and injustice. Democracy, on the other hand, stands for equality and freedom. Democratic citizenship is inclusive of all members of a polity while racial oppression actively prohibits certain people from exercising their rights as citizens. Yet in spite of these sharp contrasts, racial matters pervade nearly every aspect of life in the United States. Race influences where we live, the schools we attend, the friends we make, the votes we cast, the opportunities we enjoy, even the television shows we watch. As contrary as discrimination and democracy seem to be, they somehow coexist in the American political order.

In his 1940 book *Dusk of Dawn*, the great political theorist W. E. B. Du Bois argues that race is the central problem facing democracy in the United States and the world. One question this problem raises is how can African Americans and people of color throughout the world become part of democracy, which has heretofore been reserved exclusively for whites. Another question is how would the "self-government" of the world's peoples of color, once achieved, change democracy. How might American democracy, for example, be transformed if it was shorn of white supremacy? Would it simply be more inclusive or would its nature be fundamentally altered?¹ Contemporary political theory has had difficulty grappling with both of these questions. Part of the reason

is because it has had a hard time figuring out what to do with race. If racial oppression is contrary to democracy, there seems to be little that an analysis of race can contribute to questions of citizenship, participation, or equality. Beyond arguments opposing racism, there does not seem to be much for political theory to do. As a result, it has devoted few resources toward answering either of Du Bois's questions, particularly the latter, even though it is especially suggestive.

Political theory has had little to say about Du Bois's questions because it has not theorized race as a political category. Reflecting American society at large, the discipline has generally treated race as something created prior to or outside the political realm. This "pre-political" conception of race tends to separate racial inequality out from democratic ideals, which makes it difficult to recognize the ways in which race and democracy are interconnected.

I argue that we need a specifically political theory of race. I mean "political" in two ways. First, an effective theory must identify race as a set of relations within a network of power that organizes people into particular groups and/or roles for the purpose of governing the polity. Second, such a theory must consider politics as participation, community, and the initiation of new possibilities, or in Mary Dietz's words, as "the collective and participatory engagement of citizens in the determination of the affairs of their community."² The disciplinary aspect of politics must be complemented by its democratic aspirations. A theory of race must take into consideration both senses of the political. It must understand race as produced within the political realm rather than prior to it and therefore as a product of democracy rather than its antithesis. This requires, however, breaking with the dominant theoretical approach toward the American racial order, which tends to bracket race from democracy.

Ideals/Practices

The bracketing of racial discrimination from democracy generally takes the form of an assumed contradiction between the ideals and practices of American democracy. In his classic *An American Dilemma*, Gunnar

Myrdal argues that Americans universally hold to the "American Creed": the belief in progress, equality, the essential dignity and perfectibility of humans, and their inalienable right to freedom, justice, and fair opportunity.³ The Creed derives from the essential message of the Declaration of Independence: "All men are created equal." The problem, Myrdal continues, is that the ideal of equality is not always lived up to. Numerous disadvantaged groups in the United States, particularly African Americans, are discriminated against daily despite the Creed. The result is a conflict between the ideals of the Creed and those local and individual values, jealousies, parochialisms, prejudices, norms, and folkways that undermine the Creed in practice. The "Negro Problem" is "an American dilemma" because the treatment of African Americans stands as a vivid contradiction between democratic ideals and discriminatory practices.

From the point of view of the American Creed the status accorded the Negro in America represents nothing more and nothing less than a century-long lag of public morals. In principle the Negro problem was settled long ago; in practice the solution is not effectuated. The Negro in America has not yet been given the elemental civil and political rights of formal democracy, including a fair opportunity to earn his living, upon which a general accord was already won when the American Creed was first taking form. And this anachronism constitutes the contemporary "problem" both to Negroes and to whites.⁴

The great moral and political project of the nation, according to Myrdal, is to make practices consistent with ideals.

Myrdal's influence pervades contemporary attempts to address the racial "dilemma," even among his critics. Rogers Smith, for example, argues that liberal and republican ideals in the United States have always been accompanied by numerous "inegalitarian ascriptive traditions" such as racism, patriarchy, and nativism.⁵ Instead of an American Creed pitted against discriminatory practices, Smith proposes a "multiple traditions" approach that acknowledges that ascriptive traditions like

racism are full-blown ideologies (not just practices) that have always coexisted alongside liberal and republican traditions. "American political actors have always promoted civic ideologies that blend liberal, democratic republican, and egalitarian ascriptive elements in various combinations designed to be politically popular." ⁸⁶ For Smith, the "masculine inequalities in American life" are not a violation of the Creed so much as they represent a conflict between rival traditions, one emphasizing the fundamental equality and liberty of all, the other insisting on the special status and privileges of a particular group. Rather than distinguish good ideals from bad practices, Smith differentiates between good and bad traditions, specifically the vaunted traditions of liberalism and republicanism versus the "illiberal, undemocratic traditions of ascriptive Americanism."⁸⁷

Despite their differences, Myrdal and Smith both believe that democratic ideals are distinct from racist practices and ideologies. Thus, both bracket race from democracy. Myrdal believes that if more whites had a full awareness of the contradiction between their belief in human equality and the fact of Black subordination, they would act to eliminate the gap between ideals and practices. "There is no doubt," he writes, "that a great majority of white people in America would be prepared to give the Negro a substantially better deal if they knew the facts."⁸⁸ Smith's multiple traditions thesis holds that republican and liberal traditions exist alongside and often do battle with ascriptive traditions such as racism and sexism but presumes that each tradition is logically coherent and relatively independent from the others. This formulation leaves the ideals/practices dichotomy essentially intact, only with Smith it is not a conflict between racist practices and egalitarian ideals but egalitarian versus inequalitarian ideological traditions. Thus, the multiple traditions thesis does not overthrow the ideals/practices dichotomy; it just cuts it another way. Both Myrdal and Smith insulate American democratic ideals from the taint of racial oppression, for in each account discrimination contradicts democratic traditions but in no way forms a part of these traditions themselves.⁸⁹

Slavery, the seizure of American Indian lands, Chinese exclusion

laws, Jim Crow legislation, Japanese internment, Mexican *bracero* programs. Instead of understanding these as unfortunate episodes in violation of the egalitarian ethos of the democratic tradition, what if we understand these events as perfectly compatible with American democracy? Historian Edmund Morgan argues that "The rise of liberty and equality in this country was accompanied by the rise of slavery."⁹⁰ There is no contradiction between democratic ideals and practices of slavery; the former depended on the economic base of the latter. This interdependence of slavery and freedom, Morgan holds, is "the central paradox of American history."⁹¹ Similarly, Derrick Bell and Preeta Bansal argue that the early American republican notion of a "common good" was defined against Black subordination. There was no contradiction between republican ideals and racial oppression; rather, they were intimately linked.⁹² What if, as these arguments suggest, racial oppression and American democracy are mutually constitutive rather than antithetical?

This central question drives this book. It is a question that Myrdal's and Smith's models cannot contemplate. The ideals/practices split cannot explain how racial subordination constructs democratic ideals as well as violates them. Yet I argue this is precisely the case. It is not so much that racial discrimination is a "dilemma" for white Americans or that liberal citizenship coexists with ascriptive traditions that exclude people of color. Rather, the very structure of American citizenship is white, to the point where, for most of American history, to be a citizen was to be white and vice versa. Racial oppression makes full democracy impossible, but it has also made American democracy possible. Conversely, American democracy has made racial oppression possible, for neither slavery nor segregation nor any other form of racial domination could have survived without the tacit or explicit consent of the white majority. American democracy is a white democracy, a polity ruled in the interests of a white citizenry and characterized by simultaneous relations of equality and privilege: equality among whites, who are privileged in relation to those who are not white. The burdens of white citizenship—particularly on efforts to expand democracy—remain with us today.

This is not to say that there is no *possible* contradiction between democratic ideals and the privileged status of whites, only that there is no *necessary* contradiction. Logically, absolute equality and privilege conflict. When equality is reserved only for some, however, it can co-exist with privilege. When this occurs, any contradiction between them must be articulated, as the oppressed challenge the oppressor to “live up to its ideals.” As Pierre van den Berghe argues, “Notwithstanding some soul-searching by a few genteel slave-owning intellectuals like Jefferson and Madison in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there is little evidence of an ‘American Dilemma’ during most of the nineteenth century and the first third of the twentieth century. The democratic, egalitarian, and libertarian ideals were reconciled with slavery and genocide by restricting the definition of humanity to whites.”¹³ Slaves and free Black persons had to point out the contradiction between praising the principles of the Declaration while also holding slaves.¹⁴ Myrdal’s inability to see that the contradiction between ideals and practices is not inherent but created by the victims of racial oppression left him stunned by the emergence of the civil rights movement just ten years after his book was published. He could not see that Black agency forced the American dilemma, not the American Creed itself. The contradiction between racial oppression and democracy may seem self-evident today, but it took the deeds of Nat Turner and Ella Baker to make them so.¹⁵

The ideals/practices dichotomy makes it difficult to study race as a political category because it tends to insulate democratic ideals from criticism. It renders liberty, equality, democracy, and citizenship as pure, unalloyed ideals to aspire to rather than essentially contested concepts.¹⁶ Democracy becomes an unswerving ideal to strive for, albeit always unsuccessfully, rather than a space of action, struggle, contestation, and conflict. The logic of the ideals/practices split is that exclusion and discrimination is the problem, for which equality and democracy is the solution. But democracy is not just a solution; it is a political problem itself. The question is not just democracy for whom but what kind of democracy, not just who is to be made equal but what kind of equality,

not just who is to be free but what kind of freedom. Democracy is not a refuge that exists above the fray of interminable political conflict. It is a rough-and-tumble product of such conflict.¹⁷ One of the advantages of analyzing democracy and race as mutually constitutive is that, in addition to providing a better way to understand how race functions, it renders democratic ideals political again. It takes them down from their pedestal, makes them amenable to critical analysis, and reveals how they can foster both equality and privilege, freedom and slavery. It provides new ways of imagining what democracy is and could be. One of the purposes of my critique of the white democracy, then, is to reimagine democracy and its radical potential.

Race as a Political Category

It is widely acknowledged in academia (if not in the general public) that race is a “social construction.” To say that race is a product of social forces rather than a biological category, however, tells little about how these forces operate. As David Roediger notes, “[T]he insight that race is socially constructed is so sweeping that by itself it implies few specific political conclusions.”¹⁸ An analysis of the relationship between race and democracy illuminates the concept of social construction by understanding race as a relatively autonomous political system in its own right, with its own norms, ideology, power relations, and logic.¹⁹ Race functions by organizing people into particular groups. One group or “race” receives preferential treatment through the social order while the other race or races are subordinated to a status below that of the members of the dominant race. The result is the political docility and economic utility of all races, as the dominant race represses the subordinate one and is itself disciplined by the imperatives of perpetuating the system of privilege. Race, then, is by definition a system of discrimination, hierarchy, and power. As van den Berghe writes, “The existence of races in a given society presupposes the presence of racism, for without racism physical characteristics are devoid of social significance.”²⁰ Further, the racial order functions to preserve the privileges of the dominant race at the expense of the other race or races. The key to understanding

race as a political system, then, is through an analysis of the dominant or “white” race. Thus, a critique of whiteness, or the condition of racial privilege in a democratic polity, is crucial to understanding how race functions as a political system.

If Du Bois provides the foundation for a critique of whiteness, as I argue in the next chapter, James Baldwin provides the language and polemical framework. In his powerful essay “On Being ‘White’ . . . And Other Lies,” he argues that white people are not white because of their skin color or European ancestry but through a moral and political choice.

Americans became white—the people who, as they claim, “settled” the country became white—because of the necessity of denying the Black presence and justifying the Black subjugation. No community can be based on such a principle—or, in other words, no community can be established on so genocidal a lie. White men—from Norway, for example, where they were Norwegians—became white: by slaughtering the cattle, poisoning the wells, torching the houses, massacring Native Americans, raping Black women.²¹

Whiteness, Baldwin argues, is not a genetic inheritance so much as it is a social relation. It is not something one is; it is something one does. As the historian Theodore Allen writes, “For when an emigrant population from ‘multiracial’ Europe goes to North America or South Africa and there, by constitutional fiat, incorporates itself as the ‘white race,’ that is no part of genetic evolution. It is rather a political act: the invention of ‘the white race.’”²² “White” or “Caucasian” is not a neutral physical description of certain persons but a political project of securing and protecting privileges in a society whose ideals would seem to forbid them. Yet because whiteness is a decision made, it is also a decision that can be undone. Undoing it does not mean simply refusing to classify people by race; it means abandoning a politics in which the standing of one section of the population is premised on the debasement of another. (This explains why I do not capitalize white throughout the book, but I

do capitalize Black. The two terms are not symmetrical. Black is a cultural identity as well as a political category, and as such merits capitalization like American Indian, Chicana, or Irish American. White, however, for reasons I detail in the next chapter and in chapter 4, is strictly a political category and thus, like “proletarian,” “citizen,” or “feminist,” requires no capitalization.)

As Baldwin suggests, race is a form of political power. It confers full citizenship to those who can prove themselves white and guarantees their privileged status over those deemed not-white and therefore less than citizens. The privileges of whiteness, then, include and rest upon the rights and duties of citizenship. Hence, the racialization of citizenship and in particular the citizenship of the dominant race, or *white citizenship*, becomes a central problem for democratic theory. White citizenship is the enjoyment of racial standing in a democratic polity. It is a position of equality and privilege simultaneously: equal to other white citizens yet privileged over those who are not white. It is both a structural location in the racial order and a product of human agency. Individual whites may consciously defend their privileges, reject them, or deny they exist, yet the structure of the racial order makes it difficult for individual whites to “jump out” of their whiteness at any given time.

