

interrogates how the crisis was seen as an opportunity to confront the racist and revanchist common sense underpinning the neoliberal state and complete the unfinished business of the long civil rights movement.

Chapter 6 interrogates the relationships between mass homelessness and mass incarceration in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008 in Skid Row Los Angeles, an area of downtown that has the highest concentration of poverty, policing, and homelessness in the United States. It examines the connections between structures and processes of racialization, gentrification, and the policing of urban space. It also suggests lessons that we might learn from the social movements in the city that are formulating demands for civil and human rights, a social wage, and the right to the city. Finally, the epilogue explores how activists, artists, and intellectuals are currently playing prominent public roles in reclaiming a collective memory of freedom struggles—shared perceptions about the history of movements that are sparking the imagination of political struggles in the present, and articulating the poetry of the future. Their visions suggest that alternative futures have been and continue to be possible. I take the politics of historical excavation and theoretical explication seriously, attending to what Hall describes as “a set of contested, localized, conjunctural knowledges that have to be debated in a dialogic way.” “But,” as Hall intervened, this theoretical labor is “also a practice which always thinks about its intervention in a world in which it would make some difference, in which it would have some effect.” The goal of this work is to contribute to the evolving skills in the way readers understand the world as they struggle to change it.⁶³

CHAPTER 1

The Explosion in Watts

The Second Reconstruction and the Cold War Roots of the Carceral State

The explosion in Watts reminded us all that the northern ghettos are the prisons of forgotten men.

—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., New York, September 18, 1965

In August 1965, the California Highway Patrol stopped an unemployed resident of South Central Los Angeles named Marquette Frye and proceeded to beat him. Frye’s assault ignited the fury of the Black working class in Watts. Many took up burning and looting as their form of protest against this particular episode and the more general epidemic of police violence. Over the next five days the masses were on the move. The uprising—popularly known as the Watts rebellion or insurrection—occurred within days of the passage of the historic Voting Rights Act in 1965. National and international attention was drawn to the events, especially as they appeared to contradict the dominant national narrative of appeasement and racial overcoming.¹ Moved by the events, Martin Luther King Jr. was compelled to visit Los Angeles. Against the counsel of advisors who recommended that King denounce the rebellion and the conditions that produced it, King met with the participants of the then-largest urban uprising in U.S. history. In a press conference shortly after the meeting he stated that the rebellion “was a class revolt of underprivileged against privileged.” While King celebrated the political victories of the freedom movement, he framed the Watts insurrection as the outcome of class anger among those who found their material conditions, despite the new legislation, unchanged.²

In the wake of this encounter, King and his colleagues increasingly worked to articulate alternatives to the race and class inequality they

witnessed in Watts. King came to the ethical position that “something is wrong with capitalism. . . . There must be a better distribution of wealth, and maybe America must move toward a democratic socialism.” This realization transformed King as he sided with working people in the struggle against racism, militarism, and poverty.³ King thus affirmed the insurgent impulse of the urban uprisings, as he well understood the material conditions that had produced them. In his estimation, the struggle of the urban multiracial poor was the decisive factor in elevating the crisis of racism and poverty to the national political stage.⁴

King sought to rebuild an alliance between civil rights and labor movements to confront the crisis politically. As part of this effort, he located the origins of the rebellion in the automation and deindustrialization in the period. This focus resonated as the intersecting crises of racism, urban poverty, unemployment, and police violence disproportionately impacted the African American and Mexican American working class in the city. In his speeches he increasingly highlighted the social forces producing concentrated unemployment and poverty among the racialized poor. He therefore provided a critique of the changing geography of U.S. racial capitalism. He inspired a radical return in the freedom movement to materialist analysis and class questions that had been marked as outside the bounds of tolerable discourse during the Cold War.⁵

That is not to say that visions of redistribution had not been central to the freedom movement well before Watts. They had played a powerful role in connecting labor and civil rights movements for decades. Taking a long view of the civil rights movement, this chapter traces the rise of what activists, artists, and intellectuals in the Black freedom movement called the Second Reconstruction during the 1930s. It explores how they formed a popular alliance with radical labor and socialist movements against Jim Crow capitalism. It shows how they offered a materialist analysis of racialization, and critiqued policing and prisons as political expressions of the systemic inequalities of capitalism. It also explores how their critique was silenced as “subversion” during the post-World War II Red Scare amid the broader criminalization of antiracist freedom struggles. It demonstrates that this reaction created a political vacuum in which the logic of the carceral state would come to flourish.⁶