The category does not explain every belief or behavior of every white person but encompasses the structures and social relations that produce white privilege and the ideas that defend it. In this way, the category is similar to the phrases “the white man” or “the Negro” that were common in the civil rights era (as in “What does the Negro want?”). The white citizen is not necessarily coextensive with persons of pale skin or predominant European ancestry. Skin color is but a “badge,” as Du Bois writes, that is used to distribute people along the color line.²³ Nor is it coextensive with wealth. As I argue in chapter 1, the distinctive feature of white citizenship is that it crosses class lines.

The white citizen is one who enjoys the status and privileges of a racial polity. The political challenge is to eliminate these advantages in favor of more democratic forms of citizenship. The consequence of doing so, I maintain, would be the dissolution of white democracy.

The Democratic Problem of the White Citizen

This book attempts to bring questions of participation and race together in the context of political theory. The central challenge I confront is how to expand political participation in a society that has been historically marked by racial discrimination. The key to this challenge, I argue, lies in the white citizen, and the task of democratic politics is to abolish him.

Democracy and racial oppression are intimately connected in the United States—the freedom of some has depended on the subordination of others. This connection is sealed through citizenship. Citizenship is a political identity signifying equality in the public sphere and the shared enjoyment of rights and duties, including the all-important right to participate in governing public affairs. American citizenship, however, historically has also been a form of social status that has served to distinguish those who were or could become full members of the American republic from those who could not. In the formative years of American democracy, citizenship was in a very real sense proof that one was not and could not become a slave. Given the racial character of chattel slavery in the United States, its antithesis, citizenship, was also racialized. If the Black race was associated with slavery in the public imagination, the white race was associated with citizenship. The standing of citizens, then, was a *racialized* standing. In the antebellum era, citizenship granted an individual not just political status but a white racial status as well. The two were indissoluble. Whiteness became the political color of citizenship. The significance of racialized citizenship is not that only white persons could become citizens; it is that becoming a citizen effectively made one white.

As I stated above, white citizenship is simultaneously an identity of equality and privilege. The privileges of white citizenship, or what Roediger calls the “wages of whiteness,” are public, psychological, and material.²⁴ They include the enjoyment of all the rights accorded citizens including suffrage, the right to join political parties, access to desired jobs, the ability to compete in an unrestricted market, the capacity to sit on juries, the right to enjoy public accommodations, and the right to consider oneself the equal of any other. Whiteness, legal scholar Cheryl

Harris notes, is a “consolation prize,” particularly for poor and working-class whites.²⁵ It does not guarantee that all whites will be successful but it ensures that no white citizen will ever be thrown down to the absolute bottom of the social hierarchy. In exchange for this prize, working-class whites acquiesce to the domination of the political and economic system by powerful elites. Whiteness grants working-class whites a special status—not quite rich but not quite powerless—that becomes the focus of the white citizen’s political energy rather than challenges to elite rule. As a result, the wages of whiteness constrain “any vision of democracy from addressing the class hierarchies adverse to many who considered themselves white.”²⁶

Only with the victories of the civil rights movement was the linkage between white standing and citizenship formally broken. Nevertheless, the movement was unable to completely eradicate the anti-democratic influence of whiteness. The legacy of white standing remains at the root of advantages whites currently enjoy over African Americans and others in nearly every social indicator, from life expectancy to unemployment rates to net financial assets to incarceration rates to SAT scores. Yet the “wages of whiteness” do more than dole out a set of privileges to whites. They shape how the white citizen understands democracy. The political values and vision of the white citizen bundle racial privilege with democratic ideals. What appears as an obvious unjust advantage to those who are not white appears to the white citizen as a natural right, a normal condition, or a deserved advantage. As a result, the white citizen resists any political vision in which his or her privileges are not respected. The democratic problem of the white citizen is that the tension between the desire for equality and the desire to maintain one’s racial standing results in a narrow political imagination that constrains the way white citizens understand citizenship (as status rather than participation), freedom (as negative liberty), and equality (as opportunity rather than social equality). The white imagination exhibits little incentive to expand participation in public affairs because it construes citizenship as an identity to possess rather than a power to employ.

The political challenge, then, is to subvert the privileges of the white citizen and transform his or her democratic imagination. In practical terms, this means eradicating any disparity between whites and people of color in the realms of education, law enforcement, employment, housing, health care, and politics. Thus, my argument refutes growing arguments to replace so-called "divisive" race-based policies such as affirmative action with "universal" or "class-based" policies and insists on defending and strengthening those programs that directly undermine the wages of whiteness. The implications of my argument go beyond public policy, however. Since whiteness is a position of privilege, I argue that the subversion of this privilege amounts to no less than the abolition of white citizenship itself. This, of course, is not ethnic cleansing. The white citizen is not a biological or cultural group but a political category. Eliminating the powers of the category eliminates the category itself, much like the end of feudalism abolished the aristocracy and the Civil War abolished the slaveholders. Further, just as these previous forms of abolition paved the way for new, more democratic political orders (representative democracy and Radical Reconstruction, respectively), abolishing the white citizen paves the way for new possibilities in which privilege would be inimical to democracy rather than a functional part of it. In other words, movements against racial domination might not realize liberal democracy so much as suggest a world beyond it.

Historical struggles against white citizenship, then, provide crucial lessons for contemporary democratic theory. Particularly important are the Black freedom struggles. While various groups, from American Indians to the Irish to the Italians to the Jews to the Chinese to the Mexicans, have endured racial oppression in the United States, the archetype of not-whiteness historically has been Blackness. This is due to the original function of the racial order, which was the maintenance of slavery.²⁷ The system of racial subordination was designed primarily for African Americans for the purposes of exploiting their labor, first under slavery and then under segregation. This is not to say that only African Americans suffered under the domination of a racial state, only that, given their central role in economic production, their unique unfree

status in "the land of the free," and their signal contributions to resisting the racial order, the Black experience is central to understanding the relationship between race and democracy. As Lerone Bennett suggests, "America is, in large part, what it is because of what it tried to do to the slave and what the slave did to what was done to him."²⁸ African American freedom struggles have advanced democracy possibly more than any other kind of movement in the United States because they explicitly challenged the connection between whiteness and citizenship. The overthrow of slavery, the unfulfilled possibilities of Reconstruction, the triumphs of the civil rights movement: all of these efforts expanded and transformed American democracy and thereby provide a guidepost for future struggles. Such is the significance of the abolitionists' condemnation of the Constitution as a "covenant with death and an agreement with hell," the freedmen's insistence on "forty acres and a mule," and the Black Panthers' call for "Power to the people!" All of these efforts in some way imagined a world beyond liberal democracy. In their spirit, I argue for an abolitionist-democratic politics that makes the struggle against white privilege central not only in the fight against racial discrimination but also in the effort to expand the participation of ordinary people in those affairs that affect their daily life. Any strategy for a more democratic and participatory society, I insist, must directly confront and undermine the white citizen.

Despite its significance, contemporary political theory has generally not considered the democratic problem of the white citizen. Color-blind approaches do not account for the persistence of racial inequality since the civil rights movement, while multiculturalism and theories of recognition frame racial oppression as a cultural conflict rather than a problem of power. Theories of difference tend to consider race as one form of "difference" among others, isolating it from its historical context. All these approaches misconstrue racial domination as a problem of exclusion (for which the solution is inclusion) rather than a problem of privilege (for which the solution is abolition). Including the excluded is important, but by itself inclusion does not undermine the passive model of citizenship that white democracy promotes nor does it eliminate the

privileges of whiteness. By concentrating on whiteness rather than race in general and by connecting whiteness to participation, citizenship, and relations of power, an abolitionist-democratic politics places race in its specific historical context rather than lumping it in the general categories of difference, identity, or exclusion. It shifts the discourse of political theory from the problem of diversity to the problem of privilege, from strategies of inclusion to strategies for abolition, from a vision of the equal recognition of races to a vision of a world without whiteness, and from the goal of fulfilling liberal democracy to the possibility of transcending it.

I begin my argument in chapter 1 by using the work of Du Bois to propose a political definition of race that sets out what whiteness is and how it is fundamental to the American democratic experience. I argue that at the foundation of the American racial order is a *cross-class alliance* between the dominant class and one section of the working class. This alliance confers privileges to its members, in exchange for which they guarantee the social stability necessary for the accumulation of capital. This alliance, Du Bois argues, produces two “worlds” of race, the white and the dark worlds. It results in a peculiar kind of democracy, a *Herrenvolk* democracy, in which the white world enjoys democratic rights and political equality while the dark world is subjected to the tyranny of the white majority. I use this definition of race to reinterpret Du Bois’s famous concept of “double consciousness,” arguing that it is fundamentally an expression of alienation that results from racial oppression.

I apply this theory of race to American citizenship in chapter 2. After providing a brief history of the origins of white citizenship, I turn to Judith Shklar’s conception of citizenship as standing and Du Bois’s critique of the “public and psychological wages” of whiteness to show that the struggle for citizenship was also a struggle to join the cross-class alliance. As American workers fought to define themselves as citizens, they also fought to become white. Through an analysis of coverture and antinegation law, I distinguish between the processes that created white and male citizenship and show how white women, including many

of those active in the movements for women’s equality, sought and received racial standing. After discussing Tocqueville’s chapter on the “Three Races” in *Democracy in America*, in which I argue that democracy and racial oppression were not contradictory in the Jacksonian era until slaves and abolitionists made them so, I return to Du Bois to show how white citizenship thwarts attempts to create a more democratic society.

There are two stages of the white democracy, which are divided by the civil rights movement. Chapter 2 addresses the problem of the white citizen in the first stage, the *Herrenvolk* democracy. Chapter 3 addresses the second, post-civil rights stage, in which whiteness becomes less a form of *standing* and more of a *norm* that sediments accrued white advantages onto the ordinary operations of society. After explaining this shift, I use this analysis to address the “participation-inclusion dilemma” in contemporary democratic theory. The dilemma is that in a racial polity, the quest for greater participation may actually serve to strengthen the tyranny of the majority race. The quest for inclusion, on the other hand, may undermine racial tyranny but does little to increase participation. Through a critique of William Connolly’s *Ethos of Pluralization*, I argue that political theories based on a strategy of inclusion perpetuate normalized white privilege even as they seek to resolve the problem of difference. I then contrast Connolly’s argument with Iris Marion Young’s *Justice and the Politics of Difference* and Lani Guinier’s *Tyranny of the Majority*. Through an interpretation of these texts I argue that an effective democratic theory must go beyond inclusion by redefining the problem from exclusion to privilege and the lack of participation. The best way to undermine the tyranny of the white majority and to expand democratic participation, I contend, is through a politics aimed at the elimination of white privilege.

Whiteness also persists in the ways in which Americans have come to understand race and the proper resolution of its disorders. In chapter 4 I address the two principal racial paradigms since the civil rights movement, color blindness and multiculturalism. I argue that while both repudiate the essential principles of *Herrenvolk* democracy, neither effectively undermines whiteness. Through a critique of Justice John

Harlan's dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson* and Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom's *America in Black and White*, I show how whiteness persists in the color-blind ideal through its narrow, formal conception of race as a politically irrelevant physical attribute. Turning to multiculturalism, I analyze Charles Taylor's work on the "politics of recognition" and its influence on scholars such as Nancy Fraser and many of those working in the area of "whiteness studies." The key flaw of the multicultural ideal is that its political objective of achieving the "equal recognition" of cultures requires that it redefine race as culture. Understanding whiteness as one culture among others rather than a category of privilege, however, obscures its power. Ultimately, the color-blind and multicultural ideals perpetuate the passive model of citizenship inherited from the *Herrnvolk* era. Neither, then, provides a means to understand race or to expand democratic participation in the era of globalization.

I conclude in chapter 5 by sketching an outline of the "abolition-democracy," a politics that would abolish the white citizen in order to expand democratic participation as well as eliminate the racial order. I suggest the possibilities of Black radical political thought as a means to reimagine democracy and to leaven the suffocating pragmatism of contemporary democratic theory. Through a brief overview of the work of the original abolitionists, I set out the essential elements of a contemporary abolitionist-democratic politics, emphasizing in particular its radical nature and its emphasis on political action. In undermining the wages of whiteness, the abolition-democracy seeks to redefine citizenship from a passive identity concerned with status to a participatory activity. A democratic politics, I conclude, must be an abolitionist politics.