As the Cold War took hold after 1948, incarceration rates expanded. African American workers were members of the reserve army of labor. They were the last hired, first fired, and also increasingly subjected to

surveillance, arrest, and incarceration. Prisons began to fill with people who were young and working class—groups who also made up the social basis for the labor and civil rights struggles of the postwar era.⁷ This was particularly true in California, where the dispossessed had been forced to migrate from the South in search of waged work during World War II. Indeed, while the incarceration rate for the United States as a whole remained relatively steady in the two and half decades after the war, as the journalist Min S. Yee observed, the California prison population by contrast grew from about five thousand in 1944 to more than twenty-eight thousand by 1968. This shift coincided with a transformation in the racial demographics of the prison. The California prison population went from 68 percent white and 17 percent Black in the 1940s to 54 percent white and 28 percent Black in the 1960s, even while the percentage of Black people in California remained between 5 and 6 percent of the population throughout the period. This seemingly exceptional form of carceral control requires explanation, especially as it became the dominant strategy of racialized crisis management in the long late twentieth century.⁸

This chapter shows how carceral policies were developed in response to the most radical political and economic demands of the long civil rights movement. It argues that the national security state’s attempts to silence materialist critiques of racism produced the political and ideological conditions of existence for the Watts insurrection in 1965. In turn, it suggests that the state’s response to the revolt and the rise of Ronald Reagan during the late 1960s in California created the political foundation for the making of a neoliberal carceral state. By analyzing the speeches and writings of figures such as King and James Baldwin, I seek to demonstrate that the rebellion was a turning point in the history and future of freedom struggles. I argue that the Watts insurrection represented an organic crisis of Jim Crow racial regimes, one that presented the opportunity to form a broad alliance against racism, militarism, and poverty. I conclude by focusing on the dialectical struggle between the prose of counterinsurgency and the poetry of social movements over the meaning of this moment, illustrating how it marked a turning point in the development of the carceral state.⁹

THE SECOND RECONSTRUCTION

Many people thought that the radical thirties could be the Second Reconstruction. The language was certainly there: sharecropping as

the new slavery, the CIO as the new abolitionists, class struggle between working people and capitalists as the new Civil War.

—Toni Cade Bambara, “A Second Reconstruction? 1934–1948,” in *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Biography in Four Voices*, 1995

Reconstruction presents an opportunity to study inductively the Marxian theory of the state.

—W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 1935

The Black freedom struggle in the mid-twentieth century, referred to as the Second Reconstruction, took root in the radical 1930s. The publication of W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction in America* in 1935 represented a turning point in the history of the struggle against U.S. racial capitalism. During the economic crisis of the 1930s, and amid an emergent insurgent multiracial labor movement, Du Bois devoted his scholarly energies to a study of the race and class struggles of the post-Civil War Reconstruction period. *Black Reconstruction in America* described how the First Reconstruction (1868–76) represented an unusually successful interracial working-class movement.¹⁰ In Du Bois’s explanation, Black workers had won their own freedom by creating a “general strike” in the fields, and in turn were guided by a vision of “abolition democracy.” He was also driven by the idea that these workers had created a multiracial class alliance with poor whites that led to the formation of the Reconstruction government. This government opened the ballot to poor whites, who had been denied rights due to their lack of access to property. It abolished the whipping post, the stocks, and other forms of barbaric punishment. It pursued equal accommodation in public spaces and implemented civil rights. In short, the movement was able to transform a racial contradiction into a class confrontation. These efforts to combine political and economic rights, Du Bois argued, represented a model for confronting Jim Crow during the global crisis of capitalism in the 1930s.¹¹

Drawing on Black radical historiography, Marxist theory, and the alternative archives of expressive culture, Du Bois claimed that Reconstruction represented one of the “most extraordinary experiments in Marxism that the world, before the Russian Revolution, had ever seen.” He demonstrated how racial and labor regimes, centuries in the making, had worn thin in the face of democratic insurgencies among the poor and working class in the 1860s and 1870s. These antiracist and class struggles had created a radical rupture in the U.S. social formation. In reconfiguring the goals and capacities of the state, Black workers and their radical allies had raised the fundamental question as to “whom this wealth was to belong to and for whose interests laborers

were to work”—a question that continued to burn at the height of the Great Depression, a period that marked the rise of the Second Reconstruction.¹² Against the advance of socialist democracy, the overthrow of the First Reconstruction gave rise to Jim Crow in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In turn, Jim Crow served as the primary instrument of social control for capital and the state, as it ensured a largely segregated labor movement on a mass scale between the 1890s and the 1930s.¹³

At the time Du Bois published *Black Reconstruction in America*, there was evidence that the racial and labor regime was fraying. With the book’s publication, militant labor and civil rights activists in the radical 1930s were increasingly able to draw on a collective memory of the unfinished business of abolition democracy to press for its completion. In the decade after this signal intervention, radical Black freedom movement activists and intellectuals built a historic bloc with the multiracial Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and communist and socialist organizations to confront U.S. Jim Crow capitalism. Between 1929 and 1948, five hundred thousand Black workers gained access to unionized industrial jobs, a large scale experiment in unionization for industrial workers for the first time in U.S. history. In turn, Black industrial workers and organic intellectuals provided moral and ethical leadership in the class struggles of the postwar era.¹⁴

In 1946 in Columbia, South Carolina, Du Bois delivered a speech on a program with Paul Robeson and Howard Fast at the meetings of the Southern Negro Youth Congress, a Communist organization based in Birmingham, Alabama (a place also known as “America’s Johannesburg”). Esther Jackson introduced the lecture before an integrated audience at Benedict College in the Jim Crow South. In poetic prose, Du Bois’s address “Behold the Land” predicted that the region would become an epicenter for antiracist and class struggles. Du Bois observed, “The working people of the South, white and black, must come to remember that their emancipation depends upon their mutual cooperation.” The speech illuminated the ways in which Jim Crow segregation produced Black workers as a source of cheap labor power. It explored how this racial regime served to control the working class as a whole. It declared that this system of social relations reached far beyond the geographical boundaries of the U.S. South, having been exported around the planet through U.S. racial capitalism and imperialism. As part of an effort to articulate an ethical alternative to this political economy, Du Bois argued for the formation of a historical bloc made up of Black freedom, anti-imperialist, labor, and socialist movements. Such a bloc



FIGURE 1. W.E.B. Du Bois with Shirley Graham and indicted members of the Peace Information Center, Washington, DC, 1951. Courtesy the Department of Special Collections and University Archives, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

would press for human rights and an augmented social wage—one that included equitable housing, education, and transportation for all workers—especially workers of color who had been excluded from the New Deal. In this, Du Bois was perhaps the most prominent radical historian and social theorist during this formative moment of the age of the civil rights movement.¹⁵

During this period, Du Bois observed that an ever-increasing number of poor people “stagger out of prison doors embittered, vengeful, hopeless, ruined.” Of this “army of the wronged,” as he called them, the proportion of Black people was “frightful.” Du Bois penned these observations during his persecution for the antiwar activism he conducted with the Stockholm-based Peace Information Center. In a clear use of Red Scare tactics, he was labeled a “foreign agent” and the Soviet Union was named as the “foreign principal” by the prosecution. As a result, the senior scholar-activist of the Black freedom movement

faced an extended trial in federal court in 1951 and was forced to fight for his right to pursue radical alternatives to the Jim Crow police state. It took a national and international campaign to save him from being incarcerated. The ordeal of the trial gave him some new perspective. In reflecting on the experience, he observed the ways in which criminalization migrated from the persecution of radical intellectuals to the “great mass” of the Black poor and working class.¹⁶

Du Bois’s urgent words offered a radical challenge to the violent exclusion of “the army of the wronged” in carceral spaces.¹⁷ They dramatize the deleterious effects of prisons as modes of social control. In his writings Du Bois sought to help audiences interpret and resist coercive methods for securing consent to U.S. hegemony. Specifically, he invited readers to consider how the national security state emerged in continuity with earlier forms of social control, and how racism, capitalism, and the state were connected in the early Cold War. In doing so, Du Bois articulated a materialist critique of the carceral apparatus during the rise of postwar U.S. globalism. His intervention reveals the relationship between consent and coercion during this distinct historical conjuncture.¹⁸

THE LONG CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND COLD WAR COUNTERSUBVERSION

This bill of particulars, *We Charge Genocide*, is the documented story of the frame-up of thousands of innocent Negroes; of the attempt to stamp the brand of criminality on Negro youth; of packed lily-white juries; of the intimidation of lawyers and witnesses; of police brutality and murder, legal lynching, Ku Klux Klan and mob violence; of racist laws enforced by city, state and Federal officials and courts; of denial of the vote, Jim-Crow in employment, the ghetto system, premature death and malnutrition and preventable diseases . . . and of Jim-Crow.