Throughout the book I take a historical approach toward understanding the relationship between race and American citizenship. In so doing, I take inspiration from Judith Shklar, who writes:

I want to remind political theorists that citizenship is not a notion that can be discussed intelligibly in a static and empty social space. Whatever the ideological gratifications that the mnemonic evocation of an original

and pure citizenry may have, it is unconvincing and ultimately an uninteresting flight from politics if it disregards the history and present actualities of our institutions. . . . [P]olitical theorists who ignore the best current history and political science cannot expect to have anything very significant to contribute to our political self-understanding. They stand in acute danger of theorizing about nothing at all except their own uneasiness in a society they have made very little effort to comprehend.²⁹

Unlike Shklar, however, I take an approach also guided by historical materialism, for I am particularly interested in the way in which white citizenship relates to class relations and the accumulation of capital. I assume that the development of productive forces explains the general course of a society and that the function of the racial order is generally related to the development of such forces. As I argue in chapter 2, race is a modern concept; it did not exist prior to the conquest of the New World and the first stages of capitalist accumulation. Its present meaning and importance, therefore, cannot be separated from the development of capitalism or from the moral and political thought of modernity. Thus, I follow Stanley Greenberg when he writes, "Racial domination . . . is essentially a class phenomenon. . . . Racial domination is not an amorphous, all-encompassing relationship between groups distinguished by physical characteristics but, for the most part, a series of specific class relations that vary by place and over time and that change as a consequence of changing material conditions."³⁰

This contrasts with approaches that define race as an ideology. Matthew Pratt Guterl's *The Color of Race in America*, for example, examines the rise of a biracial order from 1900 to 1940 through an analysis of the social and political thought of figures such as Du Bois, Madison Grant, Lathrop Stoddard, and Jean Toomer. Guterl's interpretations of each are acute and historically sensitive, yet his book too much assumes that the racial order is shaped by what people write and say about race rather than how it is reproduced in economic and social structures.³¹ Madison Grant's obsession with the supremacy of the "Nordic" white race and his fear of the corrupting influence of the lower "Alpine" and

CHAPTER 3

The Peculiar Dilemma of Whiteness

In 1860, an Alabama fire-eater named William L. Yancey proclaimed to a Northern audience, "Your fathers and my fathers built this government on two ideas: the first is that the white race is the citizen, and the master race, and the white man is the equal of every other white man. The second idea is that the Negro is the inferior race."¹ In 1962, Alabama governor George Wallace proclaimed at his inaugural address, "Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!" William Yancey presumably died with his politics intact. But thirty years after his famous speech, Wallace would say that segregation was "Wrong, wrong, wrong" and earnestly claim, "I'm not a racist at all."²

What happened to Wallace but not Yancey? Both believed that being white and being a citizen were indissolubly linked. Yet one eventually renounced the defense of white citizenship that his fellow Southerner took to his grave. What roiled the racial seas such that segregationists like Wallace would repudiate three hundred years of white supremacist ideology within a single generation? Is the miraculous transformation of George Wallace the gravestone of the white democracy?

Perhaps. Yet even as Governor Wallace repented for past sins, the average white family's income in Alabama was nearly double that of the average Black family's. A white Alabaman twenty-five years of age or older is twice as likely to possess a bachelor's degree as is a Black Alabaman. Black people made up twenty-six percent of the population of

Alabama in 1996 but received just four percent of the doctoral degrees awarded by the state's universities.³ Yancey's posterity apparently still enjoys the wages of whiteness.

This chapter explores how whiteness has changed since the end of *Herrenvolk* democracy yet how it continues to pose a dilemma for democracy and democratic theory. With the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, whiteness lost its state sanction. Government policy today aims to ensure a "color-blind" society in which race has no negative bearing on the social, economic, or political status of individuals. Nevertheless, choose any indicator—infant mortality rates, prison sentences, traffic stops, college graduation rates, wealth accumulation, life expectancy, SAT scores, unemployment rates—and the result is the same: the persistence of white advantage and Black, Latino, and Native American disadvantage. Although no longer an officially recognized form of standing, whiteness, or the condition of racial privilege in a democratic polity, persists at every level of American society as a norm that sediments accrued white advantages onto the ordinary operations of modern society, making them seem like the "natural" result of individual effort.

Thus, the white democracy remains. The status value of white citizenship has been weakened since the days of Wallace's last stand at the schoolhouse door, yet the expectation and/or enjoyment of racial privilege persist. Unfortunately, democratic theory generally has not confronted the enduring problem of whiteness. This is because, I argue, much of it has relied too heavily on a politics of inclusion to resolve problems of race and difference. Such a politics understands racial discrimination as a form of exclusion from the public sphere to which the solution is inclusion. Whiteness is certainly an exclusionary power, but it is also a form of privilege. Lacking an analysis of racial privilege, the politics of inclusion cannot grasp the full scope of whiteness, which is not so much a problem of difference or exclusion as it is a problem of *alliance*. Furthermore, a politics of inclusion offers little in terms of increased participation in politics. In fact, I argue, the quest for inclusion often precludes greater participation, since the goal of that quest

is to attain stranding rather than empower. But expanded participation in itself cannot solve the whiteness problem either. In the hands of a white majority, a call for "community control of schools," for example, can easily become a tool to enforce segregation and perpetuate white domination.

The result is a peculiar dilemma. In a white-controlled polity, a strategy of inclusion may undermine explicit racial discrimination but does little to undermine whiteness as a norm. Nor does it increase participation. Yet simply expanding participation is also insufficient because in a racial polity, the quest for greater participation may actually serve to strengthen the tyranny of the dominant race. The key to resolving this dilemma between participation and inclusion, I argue, is through the *dissolution of whiteness* as a significant social-political category. Dissolving or abolishing whiteness not only includes the excluded, it undermines the tyranny of the white majority and expands democratic participation.

I hasten to add that abolishing whiteness is not the same as abolishing race itself. Although dissolving the category "white" implies dissolving its antithesis "not-white" as well, it does not require abolishing Black, Chicano/a, Indian, or other such identities, since they have a cultural and social content independent of their membership in a subordinate not-white category. But since the white category has little content independent of its position of privilege, it could conceivably disappear as a viable identity.

My argument begins by using recent work in the field of critical race theory to explain how whiteness has shifted from a form of standing to a norm after the civil rights movement. I then examine the politics of inclusion through an analysis of theories of difference. I argue that William Connolly's "ethos of pluralization" has the potential to dissolve whiteness but his own application of it ends up sustaining white identity, in part because it remains tethered to the politics of inclusion. I then turn to Iris Marion Young's *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Young overcomes the limits of inclusion by smartly redefining inclusion from an end in itself to a means toward a participatory politics. The

missing ingredient to her analysis is a critique of privilege that could connect her argument for participation to the problem of whiteness. This connection is made by Lani Guinier in her work on the tyranny of the majority. Guinier shows that the problem with white tyranny in the electoral process is not so much that it excludes African Americans as it prevents their participation. Her work is significant because it links the dissolution of whiteness to the expansion of participation in the public sphere. In so doing, it overcomes the participation-inclusion dilemma and suggests that attempts to abolish whiteness not only fight racial discrimination, they potentially flow over the containers of liberal democracy.

The Death of Herrenvolk Democracy

As Anthony Marx shows, states do or do not pursue policies of racial oppression depending on whether such policies efficiently diminish conflict between classes and within the dominant class. The United States, he argues, opted for policies that produced the white citizen because the cross-class alliance created stability. "To hold together the nation-state, preserving stability needed for growth, whites were unified across class by race. . . . Economic interests were subordinated to white racial unity, with this class compromise made explicit and enforced by state policy varying in response to ongoing class tensions."⁴

White citizenship persisted through the Civil War. It was briefly threatened by Reconstruction but quickly resumed with new strength, guaranteed by segregation laws in the South and extralegal means of exclusion, intimidation, and terror throughout the nation, all tacitly sanctioned by the federal government. Segregation reestablished familiar patterns of white-Black relations while the South slowly industrialized, urbanized, and transitioned from slave labor to sharecropping to wage labor. In the Southwest, segregation imposed white domination on a region in which the racial order was typically more fluid than in the South and North and in which Mexican Americans were technically full citizens according to federal law before the Civil War.⁵ In this period, commercial farmers and businessmen in primary industries like

mining insisted on tight control over the subordinate population and a strong state role in guaranteeing a dependable supply of productive yet docile labor. On the other hand, white workers, particularly unskilled or semiskilled ones, demanded that the state reserve certain areas of employment for them. These demands sometimes conflicted with each other, but they provided a basis for cross-class unity as well. As Stanley Greenberg argues, despite conflicts over the details of racial domination under segregation, "Each [class sector] calls on the state to take control of the subordinate worker, to draw racial lines somewhere in the society and economy."⁶ For its part, the state enjoys a fair degree of autonomy as it balances the competing interests within and between classes. Under segregation no less than during slavery, citizenship as standing was the glue that held the complex alliance between the state, white workers, and various sectors of capital together. As John Cell notes, segregation was not a throwback to another era nor did it pander to the meanest elements of the South. It was the child of economic development and modern politicking.

Mystifying, rationalizing, and legitimizing a particular configuration of caste and class, [segregation] enabled white supremacy to survive in an increasingly threatening, hostile world. . . . Far from being the crude, irrational prejudice of ignorant "rednecks," segregation must be recognized as one of the most successful political ideologies of the past century. It was, indeed, the highest stage of white supremacy.⁷

Nevertheless, segregation was a vulgar system on the ground. It meant that the poorest, lowest, meanest white person was held in higher esteem than even the most sophisticated, prestigious, and wealthy Black person. "The Jim Crow laws put the authority of the state or city in the son. 'The Jim Crow laws put the authority of the state or city in the voice of the street-car conductor, the railway brakeman, the bus driver, the theater usher, and also into the voice of the hoodlum of the public parks and playgrounds,'" writes C. Vann Woodward. "They gave free rein and the majesty of the law to mass aggressions that might otherwise have been curbed, blunted, or deflected."⁸

Ironically, the very success of Jim Crow paved the way for its collapse, as the same impulse for stability that led the state to enforce racial oppression led it to give in to the demands of the civil rights movement. Segregation reduced intrawhite conflict, which enabled the industrialization and urbanization of the South and Southwest. The mechanization of agriculture, the proletarianization of the countryside, resistance among commercial farmers and businessmen to two-tiered wage scales, and the diminishing role of organized labor relaxed demands for a tightly controlled, bound labor force. These developments lessened the importance of a bipolar racial order in securing social stability. Further, the New Deal and World War II deepened the federal government's presence in the South. Once entrenched, it was in a position to intervene on behalf of the civil rights movement.

But it did not intervene at the behest of capital. Contrary to the conceit of economic liberalism, racial hierarchy does not automatically dissolve in the magic elixir of markets. Abstract economic principles state that social distinctions should be irrelevant in the marketplace. All that matters is buying low and selling high. Practicing "pure" market logic prior to the civil rights era, however, would have been economic suicide for many a merchant. White diners would not patronize a restaurant that served Black people; unions would strike a business that hired or promoted Black labor; white home buyers would not purchase homes in neighborhoods where Black families lived. Any daring entrepreneur who followed the abstract logic of the green rather than the *Herrenvolk* world of white and not-white would be out of business very shortly. This is because capitalism is not inherently antagonistic to white supremacy. As long as the state ensures the social stability necessary for accumulation, capitalists tend to accommodate themselves to the existing political regime, whether it be constitutional monarchic, welfare liberal, social democratic, dictatorial, fascist, or *Herrenvolk*. As Greenberg writes, "The racial order makes demands on industry no more unpalatable or burdensome than the impositions of socialist and fascist governments—indeed, probably less. Businessmen can live with separate toilets and promotion lines, as they learned to live with

pension programs and price regulations."⁹ It is disorder from below, not buying and selling from above, that undermines a racial order. Only when Southern businesses faced increasing pressure from civil rights protesters, such as during the Birmingham campaign of 1963, did businessmen urge local governments to end segregation.¹⁰ Clearly, desegregation was a *political* development; it did not flow from the logic of economics. Jim Crow reached a point at which it was unable to ensure social stability at a reasonable cost. When the *Herrenvolk* democracy produced disorder rather than order, business and political elites suddenly had a dream.

The essential principle of *Herrenvolk* democracy—democracy for whites, tyranny for everyone else—was finally overthrown by the civil rights movement. With the passage of civil and voting rights legislation in 1964 and 1965, the standing of the white citizen was officially abolished and the state became committed to protecting the rights of all rather than the privileges of the majority.¹¹ No longer does the state ensure that the lowest white is socially superior to the most esteemed not-white. Instead, the essential principle of the new color-blind democracy is the formal political equality of all citizens, achieved through the removal of official racial barriers.¹²

The color-blind democracy represents a victory by the civil rights movement over the *Herrenvolk* regime, but it did not abolish the cross-class alliance. Instead, whiteness has metamorphosed into less visible but no less real forms. White privilege can be overt and explicit, as in the days of "whites only" facilities, or it may consist of covert and tacit advantages that whites enjoy with or without conscious acknowledgment, such as redlined neighborhoods or exemption from criminal profiling. This latter form dominates the post-civil rights era. Contemporary white privilege is like an "invisible weightless knapsack" of unearned advantages that whites draw on in their daily lives to improve or maintain their social position, even as they hold to the ideals of political equality and equal opportunity.¹³ The simultaneous sense of equality and privilege that marks whiteness persists as one of today's most formidable challenges to a more democratic society. The civil rights movement,

then, stands not as a bookend of white privilege but as a watershed between the two eras of the white democracy, *Herrnvolk* and color-blind, or the eras of standing and normalization.¹⁴

From Standing to Normalization

Whiteness persists because the color-blind democracy presupposes racial distinctions rather than overcomes them. It does so in a fashion similar to the way in which private property is presupposed by the state even after it is “emancipated” from it. As Karl Marx argues, when property is abolished in the public sphere by eliminating the property requirement for suffrage, private property itself is not abolished. Instead, it thrives as the ruling principle of the private realm. When the state abolishes distinctions of property, birth, education, and occupation by granting all adult males equal political rights, it frees private interests to act unfettered. Social distinctions of property, education, and occupation continue to exist but they are now “private” matters that lie outside the jurisdiction of the political realm, immune from public accountability. “Far from abolishing these real distinctions, the state only exists on the presupposition of their existence; it feels itself to be a political state and asserts its universality only in opposition to these elements of its being.”¹⁵

The relationship between race and the state is similar. Once “emancipated” from the state, race is cast into the private realm. But as with private property, it does not disappear. Instead, the color-blind democracy redefines race from a relationship of superiority and inferiority to a politically neutral category. An individual’s race now appears as a “natural” attribute that should have no bearing on one’s political or economic life. Rather than eliminating race, the color-blind state makes it *prepolitical*: it understands races as formed prior to the public sphere through essentially “private” or natural means such as biology, ancestry, culture, or even personal choice. The political emancipation of race is, of course, a big step forward. Nevertheless, transforming race into a prepolitical category does not abolish its political influence. Just as the emancipation of property withdraws inequalities of wealth from public

deliberation, the emancipation of race removes the cross-class alliance from public scrutiny.

The prepoliticization of race has three important consequences. First, race remains publicly significant even as it becomes a private matter, for the test of a successful color-blind democracy is how well racial diversity is accommodated. The peaceful coexistence of various racial identities is a sign of a stable social order, while the absence of diversity indicates the potential for instability. Obligations of diversity justify extensive state regulation. Decisions that were once the ultimate prerogative of the private individual—whom to hire, whom to allow to dine in your restaurant, to whom to sell your home, whom to allow in your social club—are now publicly regulated. Numerous relationships—student and teacher, school and neighborhood, neighbor and neighbor, owner and customer, employer and employee, cop and suspect, real estate agent and buyer and seller—are subjected to increased state scrutiny, albeit for color-blind purposes. Just as Foucault maintains that sex was not repressed in nineteenth-century Europe but proliferated through various techniques and deployments, race is reproduced through the various practices of the color-blind democracy.¹⁶ Second, a prepolitical conception of race redefines racial domination from white supremacy to abstract discrimination. Ignoring the history of the *Herrnvolk*, the state assumes that all prejudice and discrimination are equally noxious. Antiwhite attitudes are as significant as anti-Black prejudice. “Racist” no longer describes a social structure but an individual’s character. The problem is no longer segregation but “hate,” not systematic inequality but “intolerance,” not privilege but “extremism.” Racism, as Lewis Gordon writes, becomes an “equal-opportunity affair.”¹⁷ Finally, in regulating nondiscrimination and diversity, the color-blind state redefines whiteness from a privileged identity to a politically neutral racial category. The white race becomes simply one race among others and the historical effects of three hundred years of systematic white privilege are rendered politically invisible.

Thus, the transformation of race into a prepolitical category does not eliminate the significance of whiteness so much as it *normalizes* it.

Rather than a form of public standing, whiteness in the color-blind state functions as a norm in which racial privilege is sedimented into the background of social life as the "natural outcome" of ordinary practices and individual choices, making it difficult to discern any systematic explanation for the advantages whites continue to enjoy after the civil rights movement. The state's official position of color blindness and its interest in regulating diversity mask the fact that the "normal individual" is still the white individual and that the freedom of the white individual remains the standard against which social progress is judged.¹⁸

Whiteness as norm functions in at least two ways. As Cheryl Harris argues, it is a property interest that forms the background against which legal disputes, rights claims, and equal opportunities are framed, defined, and adjudicated.¹⁹ It is a form of property because it shares the same premise as property: the right to exclude. In the *Herrnvolk* era, whiteness was literally a property interest that stood for the expectation of favored status, the protection of legal claims on Native or Mexican land, and the prospect of owning another human being. "Whiteness was the characteristic, the attribute, the property of free human beings."²⁰ The color-blind state changed the form of whiteness, Harris acknowledges, but kept its exclusive character intact. While courts no longer protect explicit forms of discrimination, they still refuse to eliminate inequalities of resources that whites have built up over time, such as the \$29,000 in median assets possessed by white families in 1994 compared to the \$2,000 in median assets for Black families.²¹ The color-blind democracy thus provides for formal political equality but not substantive equality or the redistribution of resources to rectify white advantage. "Whiteness as property has taken on more subtle forms" since the civil rights movement, "But [it] retains its core characteristic—the legal legitimization of expectations of power and control that enshrine the status quo as a neutral baseline, while masking the maintenance of white privilege and domination."²²

Whiteness also acts as a filter that provides whites an edge in an "equal opportunity" society.²³ In the *Herrnvolk* era, standing was akin to aristocratic privilege. Once achieved, it was inheritable, stable, and

enduring. But as white standing was swept away by the civil rights movement, "the possibility of aristocratization" that white privilege offered disappeared as social advancement became subject to the competitive rules of the market rather than inhering partially in racial privilege. In the absence of racial standing, access to status shifts to institutions of merit such as the university and the job market. Yet as Immanuel Wallerstein argues, in a world with too many qualified people seeking too few status-holding positions, "merit," "desert," and "qualified" become political terms. With the talent pool too large and too deep, it has to be skimmed somehow, essentially through means that seem arbitrary and unfair to its victims. In such a context, whiteness operates as a filter that reduces the possibility that whites or their children will fall victim to the "arbitrary triage" that pares the pool of status seekers that merit can trim by only so much. Rational whites act to secure whatever advantages they can by opposing those policies that undermine white advantage, such as affirmative action and school desegregation, although such struggles are usually carried out on the grounds of "individual rights" or "community control" rather than explicit appeals to white supremacy.

Whiteness is reproduced through these processes of normalization even as the color-blind democracy outlaw racial discrimination. White advantage is deposited into the social structure through means as ostensibly race neutral as the generational transfer of wealth, criminal profiling, college entrance exams, and tracking in schools. Whiteness is both an *interest in* and an *expectation of favored treatment within a color-blind society*. This is the cognate of the dual sense of equality and supremacy that characterized white identity in the *Herrnvolk* era. The result is a racial order in which, as Lawrie Balfour writes, "the persistence of hierarchy is simultaneously condemned and taken for granted."²⁴

For those who are not white, the normalization of white privilege often feels like the same emperor in new clothes, as whites continue to enjoy advantages in nearly every aspect of social life. Meanwhile, persons of color continue to suffer *Herrnvolk*-era humiliations like racial profiling as well as persistent fits of white terror inflicted by racial

“extremists.” For whites, on the other hand, normalization is standing’s poor cousin. In the *Herrnvolk* democracy, standing was an individualizing form of power. Its functioning required that every individual white person enjoy standing over every not-white person. Just a few exceptions threatened the entire system. By granting standing to whites collectively, the *Herrnvolk* granted status to each white individually. The color-blind democracy, however, by definition requires that some not-whites enjoy greater status than some whites, otherwise the “color-blind” state would still be a *Herrnvolk* system. Whiteness thus tends to shift from an individualizing to an aggregate form of power. Guaranteed standing is replaced by statistical advantages. Poverty, violence, inferior schooling, poor health, high incarceration and unemployment rates, lack of assets, and substandard housing continue to disproportionately affect those who are not-white, while whites continue to disproportionately escape them. But because they are probabilities, not guarantees, the aggregated advantages of normalized whiteness hardly seem like privileges. It means almost nothing to a particular white man to know that, on average, white males live almost ten years longer than Black males. The statistical likelihood that a white teenager will score two hundred points higher on her SAT than a Black teen is no guarantee that the white teen will actually perform at that level, much less get into the school of her choice. Such statistics, however telling they are of the continuing wages of whiteness, are small comfort to a world used to more.

In this way, normalization contains within it the seeds of future instability. The result could be a reactionary effort to reestablish *Herrnvolk* forms of white privilege; evidence of this possibility is easily perceptible today.²⁵ Yet instability also presents an opportunity to expand democracy if whites can be convinced that short-term racial privileges are not worth their long-term costs. Overcoming the material, public, and psychological wages of whiteness, then, is not only crucial to eliminating the racial order; it is a vital component of efforts to expand democratic participation. Attempts by theorists to connect the struggle against racial hierarchy to a radical democratic politics, however, have been thwarted by a peculiar dilemma.

The Participation-Inclusion Dilemma

To consider the challenge whiteness poses for democratic theory, we must return to the work of Judith Shklar. *American Citizenship* stands as one of the strongest challenges to political theories that argue, in one way or another, for more participation by ordinary people in those affairs that affect their daily life.²⁶ Shklar argues that the primary value of American citizenship is the social status it confers, not the political power it bestows. Theories of democratic participation seek an ideal form of political activity that emulates the ancient Greek polis, but the disenfranchised in American history have not struggled for participation but standing.

The concept of the Aristotelian citizen as ruler has not really had much bearing on Americans. . . . [Disenfranchised Americans] have asked for something quite different, that citizenship be equally distributed, so that their standing might also be recognized and their interests be defended and promoted. The call for a classical participatory democracy may, therefore, be far from democratic, because it does not correspond to the aspirations of most Americans now and has never done so in the past.²⁷

Theorists and activists of democratic participation often have to learn this lesson the hard way, when they discover that the people for whom they are fighting to empower often do not seem interested in greater participation.

The exclusive character of citizenship, rooted in the antithetical relationship between the citizen and the slave, represents the basic challenge of American democracy for Shklar. The democratic task is not to implement far-flung models of strong democracy but to achieve the full inclusion of excluded groups in order to grant all Americans equal standing as independent citizen-earners. The minimum requirements for standing, she argues, are the right to vote and the right to a job. What one does with the vote—or even whether one uses it—is relatively unimportant; what counts is the status that comes from possessing it.

Likewise, one's job need not be fulfilling or enjoyable, only recognized as essential to a sense of belonging.²⁸

Shklar's argument poses a dilemma between inclusion and participation. A politics of inclusion holds that the central problem of modern democracy is the numerous systems of exclusion that accompany it and that the principal means toward a more democratic society is the full inclusion of excluded populations into the polity. The "quest for inclusion," Shklar argues, is to grant equal standing to all. Yet the problem with inclusion, as she readily confesses, is that it tends to produce a passive form of citizenship that is disinclined toward expanded participation because its objective is the *possession* of status rather than the *exercise* of one's power in public affairs. On the other hand, a politics of participation assumes that substantive citizen participation in deliberation and decision making is the benchmark of a democratic society. According to Shklar, arguments for participation do not speak to the real political desires of Americans, who seek standing. But the problem runs deeper than that. Theories of democratic participation rarely confront the problem of racial standing. In a racial polity, expanding participation strengthens the grip of the white majority, since whites set the agenda and determine who participates and how. The most participatory institution of the *Herrenvölk* democracy, after all, was the white riot. By ignoring the problem of whiteness, a strategy for participation may contribute to the tyranny of the white majority.

Of course, inclusion and participation are not necessarily contradictory. Inclusion is a prerequisite for democratic participation—one cannot be active in a club unless one has been let into it—and the purpose of inclusion is often to empower the formerly excluded to act in the public sphere. The dilemma between them is a historical consequence of racialized citizenship in the United States, not an inherent contradiction. Nevertheless, the dilemma is impressive. The quest for inclusion expands the membership of the polity but discourages greater participation in it because it reproduces citizenship as standing. The quest for participation promises more democracy yet it does not confront the

problem of racial standing; thus, it may end up tightening the tyrannical grip of the white majority. As presently constructed, neither holds out much hope for a more democratic society. How, in a polity in which whiteness and democracy have been inextricably connected, can greater participation be achieved without inviting a lynch mob?

This dilemma is usually posed as a tension between political participation and individual rights: Can a participatory democracy protect an individual's rights against a majority tyranny?²⁹ This version, however, incorrectly assumes that rights are an effective deterrent against white tyranny. Yet the Bill of Rights existed alongside slavery and lynch law, so this is not the best way to understand the dilemma. This is most evident when inclusion and participation are each understood as individual strategies for a more democratic society. A strategy of inclusion seeks the full admission of all persons into the polity, while a strategy of participation aims to expand participation within the polity. The former tends to emphasize the need to guarantee political equality and equal opportunity in the face of discrimination, while the latter tends to emphasize the need to expand deliberation and decision making by ordinary persons. These strategies should be complementary, but the history of white supremacy in the United States places them at cross-purposes.

The strategy of inclusion fails to resolve the dilemma for two reasons. First, it may eliminate white standing but it does not abolish whiteness as norm. For example, Shklar recognizes that racial inequality persists even after the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, but her solution for it—a state-guaranteed job for everyone—does not necessarily abolish white privilege. Such a guarantee would no doubt aid many people of color, perhaps a disproportionate number of them compared to whites, but the right to a job or even a living wage does not necessarily undermine whites' privileged access to the best jobs, the highest salaries, and the most lucrative contracts. Nor do such measures necessarily undermine "first hired, last fired" policies, glass floors, or wealth imbalances that favor whites. The second problem is that inclusion is not a strategy for greater participation. The absence of substantive

participation by ordinary citizens in the affairs that affect them is not a problem for Shklar's "dystopic liberalism," but it is for any theory that seeks to stretch the limits of liberal democracy.³⁰

A strategy to *dissolve* or *abolish* the cross-class alliance that constitutes whiteness addresses both of these problems. Whiteness is the dominant category in the racial order. Abolishing the category eliminates the social significance of white identity and hence "abolishes" the identity itself. Practically speaking, an abolitionist strategy has two prongs. It seeks to eliminate overt and normalized systems of white privilege, such as redlining, racial profiling, and tracking in schools, and supports any policy or program, such as affirmative action and reparations, that undermines white advantage. It calls attention to and seeks to redress any outcome (such as racially skewed mortgage rejection, unemployment, and life expectancy rates) in which racial privilege is evident yet is explained away as the "natural outcome" of markets or the aggregation of individual choices. The second prong opposes any attempt to reconstitute whiteness in the post-civil rights era. Efforts to resuscitate a "progressive" or "antiracist" white identity have gained currency in the education field and elsewhere, but as I argue in the next chapter, this noble cause faces historical forces too stiff to overcome. White identity in the United States has always reflected an interest in and an expectation of favored treatment. This burden of historical privilege presents an almost insuperable obstacle to transforming "white" into a radically democratic identity. In the absence of a usable past, efforts to reinvent whiteness tempt to raise demons that should be exorcised instead.

An abolitionist strategy seeks to break up the cross-class alliance in order to eliminate explicit and sedimented forms of white privilege. Yet it is also a strategy for greater democracy. Abolishing the cross-class alliance creates opportunities to forge new social relations with radical democratic potential. Replacing white unity with class unity, for example, would go a long way toward challenging inequalities of wealth that democratic theorists have long recognized as a significant obstacle to a more democratic society. Abolition also opens up opportunities to

expand democratic participation. Whiteness inhibits attempts to expand democracy because the coexistence of racial privilege and democracy gives whites an interest in preserving the former at the expense of the latter. Dissolving whiteness eliminates this conflict of interest and thus holds potential to expand participation.