—William L. Patterson, “We Charge Genocide!” *Political Affairs*, 1951

Like Du Bois, William L. Patterson of the Civil Rights Congress (CRC) engaged in a struggle to confront the criminalization of the Black working class. He noted that there had been a “conscious attempt to place the brand of criminality” upon the Black working class, whom he defined as victims of the Jim Crow police state. This analysis informed the CRC’s effort to provide political, ethical, and moral leadership in the struggle to prevent young working-class people of color from being criminalized. The group also organized civil liberties campaigns

to support imprisoned communists—both those who were card-carrying members of the Communist Party and those fellow travelers indicted by Cold War hysteria. The Los Angeles CRC was influential. It organized against the police violence experienced by African American and Mexican American working-class residents in particular. The organization worked in partnership with groups such as El Congreso del Pueblo de Habla Español and the Asociación Nacional México Americana. For working-class communities of color throughout the city, the group provided political education about the historical and material roots of racism and police violence in the political economy of capitalism during a critical moment in the history of the long civil rights movement.¹⁹

The CRC included the significant participation of activists from the Communist Party with branches in places such as Detroit, Oakland, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and New York. Its leadership included veterans of the Communist movement such as William L. Patterson, who had engaged in the defense of the “Scottsboro Boys” in Alabama during the early 1930s. They organized multiracial social protests challenging racism in housing and employment, as well as police brutality. The fights for jobs, unemployment relief, and public housing, and against the policing of the racialized poor, had been critical to the broader radical struggle against racial capitalism since the Great Depression.²⁰ The Los Angeles CRC often held its meetings at the local CIO offices. This siting was a deliberate means to link with labor in a fight against the police brutality suffered by workers of color, particularly those experiencing unemployment due to plant closures. CRC activists argued that there was a direct link between racism, unemployment, police repression, and postwar capitalist development. They gathered and presented evidence illustrating that more than one third of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) was deployed to police about one mile of territory in South Central Los Angeles. By contrast, they showed that only two officers were assigned per square mile in predominantly white and wealthy West Side neighborhoods such as Hollywood, Wilshire, and the Valley. Such racial and spatial disparity informed the CRC’s effort to fight the criminalization of racialized sectors of the class who, Patterson argued, “lie rotting in the prisons of American cities.”²¹

The Los Angeles CRC worked in conjunction with a number of media and cultural figures, some of whom were themselves members of the local chapter, to confront the common-sense associations between race and criminality. Charlotta Bass, editor of the Los Angeles-based

newspaper the *California Eagle*, played a key role in this fight over meaning and material conditions. She had become a close colleague of prominent figures on the Black Left such as Du Bois, Patterson, and Paul Robeson through her activism and journalism. Throughout the long civil rights era she was pivotal in facilitating multiracial alliances between African Americans and Mexican Americans. Bass was a board member of the CRC, and accordingly saw her mission as to connect struggles against Jim Crow capitalism with resistance to the policing of racialized space, and to advance a socialist vision of the redistribution of wealth.²²

The insurgent counternarratives provided by Bass and other journalists in the *California Eagle* were critical for working-class communities of color in Los Angeles. This was especially true in the postwar period, which witnessed an upsurge in police violence and incarceration as unemployment increased. In Watts, a majority of Black residents reported that they had been stopped and frisked, and subjected to illegal search and seizures. Despite problems with police violence, middle-class civil rights organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) generally failed to get involved in working-class confrontations with police violence, brutality, and harassment. In this context the CRC gained local acclaim for its resistance to criminalization perpetuated by the LAPD. Rather than pursuing the middle-class strategy of respectability, one that insisted that defendants be upstanding citizens and defended as such, the CRC took on unpopular cases in which people were not innocent victims. Indeed, many of the CRC’s clients had been arrested for crimes they very well could have committed such as public drunkenness and vagrancy.²³

Raising the profile of the struggle, major cultural figures, most notably the singer and actor Paul Robeson, lent their celebrity to the cause. In 1948 Robeson performed a free concert in Los Angeles to fundraise for the CRC’s campaigns against racism, policing, and violations of civil rights and civil liberties.²⁴ Robeson had achieved the status of folk hero among many in labor and social movements for his political and cultural resistance to Jim Crow capitalism and U.S. imperialism, as well as for his ability to articulate the links between Black expressive culture and the socialist vernacular cultures of working people across the planet. His free concert in Los Angeles, along with many others like it, was organized to build solidarity in the labor, civil rights, civil liberties, socialist, and Communist movements that characterized the period. It



FIGURE 2. Paul Robeson and two women activists from a delegation present *We Charge Genocide* petition to the UN Secretariat. *Daily Worker/Daily World* Photographs Collection, Tamiment Library, New York University.

was cohosted by organizations such as the CRC and the CIO as part of this broader social movement. Taking place at the Second Baptist Church in Los Angeles, the event provided a social space to articulate radical political visions and economic demands in this dynamic social movement.²⁵