Of course, a just distribution of wealth and greater democratic participation do not follow automatically from the dissolution of whiteness; they are only possibilities. Further, I readily acknowledge that the notion of abolishing white identity is difficult to imagine. Nevertheless, it is not without historical and philosophical precedent. The abolition of feudalism abolished lord and serf. The abolition of slavery abolished master and slave. The abolition of capitalism promises to do away with bourgeois and proletarian. In much the same way, the dissolution of whiteness suggests the abolition of the categories "white" and "not-white" themselves. As the dissolution of the aristocracy paved the way for representative government and the abolition of slavery inaugurated Radical Reconstruction, the dissolution of whiteness could potentially expand the boundaries of contemporary democracy.

Abolishing whiteness is not the same as abolishing race. "White" and "not-white" are antithetical categories; abolishing one implies the abolition of the other. Identities such as Black or indigenous, however, refer to a cultural identity as well as a subordinate (not-white) status in the present racial hierarchy. Eliminating the subordination of these identities does not necessarily imply eliminating their cultural content. But whiteness, as I argue in the next chapter, possesses little cultural content independent of its position of privilege, meaning it could potentially disappear as a socially significant identity even if other racial identities persist.

The politics of inclusion dominates democratic theory's approach to race despite its inability to eliminate normalized whiteness or to expand democratic participation. Meanwhile, the historical dilemma between inclusion and participation is rarely considered. Some consider racism to be symptomatic of broader problems.³¹ Others scarcely mention it.³² Still others assume that inclusion and participation are symbiotic:

the politics of inclusion are slowly, if unevenly, removing discrimination from American society, which in turn encourages participation, which further reduces discrimination.³³ An increasingly common response is to define racial discrimination as a problem of difference. According to this perspective, the plurality of identities—ethnic, national, racial, cultural, gendered, religious—is both the central problem and grand opportunity of contemporary politics. Modern society is plural and diverse, yet it rests on a series of exclusions. The philosophical-political challenge of theories of difference is to construct a politics that understands difference as an asset to democracy rather than a threat.³⁴ Theories of difference are potentially useful in cutting through the participation-inclusion dilemma because they tend to be more attuned to the limits of inclusion. Nevertheless, they can still be tripped up by the problem of whiteness and the dilemma it creates. An example of this lies in one of the most important texts on the politics of difference, William Connolly's *The Ethos of Pluralization*.

Difference and the Politics of Inclusion

The Ethos of Pluralization begins as a conversation with pluralism. Connolly acknowledges that conventional pluralism has its strengths: it is premised on the irreducible diversity of the social sphere and often encourages the development of difference, especially in situations where cultural consensus is impossible. Nevertheless, conventional pluralism assumes that diverse identities, interests, and cultures orbit around a “universal” ideal, like reason, civic identity, or rational self-interest, and it tends to assume that individuals’ identities are coherent and fully formed prior to their entrance into the public sphere rather than constructed in the public sphere itself. As such, conventional pluralism treats identities as largely static and unchanging. The assumption of stable identity gives rise to the construction of a “normal individual” against which “abnormal” identities are measured. This is the “unconscious conservatism” at the center of the conventional pluralist imagination: new additions to the public sphere must conform to the norm, else they are considered a potential threat to social stability.³⁵

Connolly characterizes conventional pluralism as “arboreal.” Arboreal pluralism assumes a treelike conception of difference: multiple and diverse branches jut out everywhere but are connected to a common trunk of values. Arboreal pluralism’s fear is that diversity can be taken too far: the overproliferation of identities can fragment the public sphere like too many heavy branches, burdening the trunk to the point where it splits. This fear is unnecessary, Connolly argues. It reflects the limits of the arboreal imagination rather than the amount of diversity a society can actually accommodate. He proposes a “rhizomatic pluralism” to overcome the limits of conventional pluralism. A rhizome is a plant that has no central trunk or stem but instead consists of a network of roots below and shoots above that spread throughout the environment, appearing in a variety of locations and connected only through the network itself. A rhizomatic pluralism rejects the notion that there can be too much diversity. A public sphere will fragment under the stress of difference only if its identities declare themselves normal or truthful and exclude other identities as abnormal, false, or deviant. “To pluralize is not to fragmentize,” he writes. “To dogmatize is to fragmentize.”³⁶ A rhizomatic pluralism avoids this sort of fundamentalism by embracing *pluralization*, which not only encourages the proliferation of identities but recognizes that changes in relations among identities alter identities themselves. Pluralization rests upon an “ethos of critical responsiveness” that “opens up cultural space through which new possibilities of being might be enacted” and respects the plural and “multifarious ways of being.”³⁷ The democratic task, Connolly asserts, is to pluralize the political realm by “[striving] to cultivate an ethos of critical responsiveness to political movements that challenge the self-confidence and congealed judgments of dominant constituencies.”³⁸

The ethos of pluralization is an important revision of pluralism. Connolly convincingly argues that it is fundamentalism, not diversity, that threatens social stability. He points to normalization as a central problem for expanding democracy. Further, while conventional pluralism understands diversity as the presence of multiple but fixed, already-formed identities in the public sphere, pluralization assumes that such

identities are “self-revisionary.” That is, the emergence of a new identity or changes in an existing one inevitably modify other identities, since they are constructed and reconstructed through relations of difference. For example, a rhizomatic pluralism would not just include oppressed races in the public sphere on an equal footing with whites; it would reconfigure “Angloid nationality” itself by compelling it to shed its presumptions of superiority and normalcy.

The long term result of such a series of shifts [in the self-recognition of a dominant constituency] in several domains would be the historical transition of America from a majority nation presiding over numerous minorities in a democratic state to a democratic state of multiple minorities contending and collaborating with a general ethos of forbearance and critical responsiveness.³⁹

The ethos of pluralization would not just welcome other peoples into a polity once reserved exclusively for whites. It would alter white identity. “The politics of enactment . . . presses hegemonic identities, which are always dependent upon the very differences they define, to translate this experience of disturbance into a will to modify *themselves* so that they no longer remain exactly what they were.”⁴⁰

The terms Connolly uses to describe changes in dominant identities, such as “modify,” “self-revise,” “reconfigure,” and “transition,” are not wholly equivalent to terms such as “abolition” and “dissolution.” Nevertheless, his claim that the entrance of new identities in the social sphere creates “new possibilities of being” for existing identities suggests a compatibility between rhizomatic pluralism and a strategy of abolition. “Critical responsiveness to the injuries of Otherness,” he writes, “implies a comparative denaturalization and reconfiguration of hegemonic identities whose character depended on these specifications of difference.”⁴¹ If a dominant identity possesses little meaning outside of a system of subordination, as in the case of whiteness, its “denaturalization and reconfiguration” could easily be read to imply its dissolution. After all, “white” is not so much a signifier for a pinkish people of predominantly European ancestry as it is for a system of power that constructs

relations of subordination and privilege. Dismantling these relations leaves white identity as little more than an empty signifier that is barely useful to describe a skin color. The ethos of pluralization points in the direction of white abolition, since it holds that a politics of racial difference implies the erosion of white dominance—and thus white identity itself.

Notwithstanding this compatibility, however, Connolly’s argument arrives at political conclusions that, if followed, would solidify whiteness rather than dissolve it. A rhizomatic pluralism, he maintains, would modify “Angloid identity” and compel it to shed its presumptions of supremacy and normalcy. Given this, the political task would seem to be to encourage those activities that confront and undermine such presumptions. Yet Connolly rejects a direct approach to confronting whiteness. He argues that the issues addressed by welfare liberals in the post-civil rights era—women’s rights, racism, ecology, discrimination—ignore the hardships faced by the white working class, pushing it into the open arms of the right. “The politics of welfare liberalism from the late sixties onward betrayed the white working class, driving a section of it toward a fundamentalism of gender, self, race, and nation.”⁴² He suggests that the “fundamentalisms” of the white working class could be “renegotiated” by retooling programs currently aimed at white women and people of color, such as affirmative action, so that they incorporate a class or income dimension. This would “go a long way toward easing the sense of insult and discrimination among Reagan Democrats, for their children . . . would no longer be singled out as the only constituency that deserves to be stuck in the crummy jobs now available to it.”⁴³

This indirect approach of fighting racial discrimination by incorporating a class dimension into race-specific programs is increasingly popular in left-liberal circles. Ruy Teixeira and Joel Rogers, for example, argue that although the white working class comprises about fifty-five percent of the electorate, its needs have long been ignored by the political system. The party that can win over this “forgotten majority” will dominate the political landscape well into the twenty-first century. Doing so will require advocating a stronger government that can improve basic

aspects of workers' lives, from health insurance to education to retirement to a healthy balance between work and family life. The Democrats are ideologically better situated to carry out such a program than the Republicans, but to do so Democrats will have to shift their focus from the condition of gays, women, and minorities toward advocating "universal" programs that help all of the working class. Thus, they should replace programs such as affirmative action and busing with class-based affirmative action and "class-based integration" programs.⁴⁴

This argument is ironic because the American welfare state historically did not ignore the white working class but catered to its interests. The Social Security Act excluded farmworkers and domestics (most of whom were Black) from receiving benefits. The Federal Housing Agency promoted residential segregation and channeled money toward white suburbs. The Environmental Protection Agency located garbage dumps and toxic waste sites away from white neighborhoods, while the federal highway system destroyed housing in Black neighborhoods to connect white suburban commuters to their downtown jobs. All of these welfare liberal programs were premised on the consolidation of the "possessive investment in whiteness."⁴⁵ Given this, the white working class's alienation from progressive politics is more likely due to its resistance to programs that erode its privileged standing than welfare liberals' supposed overemphasis on oppressed groups. Confronting whites' expectations of favored status is key to expanding democracy. "Inclusive" or class-based programs, however, downplay whites' historical privileges. In so doing, they appease white expectations rather than challenge them.

This is not to say that class-based programs would not help African Americans and other people of color. They likely would, and they might even distribute benefits to people of color disproportionately compared to whites, as Teixeira and Rogers contend. Nevertheless, the success of such programs still depends on how well they comport with what Derrick Bell calls the "white self-interest principle": whites will support social and political programs aimed at African Americans (directly or indirectly) only if whites stand to benefit from them as well. This leaves

such programs politically vulnerable should their support wane. This vulnerability signifies the continuing power of whiteness.⁴⁶

An ethos of pluralization is equipped to avoid these pitfalls. It undermines the power of dominant identities by challenging them to not merely recognize new identity claims but to transform themselves in the process. Unfortunately, Connolly does not follow through on the implications of his argument as it relates to white identity.⁴⁷ Pursuing class-based programs rather than ones that directly undermine white advantage may appear to be more inclusive and less divisive, but due to the historical dilemma between participation and inclusion in a white-dominated polity, they can unintentionally perpetuate white normalization instead. What is needed is a politics of difference that directly challenges whiteness and links this challenge to a participatory politics. The basis of such a politics lies in the work of Iris Marion Young and Lani Guinier.

Participation and the Politics of Difference

Young's argument for participation emerges out of her critique of what she terms the distributive paradigm of justice, which understands justice as the fair and ethical distribution of a society's benefits, burdens, and resources. Young's main criticism of the paradigm is that its focus on distribution tends to conceive of citizens as passive consumers of goods. This tends to depoliticize social life because the emphasis on distribution takes precedence over the organization of production and decision-making processes.⁴⁸

Young proposes a more active conception of justice, a politics of difference, that improves on the distributive paradigm by including deliberation and decision making as elements of justice as well as distribution. The primary concern of justice, Young argues, should be to confront domination ("the institutional constraint on self-determination") and oppression ("the institutional constraint on self-development").⁴⁹ Domination and oppression, she argues, are group conditions. Similar to Connolly's conception of identity, her concept of social groups is as "expressions of social relations."⁵⁰ Individuals do not just constitute groups;

groups constitute individuals. Justice, then, is the elimination of the oppression and domination of social groups through self-determination and the ability to develop one's capacities. It is "the institutionalized conditions that make it possible for all to learn and use satisfying skills in socially recognized settings, to participate in decisionmaking, and to express their feelings, experience, and perspective on social life in contexts where others can listen."⁵¹

The strength of Young's argument is twofold. First, it emphasizes participation as a key democratic ideal in addition to political and social equality. Redistributing wealth is less an end than a prerequisite for the ability to participate democratically in the processes and institutions of collective life.

Justice equally requires . . . participation in public discussion and processes of democratic decisionmaking. All persons should have the right and opportunity to participate in the deliberation and decisionmaking of the institutions to which their actions contribute or which directly affect their actions. . . . Democracy is both an element and a condition of social justice.⁵²

Second, it challenges Shklar's conception of citizenship as standing, not by merely expressing a preference for participation over standing but by connecting the elimination of oppression to the practice of participation. Shklar's remedy for the exclusion of African Americans and others is to include them in the polity. Young's remedy is not just their inclusion but also their participation, which is necessary for a group's self-determination and the development of an individual's capacities.

Young's concept of a social group has been one of the most controversial parts of her argument. Liberals such as Ronald Beiner charge that it promotes the "ghettoization" of identities and undermines the significance of the state. Postmodernists such as Chantal Mouffe criticize it as essentialist and unable to account for the construction of new identities. Critical theorists such as Nancy Fraser argue that the concept is modeled too closely on the ethnic group and as a result gender,

class, race, and sexuality do not fit into it well.⁵³ Young's account of the social group is problematic, particularly for the reasons pointed out by Mouffe and Fraser. The debate as it stands so far, however, overlooks the real limitation of the concept: it does not consider *privilege* as a problem of justice in addition to oppression and domination. As a result, like Connolly, Young does not consider that a politics of difference might imply the dissolution of privileged social groups. A critique of privilege is implied in her analysis, since the oppression of one group is almost always done for the advantage of another. An explicit analysis of privilege, however, would have avoided many of the pitfalls of her concept of a social group, since it would shift the problem from subordinate groups to the antidemocratic nature of dominant groups. It would also redress the central difficulty of her controversial proposal for group representation, which would grant specific representation for oppressed groups. The paradox of this proposal is that it presumes the presence of oppressed groups yet its purpose is to end oppression; hence the proposal initiates its own obsolescence. A political program for the dissolution of the privileged group, however, does not require group representation, for abolition does not bring about equality between groups so much as it transforms the very structure of group relations in the polity.

Nevertheless, Young's emphasis on participation helps to reveal the limits of inclusion in challenging the whiteness of American democracy. Combining her orientation toward participation with a critique of privilege, I suggest, can overcome the participation-inclusion dilemma. The latter element of the synthesis is found in Lani Guinier's critique of majority tyranny.

The Tyranny of the White Majority

In *The Tyranny of the Majority*, Guinier argues that the central danger of majority rule is not that it threatens the rights of individuals or minorities but that it is a winner-take-all system in which fifty percent plus one of the voters win everything while everyone else gets nothing. This turns politics into a zero-sum competition for power rather than a means

of including everyone in the processes of governance. This danger is exacerbated in a polity in which the majority is racially prejudiced against the minority to such an extent that the minority is consistently excluded from representation and policy making. When this happens, majority rule perpetuates racial inequality, as the combination of a winner-take-all system and white prejudice turns African Americans into permanent political minorities. Permanent minority status prevents African Americans from participating meaningfully in politics even when their political rights are guaranteed by the Voting Rights Act. Whether in the *Herrnvolk* or color-blind eras, "Racial polarization in the electorate and in the legislative body . . . [transforms] majority rule into majority tyranny."⁵⁴

Guinier proposes a procedural remedy for the problem of (white) majority tyranny. Democratic procedures, she holds, are just as important as substantive values or ideals, since "procedural rules, in a very real sense, shape substantive outcomes."⁵⁵ Eliminating permanent majorities requires turning zero-sum electoral outcomes into "positive-sum" outcomes, or results in which everyone wins or at least takes a turn at winning. She proposes replacing fifty percent plus one majorities and the territorial districting of representatives with a cumulative voting system, in which voters receive the same number of votes as there are seats to vote for, but rather than being limited to voting only for representatives within their geographic district, they can vote for any representative. Further, voters can distribute their votes as they please, "plumping" them with one candidate or distributing them among several according to the intensity of their preferences. Such a system, Guinier argues, would not only make it likely that at least one of a voter's candidates will be elected, it also encourages greater political participation. Cumulative voting provides citizens with an incentive to organize alliances that can vote as a single bloc or to form strategic coalitions with other groups to gain mutual benefits, since "any politically cohesive group can vote strategically to win representation."⁵⁶ It would encourage people to vote according to their interests rather than where they live (as geographic districts do) or who they are (as race-based districts do). It would eliminate

gerrymandering as well as "safe" districts controlled by one party that are largely immune to political competition. Cumulative voting, Guinier argues, would make elections competitive and give citizens an incentive to participate beyond simply voting.

Guinier's argument demonstrates that majority tyranny does not just exclude minorities; it builds white advantage into the electoral process and inhibits participation, even given the protections of the Voting Rights Act. White privilege is normalized through ostensibly race-neutral legislative districting and a winner-take-all system. Guinier makes a qualified defense of race-conscious districting in *Tyranny of the Majority*, arguing that given the current system of territorial districting, racial gerrymandering to create majority-Black or -Latino districts is sometimes necessary to ensure Black and Latino political representation.⁵⁷ Ultimately, however, this solution cannot dislodge white advantage because the creation of majority-Black districts only includes people of color into representative bodies (and as permanent minorities at that). It does nothing to enhance the extent or quality of their participation. A better solution, she argues, would be to scrap group-based representation altogether (geographic as well as racial) and replace it with interest-based representation that employs cumulative voting.

The problem of the white majority, Guinier shows, cannot be resolved through inclusion alone. Inclusion, of course, is preferable to life prior to the Voting Rights Act, yet for Guinier, like Young, the goal is not simply to ensure representation for minority groups but to enhance their participation. "The right to a meaningful voice does not measure participation simply by counting competitive votes; it examines the extent to which a system mobilizes broad-based voter participation, fosters substantive debate from a range of viewpoints, and provides and reinforces opportunities for all voters to exercise meaningful choice throughout the process of decision making and governance."⁵⁸ Guinier's proposals are aimed not so much at securing representation for permanent minorities but toward *eliminating permanent majorities*. This requires undermining the power of whiteness through procedures that foster the participation of everyone.

Guinier offers her proposals in the interests of fairness and in the belief that they will fulfill the potential of modern democracy. As such, her argument does not necessarily test the boundaries of liberal democracy. Nevertheless, her critique of majority tyranny does have radical democratic potential because it connects a critique of racial privilege with an orientation toward participation. Guinier's contribution to democratic theory is not her specific proposals, which are overly proceduralist and have been suggested (and even implemented) elsewhere, but her theoretical orientation.⁵⁹ She demonstrates that the tyranny of the white majority remains a central problem of American democracy and shows how it is a problem of privilege and participation as well as one of exclusion and inclusion. Her argument suggests that abolishing the white majority would not only include people of color, it would undermine normalized white advantage. In so doing, it could expand participation and foster political conditions that make more radical forms of democracy possible. Guinier does not make this argument explicitly but she hints at the transformative possibilities of her theory when she writes, "The winner-take-some-but-not-all approach contemplates 'strong democracy,' meaning an invigorated electorate that participates (as opposed to spectates) throughout the political process."⁶⁰

The democratic problem of whiteness persists after the *Herrenvolk* era. Its shift from a form of standing to a norm has obscured and weakened the value of whiteness in some ways, but the cross-class alliance continues to function through the normal operations of contemporary democracy. It persists as a problem for democratic theory as well, not only in that it is the engine of racial discrimination but also in that it continues to drive a wedge between inclusion and participation. Strategies to include persons of color into the polity by giving them equal standing with whites do little to expand participation. Yet strategies to expand participation can easily end up bolstering white majority tyranny, as Guinier shows. Neither strategy alone, then, is sufficient for democratic theory. A politics that emphasizes the abolition of whiteness, however, directly confronts racial privilege in a way that includes the excluded

and encourages the expansion of democratic participation. It resolves the participation-inclusion dilemma and suggests a critique of liberal democratic institutions as they presently exist.

This is not to say that dissolving whiteness would be easy. It requires not only activities and policies that undermine the wages of whiteness but the creation of a new political ideal. Sketching this alternative "abolitionist-democratic" politics is the task of the final chapter. Such an ideal must go beyond the two existing attempts to address the problem of whiteness, color blindness and multiculturalism, for as I explain in the next chapter, both ultimately fail to eliminate the problem of the white citizen. Creating a new hegemonic ideal is undoubtedly a difficult task. Yet I submit there is little alternative. So long as the white citizen simultaneously insists on his or her privileges and denies they exist, the potential for white reaction remains. So long as the politics of inclusion dominates thinking on race, democratic theory will continue to run into the participation-inclusion dilemma and continue to have difficulty stretching its imagination beyond the boundaries of liberal democracy. A participatory politics must be an abolitionist politics.

The Abolition-Democracy

I was in my car driving along the freeway when at a red light another car pulled alongside. A white woman was driving and on the passenger's side, next to me, was a white man. "Malcolm X!" he called out—and when I looked, he stuck his hand out of his car, across at me, grinning. "Do you mind shaking hands with a white man?" Imagine that! Just as the traffic light turned green, I told him, "I don't mind shaking hands with human beings. Are you one?"

—Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

One of the great stories about **Malcolm X** is how his views on white people changed after his pilgrimage to Mecca. While making his Hajj in 1964, he observed people of all colors living and worshipping Allah as equals, leading him to write in his journal that "the whites don't seem white."¹ He then realized it was indeed possible for there to be good "white" people.² As a result, he quickly abandoned the prejudice he held against whites when he was the spokesman for the Nation of Islam. **Releasing his hatred, he began to judge people for what they did and said rather than who they were.**

That, anyway, is the tale that inspired the postage stamp. The chance meeting with the white motorists would seem to confirm this rebirth from racist to civil rights champion. There is another way, however, to interpret this encounter. Certainly, Malcolm X underwent an extraordinary change in the last fifteen months of his life. But through it all he remained antiwhite. For example, a content analysis of his speeches found that, while he did begin to make favorable assertions about white people after his pilgrimage, over eighty percent of his references to whites were still negative.³ He continued to be strongly critical of whites for their participation in the oppression of Black people;

he just came to allow for the possibility that they were not inherently racist. As he put it, "I haven't changed, I just see things on a broader scale."⁴

Malcolm X abandoned his belief that white people are devils by nature and came to believe that whites could potentially become human beings. Whiteness went from something one was to something one did. But this raises a question: if whites stopped acting like devils and started acting like humans, would they still be white? Malcolm did not have the language of social construction to help distinguish the political category of race from physical characteristics such as pale skin or hair that does not need a conk to be straight. His encounter with the white motorists, however, indicates that if he had had access to such language, the answer might very well have been no. After the Hajj, Malcolm X went from describing racial oppression as a conspiracy among whites to a system of white supremacy. Those who consent to the system (tacitly or expressly) remain devils in all but name, while those who resist it are human beings worthy of a handshake. The political challenge Malcolm raises with his handshake is how to turn "white people" into human beings. The process of becoming human, he implies, involves unbecoming white.⁵

In this final chapter I consider the implications of a political theory aimed at abolishing white citizenship. Borrowing a term from Du Bois, I call such a politics the *abolition-democracy*. Rooted in the spirit of the nineteenth-century abolitionists, the abolition-democracy is a politics committed to expanding freedom through the dissolution of whiteness. Its object, following Malcolm, is to make white citizens human beings through the elimination of their racial privileges. Drawing on utopian elements in Black radical political thought, the abolition-democracy seeks to directly challenge the status and privileges of whiteness, both to undermine racial discrimination and to expand democratic participation. Just as the original abolitionist movement paved the way for feminism's first wave, Reconstruction heralded the rise of organized labor, and the civil rights movement created political space for feminist, gay and lesbian, Chicano, and other movements, the abolition of white

citizenship creates the potential to expand the American democratic imagination beyond the limits of liberalism.

The White Imagination Revisited

In this book I have argued that white democracy has not violated American ideals of equality, liberty, and citizenship so much as it has shaped them. I argued in chapter 2, for example, that whites in the *Herrenvolk* era rejected "social equality" because the term implied equal standing as much as it did the equalization of wealth. This has contributed to a conception of equality that is restricted to political rights and equal opportunity. A program like welfare is politically suspect in the white imagination because in redistributing wealth to both "undeserving people" and Black people (a distinction many whites barely bother to make), it appears as an unfair "handout" that violates the premise of individual effort and opportunity.⁶ Thus, white citizenship has not simply reserved equal rights and opportunities for whites exclusively. It has also contributed to a narrow understanding of equality that conceives of social equality as illegitimate.

Whiteness also constrains the meaning of freedom. As David Roediger notes, a standing conception of citizenship tends to place mostly negative demands on the public sphere because liberty implies distinguishing oneself from a degraded status more than participating in those affairs that affect one's daily life.⁷ Even the most minimal forms of citizen participation, therefore, suffice to denote standing. Accordingly, "negative" rights that protect one's status and property become more important than "positive" liberties such as substantive participation in politics or the right to the prerequisites for such participation (nutrition, shelter, health care, education, sufficient leisure time). Freedom in the white imagination is something to possess rather than an activity to practice. This passive conception of freedom tends to sustain a worldview of atomized, status-seeking persons who see in others a threat to individual liberty rather than a condition of it. As a result, citizenship becomes an identity that claims possession of significant political power but is generally disinclined to use it, particularly

to challenge the structural inequalities built into a liberal capitalist system.

Of course, white privilege is not the only influence on American political ideals. Classical republicanism and liberalism. Enlightenment ideals, English common law, Puritan thought, Black freedom struggles, and other influences have all played roles in shaping the American democratic tradition.⁸ Further, a negative conception of liberty and a formal conception of equality are hallmarks of nonracial liberalism as well as the white democracy. Nevertheless, in the United States the ideals of individual autonomy and equal opportunity were constructed against a backdrop of Black subordination and white advantage, and are so intertwined that they are not easily separated.

White citizenship, then, has left a lasting mark on the American democratic imagination. The democratic problem of the white citizen is not only that he or she has a material interest in excluding not-whites from the full fruits of democracy but that his or her very existence perpetuates a stunted conception of democracy. The white imagination is exclusive: it does not want to let new members into the polity, from American Indians to former slaves to Mexican immigrants to convicted felons. It promotes a negative conception of liberty: the individual is free to the extent that others do not interfere with her or him. It emphasizes standing: the object of democracy is less to participate in those affairs that affect one's daily life than to achieve a certain status and hold on to it. It is miserly: it casts a suspicious eye toward social programs that supply the prerequisites of participation, such as universal health care, a decent standard of living, and a good education, and it tends not to question private property and inequalities of wealth. It emphasizes individual success rather than class solidarity: the objective is to beat one's competition in the marketplace rather than challenge exploitation. Perhaps the most insidious aspect of the white imagination is that it presumes that the system of rights and representation established in the *Horrendous* and post-civil rights eras is the highest political form attainable. It assumes that the white citizen is free, when it is precisely the

nature of his or her freedom that must be interrogated. In these ways, the white imagination sustains a narrow conception of democracy that inhibits more expansive and participatory visions.