The cultural and ideological struggles of the CRC were taken up alongside significant legal and policy-oriented political challenges. William Patterson submitted *We Charge Genocide* at the United Nations in Paris, which documented widespread state-sanctioned and extralegal violence deployed against Black people in the postwar period. This event was coordinated so that Robeson was able to submit the document to the United Nations in New York at the same time. Signatories included prominent figures on the antiracist Left such as Du Bois, Charlotte Bass, Alphaeus Hunton, and Jessica Mitford. In a speech he delivered in New York on November 12, 1951, at a release event for *We Charge Genocide*, William Patterson explained that the article

represented the struggle against the “premature death” created by racism, state violence, and finance capital’s dominance, as he described it.²⁶

U.S. state officials were not sympathetic to the appeal. The report was dismissed by anticommunists—both racial liberals and conservatives—as propaganda promoted by the Communist Party. As a result of their activism the CRC was singled out for political repression by the national security state. Against their efforts to end police brutality, racist violence, segregation, and civil and human rights violations, the Subversive Activities Control Board declared the CRC a Communist front. As such, the claims of the petition were de-authorized and the United Nations was prevented from considering the petition. While Robeson had been able to translate his cultural visibility as a celebrity into organizing efforts for the Black freedom, labor, and socialist alliance, he became an outlier in an increasingly countersubversive entertainment industry. Such counter-subversion was part and parcel of the postwar Red Scare.²⁷

Throughout the rise of the Cold War national security state in the post-1948 period, Black radicals such as Du Bois and Robeson who promoted socialist solutions to racial and class inequality were demonized as subversives. At the national scale, the Red Scare under President Harry Truman’s administration oversaw the political attack and criminalization of the antiracist Left. The national security state pursued the arrest, incarceration, and deportation of hundreds of Black radical figures such as Du Bois, Robeson, Claudia Jones, and C.L.R. James while overseeing the surveillance of artists such as Ruby Dee, Ossie Davis, Lorraine Hansberry, Canada Lee, Lena Horne, Elizabeth Catlett, and other luminaries.²⁸ By persecuting those who rendered vivid the articulation between race and class, the national security state demonized the social vision most able to provide viable alternatives to what would later be called “white supremacist capitalism.”²⁹

Indeed, racial liberals in the Truman administration who supported anticommunism attributed criminality to civil rights and created the conditions of existence for the McCarthy era. As Jessica Mitford, the journalist and former executive secretary of the East Bay CRC in Oakland, put it, “The soil for the noxious growth of McCarthyism had been well prepared by the Truman Administration, and the anti-Communist crusade was well under way before the junior senator from Wisconsin himself appeared on the scene.”³⁰ While conservatives and liberals used languages of anticommunism to justify the expansion of the domestic security apparatus, millions of workers dispossessed by the mechanization of agricultural production were forced to migrate to industrial

cities in search of waged work. Dispossession, forced migration, urbanization, and wartime increases in production in industrial cities created an increasingly working-class dynamic in the Black freedom struggle. In turn, Black working people elevated the struggle against white supremacist capitalism to new geographical scales. The movement intensified with unparalleled force and led to a situation where not even the arrest, incarceration, and deportation of radicals could stop the forward motion unleashed by the freedom movement.³¹

THE BLACK FREEDOM STRUGGLE AND THE WATTS INSURRECTION OF THE 1960S

I never intend to become adjusted to the evils of segregation and discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic inequalities of an economic system which takes necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes.

—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Highlander Folk School,
Monteagle, Tennessee, September 2, 1957

With its strategically located means of cultural production in Hollywood and the postwar expansion of the military-industrial complex, Southern California became an epicenter of the Cold War reaction against the Black freedom, radical labor, and socialist alliance. California countersubversives carried an organized political attack on labor and civil rights activists. They recognized that workers of color experiencing racial segregation and who were also being denied access to the social wage and means of social reproduction were sympathetic to struggles for economic justice. This countersubversive tradition extended from Southern California across the state as well as throughout the state government. Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan in particular rose to prominence in California by carrying out domestic Cold War campaigns that practiced “anticommunism as governmentality.” Efforts by civil rights organizers and the multiracial Left to resist segregation were demonized as subversive in order to win consent to political and economic policies that were antagonistic to the interests of the majority of working people. As deindustrialization began wiping out jobs in segregated neighborhoods followed by waves of foreclosures, housing became a central site of struggle. Public housing as a solution to housing shortages for the poor and people of color was promoted by progressives and the antiracist Left. These class demands were represented in countersubversive narratives as a “creeping socialism.”³²