The Utopian Element of Black Radical Political Thought

What is needed, then, is a political vision that exceeds the limits set by the white imagination. Unfortunately, contemporary democratic theory by and large has yet to meet this need because it is pervaded by a chastened conception of democracy that appears resigned to liberalism.⁹ This is evident in that much of its intellectual energy is currently devoted to relatively modest proposals for procedures, practices, and programs that supplement liberal democratic institutions rather than challenge them. As Will Kymlicka and Wayne Norman note in their assessment of contemporary citizenship theory, "Most citizenship theorists either leave the question of how to promote citizenship unanswered or focus on 'modest' or 'gently and relatively unobtrusive ways' to promote civic virtues."¹⁰ The appeal of "civic associations," which nearly all schools of thought in democratic theory endorse in one form or another, is a case in point. Jeffrey Isaac, for example, raises a powerful critique of the failure of political theory to come to grips with the recent changes sweeping the world, beginning with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Much of this failure has to do with a reflexive attachment to liberalism. Liberalism in itself, he argues, is insufficient to meet the needs and aspirations of humanity. As such, it must be supplemented with grassroots civic associations, or "oases in the desert" of liberal democracy, that can empower individuals and inculcate civic responsibility.

It is in this light that we need to consider and to theorize other forms of democratic politics, other vehicles of democratic aspiration, not as replacements for the liberal democratic state but as adjuncts to it, ways of challenging the injustices to which it is insufficiently attentive and ways of promoting forms of exit, loyalty, and especially *voice* in a system increasingly beset by immobilism and sclerosis.¹¹

Isaac proposes a "localist democracy" as an alternative, a regionally oriented, pragmatic, diffuse, and pluralist politics filled with civic associations that would flourish within the "admittedly unethical and unsatisfying framework of capitalism."¹² Isaac looks to the outer reaches of liberal democracy, yet even his vision is notable for its chastened view of the possibilities of democracy in the present era. Despite his critique of contemporary political theory, democratic theory in "dark times" apparently must still trade vision for pragmatism.

It seems utopianism is out of fashion these days. Yet a normative democratic theory needs a touch of utopia almost by definition. "Utopian" is not a word to scorn. Certainly, it can represent the hopelessly unrealistic, but it also describes political visions that go beyond the boundaries of conventional political thinking. The works of Carole Pateman and C. B. Macpherson on participatory democracy, for example, are so compelling in part because they refuse to limit themselves to a politics of the possible.¹³ In their work, expanding citizens' participation in public affairs is a means to transform the structures of society as well as individuals' sense of their capacities. Yet as Emily Hauptmann has persuasively shown, deliberative democratic theory (which replaced participatory theory in the 1980s) has drawn much more modest conclusions about the possibilities of democratic participation in the contemporary era.¹⁴ Deliberative democratic theorists claim to correct the excessive utopianism and simplistic nature of participatory theory, but their own theories lack a critical perspective and a transformative vision. Of course, pragmatism has a role in any attempt to theorize a more democratic society, but so does a politics that defines democracy in the most radical manner—as the ability of all persons to have a meaningful say in those affairs that affect their daily life—without worrying whether it is "realistic." The purpose of democratic theory is to imagine and seek the most democratic society possible, which implies reaching beyond liberal democracy and the modest aspirations of today's democratic theory.

The Black radical tradition is an important source to draw on in restoring the radical-utopian element in democratic theory and practice.

As Michael Dawson points out, Black radical thought while not necessarily antiliberal, "cannot be confined within the boundaries of liberalism."¹⁵ Its trenchant critique of white supremacy, its commitment to an international regard even while being rooted in a concern for the needs and desires of a specific community, and its expansive vision make it a wellspring of inspiration, knowledge, and philosophy for a twenty-first-century democratic theory. These utopian visions, or "freedom dreams" as Robin Kelley calls them, emerge from movements against white domination in particular. "Collective social movements are incubators of new knowledge," he asserts. Social movements against white supremacy "do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society."¹⁶ Rather than understanding democracy as something whites created and people of color sought to join, the Black radical tradition enables us to reinterpret American democracy as something that white citizens have contributed to yet compromised and that anticolonial citizens have advanced. This is not to say that there is a single, coherent Black community that is inherently more moral or revolutionary than whites. My point is that the Black radical tradition, from abolitionism to nationalism to communism, has consistently challenged common notions about American democracy, exposed the limitations of the white political imagination, enabled new political visions, and shown the radical democratic potential of efforts against white citizenship. While examples of this tradition can be found in thinkers such as Martin Delany, James Baldwin, Angela Davis, Ella Baker, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., bell hooks, and others, I turn to W. E. B. Du Bois as a classic example.

In all of his writings Du Bois emphasizes the central role of Black people in history. Black self-activity, he argues, is the motor force of American freedom and culture: slaves won the Civil War in *Black Reconstruction*, invented modern American music in *The Souls of Black Folk*, and created the weekend in *Dusk of Dawn*. They even made John Brown.¹⁷ Further, Du Bois consistently casts these achievements in radical-utopian terms. The Civil War was a "general strike" against slavery by

the slaves, while the 1868 South Carolina state legislature was practically a dictatorship of the Black proletariat.¹⁸

This utopian strain informs his critique of race and democracy. For Du Bois, the central political task of the age is to abolish the color line. This means much more than the end of segregation; it is a call to transcend the white and dark worlds. As he argues in *Souls of Black Folk*, the striving of Black people is to overcome their double consciousness, but not by making the Black world supreme or by dissolving it into the white world. As with Hegel's spiral trajectory of history, the task is to forge the two antithetical worlds into a new polity.

In this merging [the Negro] wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.¹⁹

This is a call for neither assimilation nor separation. As David Levering Lewis argues, Du Bois rejects the integration-separation dichotomy "by affirming it in a permanent tension. Henceforth, the destiny of the race could be conceived as leading neither to assimilation nor separatism but to proud, enduring hyphenation."²⁰ Yet there is a deeper implication in this passage, and in Du Bois's life's work. By defending the Black world even as he calls for the abolition of the color line, Du Bois essentially calls for *the end of the white world*. As Arnold Rampersad argues, Du Bois understands the African American experience "as essentially a continuous political struggle with the white world."²¹ For it is this world, Du Bois later writes, that "existed primarily, so far as I was concerned, to see with sleepless vigilance that I was kept within bounds."²² The dark world, on the other hand, is the democratic antithesis to whiteness. In its preservation lies the hope of the world. "A belief in humanity," he writes, "is a belief in colored men."²³ The political problem for

Du Bois is not how to find a way for (the white) democracy to include Black people. Rather, *democracy should aspire to the dark world*, since the struggle for its freedom opens up political possibilities unimaginable to those tethered to the white world.

Du Bois hints at such possibilities in "Criteria of Negro Art," an article originally published in the NAACP's *Crisis* magazine in 1926. In it, he asks his largely Black readership, "What is the thing we are after?" He replies, "We want to be Americans, full-fledged Americans, with all the rights of other American citizens." This seems like an honorable demand for full civil and political rights, and indeed it is. But he continues:

But is that all? Do we want simply to be Americans? Once in a while through all of us there flashes some clairvoyance, some clear idea, of what America really is. We who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans cannot. And seeing our country thus, are we satisfied with its present goals and ideals? . . . [P]ushed aside as we have been in America, there has come to us . . . a vision of what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world . . . a world where men know, where men create, where they realize themselves and where they enjoy life. It is that sort of a world we want to create for ourselves and for all America.²⁴

This utopian imagination, borne of Black struggle, is one of the potential fruits of unshackling democratic politics from the bonds of whiteness. "We have within us as a race new stirrings," Du Bois maintains. "Stirrings of the beginning of a new appreciation of joy, of a new desire to create, of a new will to be."²⁵ The battle to abolish the white world, he suggests, goes beyond the inclusion of all persons into the polity. It is the struggle for human emancipation itself.²⁶

Principles of the Abolition-Democracy

The term "abolition-democracy" is from *Black Reconstruction*. Du Bois uses it to refer to the Black and white abolitionists who led the "Reconstruction of Democracy" after the Civil War. The workers and small

capitalists who formed the abolition-democracy firmly believed in democratic government, but also in the system of private property and in the American Dream.²⁷ But the abolition-democracy's significance went much deeper than these petty bourgeois aspirations, Du Bois argues. The abolition-democracy was revolutionary because in challenging the power of the former slave masters, it cut to the foundations of the nation's class system. While its professed aim was liberal democracy, the cataclysmic struggle it engendered opened up the possibility to create a radical or "industrial democracy." I borrow the term "abolition-democracy" for a contemporary political theory to evoke the expansive democratic potential of struggles against white citizenship.

Most historians date the origins of the American abolitionist movement at 1831, the year in which William Lloyd Garrison began publishing his newspaper *The Liberator*.²⁸ Resistance to slavery, of course, is as old as the institution itself, and antislavery organizations existed in the New World at least since the Revolutionary era. *The Liberator*, however, inaugurated a new wave of abolitionist activity that broke from the moderate, conciliatory, and procolonizationist politics of earlier antislavery societies. Garrison's paper argued that slavery was a sin and that slaves should be freed immediately and unconditionally, without compensation to slaveholders. It also railed against racial prejudice. The constitution of the New England Anti-Slavery Society (founded by Garrison in 1832), for example, calls for the immediate emancipation of slaves and declares that "a mere difference of complexion is no reason why any man should be deprived of any of his natural rights, or subjected to any political disability."²⁹ Garrison also believed that an antislavery society should welcome all religious, social, and political viewpoints. The only necessary principle of unity among abolitionists, he argued, is a commitment to immediate and unconditional emancipation.³⁰

The abolitionists lectured and petitioned against slavery. They published newspapers and pamphlets, using them as organizing tools. They held meetings, conventions, antislavery bazaars, and sewing circles. They raised money, passed resolutions, organized vigilance committees against the Fugitive Slave Law, and participated in the Underground Railroad.

In at least one instance—John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry—they organized armed rebellion against slavery. Abolitionists also deliberately challenged the nation's racial boundaries. Meetings flouted segregated seating customs. African Americans served in positions of leadership in antislavery organizations. White female agents of the American Anti-Slavery Society toured with Black male agents.³¹ Financial support came from Northern Black communities and white settlements in western states like Ohio. Unquestionably, white paternalism and racial prejudice existed within the movement; nevertheless, abolitionism marked the first time white Americans collectively participated in efforts to abolish the color line.³²

The abolitionists were vilified in the press, denounced from the pulpit, and attacked in the streets. Their meetings were broken up by mobs, their halls trashed, their printing presses thrown into rivers, and their speakers pelted with rotten vegetables, stones, snowballs, and brickbats—this in the North! Garrison himself was nearly lynched by a Boston mob in 1835. Yet by the late 1850s the North had come 'round to the abolitionist perspective. In 1848 the Free Soil Party opposed the expansion of slavery into the new territories; the new Republican Party would do the same a few years later. Chief Justice Roger Taney's opinion in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857) infuriated the North rather than settled the slavery question as he intended. John Brown's 1859 assault on Harpers Ferry thrilled Northerners—just as his quick trial and summary execution outraged them. Garrison's abolitionist career began by dodging projectiles from angry mobs, but by 1864 he was meeting with President Lincoln at the White House.³³ A movement that began with just a few hundred people had managed to abolitionize half the nation and inspire a civil war that would clinch its principal demand of immediate and unconditional emancipation without compensation to the slave owner. It was a revolutionary movement.³⁴

The abolitionists' principles and achievements make them an important, if underappreciated, source of a new democratic politics, for in the process of challenging slavery and racial prejudice they challenged white citizenship itself, thereby creating space for expanded democratic

practices. There are three elements of abolitionist praxis that are particularly relevant for today: their model of the political actor as agitator, their emphasis on freedom, and their willingness to follow the radical implications of their demands.

The Abolitionist as Agitator

As historian Aileen Kradtor emphasizes, the radical abolitionists engaged in antislavery work as agitators rather than reformers.³⁵ The abolition of slavery, they argued, could not be achieved through normal political channels because the entire political system, from the parties to the federal government, served the interests of the slave power. The Garrisonians' foremost concern was to build a constituency, not to influence legislators, pass laws, or run candidates for office. They sought to build it by awakening consciences, encouraging free speech and debate, publishing propaganda, and refusing to sacrifice principle for political expediency. The abolitionist as agitator refused to compromise, for she believed that adherence to principle is itself the most expedient course.³⁶

Reformist abolitionists urged the Garrisonians to be more "respectable" in their criticism of slavery. It is more effective, they argued, to win people over through cool, rational discourse than with fierce denunciations of slaveholders, the church, and the state for their complicity in slavery. The radicals replied that it is agitation, not reasoning, that gets results. As the Garrisonian Wendell Phillips states:

The cause is not ours, so that we might, rightfully, postpone or put in peril the victory by moderating our demands, stifling our convictions, or fling down our rebukes, to gratify any sickly taste of our own, or to spare the delicate nerves of our neighbor. . . . The press, the pulpit, the wealth, the literature, the prejudices, the political arrangements, the present self-interest of the country, are all against us. God has given us no weapon but the truth, faithfully uttered, and addressed, with the old prophets' directness, to the conscience of the individual sinner. . . . We have facts for those who think, arguments for those who reason; but he who cannot be reasoned out of his prejudices must be laughed out of them.³⁷

Phillips's insistence that "There are far more dead hearts to be quickened than confused intellects to be cleared up" is a powerful rejoinder to the belief that deliberation, reason, and the forceless force of the better argument is the best form of suasion.³⁸ The Garrisonians made the case for radicalness over respectability, principle over expedience, militancy over discipline, and volume over toned-down talk. Should the slave, they ask, expect anything less?