The relationship between countersubversion and the expansion of carceral forms of social control was rendered vivid in Los Angeles

throughout the reign of LAPD Chief William Parker. Depicted by the press in a positive light much like FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, Parker was celebrated for modernizing the department. In addition to promoting a militaristic culture, Parker, a former Marine Corps officer, encouraged the racist repression of the city’s African American, Asian American, and Mexican American working-class residents. Parker described this style of authoritarian policing as a front line of defense against communism. The chief was a member of the right-wing populist and white supremacist organization the John Birch Society, which actively resisted the advances of Black freedom, labor, and socialist struggles. In his various capacities working for the state and the city, Parker fanned the flames of racism and anticommunism. In so doing he helped popularize the California tradition of countersubversion among reactionary forces.³³

Countersubversives marginalized the radical critique of racial capitalism and state violence promoted by labor and civil rights activists. They also articulated a Cold War racial discourse of security and law and order. This discourse naturalized the accumulation of wealth among middle- and ruling-class whites. White flight to the suburbs, for example, occurred alongside massive public investment in education and transportation that enabled the expansion of a white middle class. This encouraged whites to see their class interests as linked to finance capital, insurance, and real estate industries, rather than to the struggles of workers of color for better wages, working conditions, and access to public goods and services. Thus, the ideology of whiteness naturalized the uneven capitalist development of urban and suburban areas, an unevenness that led to differential wages and disastrous inequalities in wealth. As the suburbs experienced greater prosperity, areas in the city occupied by working-class people of color did not. Instead, urban renewal policies displaced and dispossessed poor African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos from inner-city neighborhoods. This strategy of uneven geographical development led to capital and the state’s abandonment of inner cities, which eroded the economic basis of urban areas. Taken together, these policies were at the root of the “urban crisis of the 1960s.”³⁴

As deindustrialization, a decline in trade unionism, and the defeat of the left wing of the multiracial civil rights movement took hold, as the historian Gerald Horne demonstrates, cultural nationalist movements held increasing sway. The period witnessed the expansion of the Nation of Islam’s (NOI) influence in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In turn, the

LAPD also depicted the NOI as a security threat and targeted the organization for police and state surveillance, particularly due to the efforts of Malcolm X to establish a mosque and expand their influence in the region. According to Manning Marable, "Such activities were noticed and monitored by the California Senate Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities, which feared the NOI had Communist affiliations." The state purported that there was a "parallel" between the NOI and the Communist Party to justify surveillance and aggressive policing. In April 1962, LAPD officers killed seven unarmed Nation of Islam members, including the Korean War veteran Ronald Stokes, in a raid on a mosque. Stokes had his hands up when he was shot. The police raid compelled Malcolm X to address a growing trend in California where Black people were killed a rate ten times higher than whites. Between 1963 and 1965, sixty African Americans in Los Angeles were killed by the LAPD. Many of these victims were unarmed, and twenty-seven of them were shot in the back. These police killings were deemed legitimate.³⁵

The policing of the urban crisis in the 1960s occurred amid a booming political economy that had been fueled by federal expenditures in the military industrial complex in California. At the same time, automation, militarization, and outsourcing were leading to a reduction in industrial jobs, which disproportionately impacted the African American working class. It was in this context that Dr. King observed, "The unemployment rate in Watts was a staggering 34 percent." These figures were akin to the situation of the U.S. working class during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Hundreds of thousands of Black working people, King noted, had "no unemployment insurance, no social security, no Medicare, no minimum wage." These conditions, King and his former advisor Jack O'Dell argued, led to the Watts uprisings. Indeed, O'Dell suggested that the event was an expression of the resentment and anger of the working class due to unemployment, police brutality, poor housing, and poverty.³⁶

The explosion in Watts marked the end of the postwar period of economic growth, the decline of industrial urbanization, and the rise of permanent structural unemployment in the political economy. During this period, factories began leaving the city for suburban areas in search of reduced taxes, cheaper land, and new markets. For example, in the two years before the rebellion in 1965, at least twenty-eight factories left South Central and East Los Angeles. Dropout rates in local high schools increased. The dismantling of public transit ensured that poor

people would remain trapped in increasingly deindustrialized neighborhoods in homes they largely did not own. Instead, a majority of South Central Los Angeles's housing stock was owned and operated by absentee slumlords.³⁷ In November 1964, Proposition 13 was passed by California voters, which undid the Rumford Fair Housing Act that had sought to restrict racial segregation in housing. This repeal of open housing was symptomatic of the pervasive and persistent white resistance to the demands of the long civil rights movement. One of the consequences of the combination of racism, militarism, and poverty was the Watts insurrection. In this age of the civil rights movement, organic intellectuals responded to the events with distinct visions of social change.³⁸

THE CRISIS IN U.S. CITIES

The bombs in Vietnam explode at home. The security we profess to seek in foreign ventures we will lose in our decaying cities.

—Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Crisis in America's Cities: An Analysis of Social Disorder and a Plan of Action Against Poverty, Discrimination, and Racism in Urban America," Atlanta, August 15, 1967

In the late 1960s, King was determined in this period to "break the silence" about war both at home and abroad. Significantly, he also saw how racist narratives of the crisis were gaining traction. He observed the spread of racialized discourses of internal security and law and order as symptomatic of the "madness of militarism." Such discourses purported that the militarization of urban space could serve as a viable political solution to social and economic crisis. This emerging common sense would produce incalculable damage in the decades to come. Thus, he saw that the civil rights movement was engaged in a struggle to transform the conditions as well as the common sense.³⁹ Broadly speaking, he extended a radical perspective articulated by figures on the Black Left such as Du Bois, Patterson, Robeson, and Bass during the postwar period. Sparked by the self-activity of the masses on the move during the insurrection and inspired by the radical turn in the civil rights movement, analysts increasingly argued that the multiracial working class in U.S. cities portended the most viable potential for social transformation in North America.⁴⁰

At an event celebrating the one hundredth anniversary of W.E.B. Du Bois's birthday on February 23, 1968, at Carnegie Hall in New York, sponsored by *Freedomways* magazine, which was cofounded by Dr. Du Bois, Shirley Graham Du Bois, Esther Cooper Jackson, W. Alpheus



FIGURE 3. James Baldwin and Martin Luther King Jr. at the one hundredth birthday celebration of W.E.B. Du Bois, sponsored by *Freedomways* magazine, Carnegie Hall, New York, February 23, 1968. Courtesy of Esther Cooper Jackson.

Hunton, Margaret G. Burroughs, and others. Dr. King delivered the keynote. He paid tribute to Du Bois by countering the ways in which anticommunism had deprived the Black freedom struggle of its radical leadership. He declared, "It is time to cease muting the fact that Dr. Du Bois was a genius and chose to be a communist. Our irrational obsessive anticommunism has led us into too many quagmires to be retained as if it were a mode of scientific thinking." King extended his admonition beyond the Black community. He argued that white Americans also owed a debt to Du Bois: "Dr. Du Bois gave them a gift of truth for which they should eternally be indebted to him."⁴¹

With the shared goal of extending this "gift of truth," King articulated an alternative narrative about the causes and consequences of urban rebellions, and reactions to them by the state apparatus. Against those quick to define the events not as motivated by racism and class exploitation, but as a problem of the behavior of militant Black power activists and poor inner-city residents, King intoned an alternative reading. He argued that racial capitalism itself was the source of social and

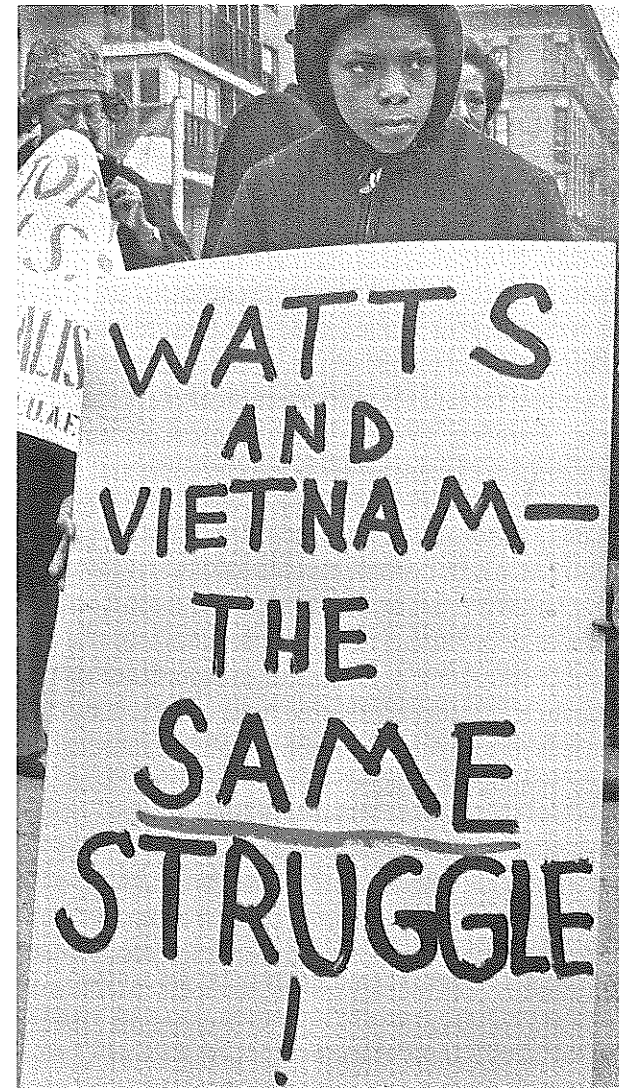


FIGURE 4. Photo by Builder Levy, *Watts and Vietnam*, Citywide Peace March to End War in Vietnam, Harlem contingent, New York, 1967. James E. Jackson and Esther Cooper Jackson Photographs Collection, Tamiment Library, New York University.