Many Northerners dismissed as unrealistic the Garrisonians' demand for immediate emancipation and the end of racial prejudice. The Garrisonians replied that limiting one's goals to what is "realistic" sets the sights of social change too low, while demanding the unattainable makes favorable compromise possible by making a reform-minded politician's demands seem reasonable. (Consider how Malcolm X's fiery statements made Martin Luther King's demands tenable to white moderates, who otherwise felt that King was going too far too fast.) Further, the call for immediate and unconditional emancipation was not just a demand but a means of struggle, for it opened the ears and eyes of the public. "We have never said that slavery would be overthrown by a single blow," Garrison once confessed. "That it ought to be, we shall always contend."³⁹ Agitation, the abolitionists show, is vital for democratic politics because in demanding the impossible one creates possibilities.

The Goal Is Freedom

Democracy is often understood as a political form driven by the desire for equality. Robert Dahl, for example, explains that democratization is an uneven and unsteady battle between the "logic of equality" (the desire to extend equal political rights to all members of a polity) and "the brute facts of inequality." Accordingly, he argues, the best way to counter these facts is to steadily extend democratic rights to excluded groups.⁴⁰ Inclusion is the means and equality the end.

Unquestionably, racial discrimination is a form of inequality. Yet it is notable that in two of the nation's most significant struggles against this "brute fact," equality served as neither political slogan nor final end. Slaves prayed for "the coming of the Lord," fought for jubilee, and

remained themselves “Freeman” after emancipation. Civil rights activists demanded “Freedom Now!,” took Freedom Rides, and sang freedom songs during Freedom Summer. In both struggles, the slogan and the goal was freedom. Calls for “inclusion” or “diversity” were nonexistent. Cries for “equality” were not entirely absent but were clearly less common. It was not that equality was irrelevant, of course, but that it was assumed to be an implicit part of freedom. Indeed, as Richard King argues, since African Americans took it for granted that they were equal to whites, the debate over equality during the civil rights movement was largely “an argument among white people.”⁴¹

This commitment to liberty was the touchstone of the abolitionist movement. Black abolitionists in particular insisted on freedom from bondage, freedom from color caste, and freedom from poverty. Abolitionists struggled for free speech in the face of local intimidation and federal censorship, elevated the Declaration of Independence above the Constitution in esteem, emphasized personal liberty, and resisted racial privileges.⁴² Perhaps most importantly, abolitionists insisted that freedom means the ability to participate in public affairs. As the abolitionist Martin Delany explains, “No people can be free who themselves do not constitute an essential part of the *ruling element* of the country in which they live.”⁴³

This quest for participation is obscured when democracy is associated primarily with the “logic of equality.” For this reason, an abolitionist-democratic politics seeks to emphasize participation by reasserting freedom as the basic ideal upon which democratic theory should rest. Of course, it appreciates the significance of equality, including equal political rights and the fair distribution of “social rights” such as universal health care, decent housing, adequate nutrition, and a minimum standard of living for all. But it insists that these must orbit around participation, for as Hannah Arendt argues, humans are not truly free until they have the option of participating in political debates and making decisions. “Men *are* free—as distinguished from their possessing the gift for freedom—as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to *be* free and to act are the same.”⁴⁴ The abolition-democracy

goes beyond equal rights and inclusion to embrace a concept of freedom as substantive participation in public affairs. The path to participation runs through the struggle against white citizenship.

Radical Implications

Marx sought to change the world through a “ruthless criticism of everything existing.” He argued that theory must be ruthless in two senses. It must not be afraid of its own conclusions, however radical, and it must not be afraid of being in conflict with the powers that be.⁴⁵ The abolitionists followed Marx on both counts. They were not afraid to go where their radical conclusions took them, from women’s suffrage to condemning the Constitution as a proslavery document to arguing for disunion to welcoming civil war. Abolitionists’ radical views often extended beyond antislavery. Many experimented with diet (including vegetarianism), were early practitioners of alternative medicine, and were open to new forms of religious worship. Abolitionists even transformed the traditional Christian wedding ceremony, as when Theodore Weld and Angelina Grimké married without a minister and without Grimké promising to obey Weld.⁴⁶ Following the radical logic of their arguments sometimes required rejecting their own cherished beliefs, as when Abby Kelley, Stephen Foster, and William Garrison defended John Brown’s raid despite their pacifism.⁴⁷ These Garrisonians had little desire to be “respectable” or to moderate their beliefs, since they were convinced that a moderate approach to antislavery often meant complicity with slavery. “I am for conciliation,” Phillips explained, “but not for conciliating the slaveholder. Death to the system, and death or exile to the master, is the only motto.”⁴⁸

The abolitionists’ radical crusade has several important implications for a contemporary abolitionist-democratic politics. It suggests that an attack on racial subordination raises the level of struggle against oppression in general. By undermining slavery, the abolitionists challenged the entire political and economic order. Unlike trade unionism, prison reform, women’s suffrage, temperance, or other reform movements of their day, the abolitionists’ demand for unconditional emancipation

with no compensation to slaveholders threatened the entire structure of the American state, which was dominated by the slave power. Atacking slavery melted the glue that kept the Union together. The abolitionists placed their fingers on the nation's fault line; through their agitation they pried the crack apart.⁴⁹ The lesson for today, as David Roediger points out, is that as the walls of racial oppression tumble, class rule is also shaken.⁵⁰

Further, an abolitionist politics shows that expanding democracy is not just a matter of changing democratic procedures or norms but also of creating new institutions: integrated antislavery meetings; state legislatures supplemented by mass meetings of Black women, men, and children during Reconstruction; freedom schools in the back of beauty parlors during the civil rights movement; Black Panther parties for self-defense. These institutions offered new means of participation that went beyond voting and potentially beyond liberal democracy.⁵¹ Civic education, deliberation, social rights, and civic associations are all important accoutrements of democracy, but by themselves or even taken together they remain within the limits to democratic participation set by liberalism. Expanding participation beyond these limits implies new institutions or the transformation of existing ones. This is a political challenge that requires conflict more than consensus, struggle more than agonism, and debate more than deliberation. Contemporary democratic theory has been reluctant to pursue these themes but the abolition-democracy turns politics toward them.

Strategy and Application

I have argued that vision is one of the principal weaknesses of contemporary democratic theory, but the lack of strategy is evident as well. Democratic theorists commonly preface their arguments for expanded democracy with a disclaimer that their model presupposes a diminishment of economic and social inequalities but provide no ideas for how to achieve this. William Connolly, for example, writes, "Agonal democracy presupposes a reduction in established economic inequalities, and this objective in turn requires a mobilization of public energies to promote

it."⁵² But the mobilization of such energies is precisely what a democratic theory is supposed to help achieve. Connolly's theory of greater democracy rests on reduced social and economic disparities, yet reduced disparities depend on greater democracy. This catch-22 reflects a lack of strategy. The abolition-democracy, on the other hand, is both means and end. Through its strategy of abolishing white citizenship, space is created for new forms of democratic participation and new political ideals.

An abolitionist-democratic strategy does not seek to build coalitions by downplaying racial tensions or to create class-based social programs that "transcend" race. Instead, it directly confronts policies and practices that sustain the cross-class alliance and thereby limit the democratic imagination of white citizens. Thus, policies such as busing and affirmative action are important not so much because they foster diversity but because they redistribute racially skewed education resources, countering whites' material interest in segregated schools and preferential access to elite universities. Similarly, policies that attack redlining redistribute housing wealth in a way that undermines whites' privileged access to the best homes, best neighborhoods, and lowest interest rates. An abolitionist-democratic strategy challenges neighborhood associations, often regarded as beacons of face-to-face democracy, when they serve as vehicles for gentrifying inner-city neighborhoods and driving out residents of color. It challenges parent-teacher associations when they seek to preserve racial segregation or tracking in schools. It challenges unions, such as teachers' or police officers' unions, when they place the interests of their members before the need to fight racial discrimination. It monitors the police to prevent racial profiling and arrest rates that disproportionately impact people of color. It monitors the courts to prevent biased juries, sentencing disparities, and racially skewed incarceration rates. For the reasons set out in chapter 4, it resists any attempts to resuscitate a "progressive white identity" in the classroom or elsewhere.

The abolition-democracy works for reparations to redistribute wealth unjustly accumulated by whites as a result of centuries of slavery and segregation. Yet as Robin Kelley argues, reparations are about

“more than a paycheck and an apology.” Equally important is the way in which any resources won in a reparations struggle would be distributed. There are few implications for democratic participation if reparations merely involve the government distributing checks to the victims and ancestors of slavery and segregation. If reparations are understood as “a means to mobilize African Americans to struggle for social change, self-transformation, and self-reliance,” however, it raises important questions of democracy.⁵³ It suggests that the means of distribution are as important as the wealth distributed. It would also require a democratic structure so that ordinary people can determine for themselves how to spend the money. If reparations went to building autonomous Black institutions rather than individuals, for example, it would benefit the entire nation, not just the Black community, since it would involve creating democratic institutions in largely urban areas.⁵⁴

In sum, an abolitionist-democratic strategy seeks to abolish explicit and normalized white advantages in housing, education, employment, asset accumulation, health, criminal justice, and politics, both because such preferences are morally wrong and because struggles against them point toward greater democratic possibilities. The radical potential of such a strategy is suggested by the historical impact of the Black freedom struggles on American democracy. The abolitionist movement inspired the first wave of feminism. Emancipation led to jubilee, then Reconstruction, then the rise of organized labor and the movement for an eight-hour day.⁵⁵ The civil rights movement imagined a “beloved community” and unleashed a flurry of social movements, from women’s liberation to the student movement to Stonewall to Black and Brown and Red Power to the revolutionary underground. Black freedom struggles, whose ostensible purpose was to fulfill the “American Creed,” quickly spilled over the containers of liberal democracy. An abolitionist-democratic politics seeks to do the same. It seeks to restore the radical-utopian and the action dimensions of democratic theory by imagining a world without whiteness. In so doing, it envisions a world free of oppression and domination in general. A democratic politics must be an abolitionist politics.

An abolitionist strategy has two potential weaknesses. Without a doubt, it is difficult to convince white citizens to surrender existing short-term privileges for the possibility of long-term gain. Privileged groups rarely give up their power voluntarily—especially when they no longer believe themselves to be privileged. But the difficulty of a task does not diminish its necessity. All social movements face difficulties that appear insurmountable at the onset. Conversely, it could be that the radical potential of an abolitionist-democratic politics, which advocates a social movement from below, is being undermined by diversity policies from above. University administrators vigorously defend affirmative action on campus and in court. Corporate executives hunt for employees who will diversify their workforce and expand their access to “ethnic markets.” Federal attorneys prosecute violations of the civil rights acts. Republican presidents appoint African Americans to important posts and promise to channel funds through Black churches. Such elites hardly fit the model of abolitionist as agitator, yet they would seem to be doing this work. Ironically, the radical democratic potential of the abolition-democracy is possibly blunted more by these activities than by overt white racists. Of course, the eradication of discrimination is to be celebrated regardless of who carries it out. Nevertheless, the consequences of dismantling the cross-class alliance from above are potentially significant for democratic theory.

Many of these elites seem to assume that the cross-class alliance will wither away without serious repercussions. Yet it is unclear how the white working class—which depends on its racial status much more than elites—will react to the erosion of whiteness from above, particularly in difficult economic times. Normalized white advantage breeds dissatisfaction among both whites and not-whites, the latter because they continue to be discriminated against disproportionately. Given this, mer because they are advantaged *only* disproportionately. Jennifer Hochschild argues that we face two possible futures. Diversity policies could help the nation finally reach a “benign tipping point” in which enough African Americans occupy prominent positions that whites no longer resent their presence and Black people no longer feel

unwanted. In this scenario whiteness would gradually fade from the political scene, making it nothing but a biologically inaccurate but politically innocuous description of physical difference. The other alternative is that white resistance could increase proportionately with Black progress, leading to greater racial conflict as whites attempt to preserve their privileges.⁵⁶ A third possibility is the abolition-democracy. Ultimately, whether the elite strategy from above, a white nationalist backlash, or the abolitionist strategy from below triumphs is uncertain, but for advocates of expanded democratic participation, I hope the choice among them is sufficiently clear.

In an essay titled "Black Man's Burden," John Killens asks his primarily Black audience:

What are we going to do about these Europeans? . . . having liberated ourselves from them, politically, economically, socially, psychologically, culturally, how are we going to integrate them into the New World of Humanity, where racial prejudice will be obsolete, where the whiteness of their skin will not be held against them, but at the same time, will not afford them any special privileges? How are we going to teach them the meaning of some of the terms they themselves claim to have invented, but never practiced, as far as we were concerned; such terms as "democracy," "human dignity," and the "brotherhood of man"?⁵⁷

The white citizen has been a Black burden throughout American history, but it has been a burden for democracy as well. As the editors of *Ebony* magazine put it in 1966, there is no "Negro problem" in the United States, but there is a white problem, and the solution to this problem lies "not in the Negro but in the white American and in the structure of the white community."⁵⁸ Today there is still the white problem—its expectations, its power, its solidarity, its imagination. Even after the civil rights movement, whiteness stands at the path to a more democratic society like a troll at the bridge. The political task, I have argued, is to chase the troll away, not to ignore it or invite it to the multicultural table.

An abolitionist-democratic theory provides the intellectual tools to scatter the troll. It identifies white citizenship and its "public and psychological wages" as key barriers to democratic participation. It emphasizes power rather than recognition, alienation rather than difference, privilege rather than exclusion. It suggests that the impulse for greater democracy lies neither in a color-blind society nor in granting equal worth to all races but in the vision of a world in which no one needs to be white. Such a world has the potential to overflow the containers of liberalism, carrying a new conception of democracy on its floodwaters. It is a politics based on a simple principle: No privilege held can compare to a world in which privilege does not exist.