economic problems, a reading borne out by social movements emerging among the masses of people themselves.⁴² In developing this analysis of the origins of the crisis in U.S. cities, King linked the national security state's counterinsurgency campaigns in Vietnam to the suppression of subaltern insurrections in Watts and Detroit. While analysts were (and continue to be) quick to describe the urban rebellions and rise of Black power in the wake of the events as markers of the collapse of the civil rights movement, he emphasized that they were rather signs of its unfinished business. King compelled social movements to see that the United States' imperialist war in Vietnam, which drew its soldiers from the poor, working class, and people of color, directed resources away from the social wage and toward the militarization of the political economy.⁴³

By contrast, President Lyndon B. Johnson's statement on the Watts uprising drew a chain of equivalence between rioters and Klansmen, and revealed how a Cold War racial liberalism coalesced with racial conservatism in shaping the state's reaction to the crisis in U.S. cities. In August 1965, Johnson remarked, "A rioter with a Molotov cocktail in his hands is not fighting for civil rights any more than a Klansman with a sheet on his back and a mask on his face. They are both more or less what the law declares them: lawbreakers, destroyers of constitutional rights and liberties, and ultimately destroyers of a free America. They must be exposed and they must be dealt with." Johnson purported that equal treatment under the law required a tougher carceral response, a conclusion that revealed bipartisan consensus about authoritarian solutions to "disorder." This reaction to the events, reinforced by journalists, politicians, and cultural producers, also marked a shift from countersubversion to counterinsurgency as the hegemonic strategy of racialized crisis management. A wave of liberal social science research followed, similarly investigating the causes of the complex events deemed "civil disorders" in the psychological and sociological terms deemed within the tolerable bounds of Cold War racial discourse. United in an untidy unity against the Left, an alliance of conservatives, liberals, and nationalists denounced and even criminalized materialist analyses of race and racism that strayed from the emergent common-sense explanation.⁴⁴

In what would be his last book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (1968), King directly challenged the definitions of Johnson's administration as "prepared to implement measures leading to full equality but [having] waited in vain for the civil rights movement to offer the programs." King renounced the depiction of the Cold War national security state as benevolent and the freedom movement as

lacking a program. He saw how this definition of the situation shifted the burden away from "the white majority" and offloaded responsibility onto "the oppressed minority." It represented the former as "withholding nothing" and the latter as "asking for nothing." "This is a fable," King explained, "not a fact." The circumstances themselves cried out for activists to carefully consider how to organize a multiracial alliance against poverty, King argued, "so that the government cannot elude our demands." He explained that organizers armed with the "knowledge of the science of social change" could study how state power actually works, and can "always finally be traced to those forces which we describe as ideological, economic and political." This analysis of the situation expressed the materialist analysis of race and class that had grown out of the Second Reconstruction.⁴⁵

The Second Reconstruction sought the overthrow of Jim Crow and the creation of new, radically democratic institutions. In particular, it set its sights on access to the social wage programs that working-class people of color had been excluded from under Jim Crow. The passage of the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965) were victories borne of an alliance between Black freedom, radical labor, and socialists rooted in the 1930s. The legal victories of the Black freedom movement to end Jim Crow segregation inspired Asian Americans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Native Americans to intensify their struggles against racism and for civil rights and access to public transportation, housing, education, and other essential infrastructure. Struggles for women's rights, gay rights, immigrant rights, and labor rights all benefited. The pressure of abolition democracy enabled unprecedented access and greater quality of social wage programs such as public education, hospitals, and post offices as well as expanded democracy at the point of production during the 1960s and 1970s. Just as the First Reconstruction had formed the first system of public education and inspired the labor movement for the eight-hour working day during the 1860s and 1870s, so too did the Second Reconstruction represent a dramatic turning point in the history of social movements.⁴⁶

Yet the freedom movement only partially achieved its goals in the struggle for dignity, social justice, and freedom. Its victories, though substantial, were not enough to overturn dramatic polarizations of wealth and poverty within the United States. These material conditions obtained not just among Black communities in the Jim Crow South, but among poor and working people across the country. More than

60 percent of Black working people lived in urban industrial slums where their conditions were defined by poverty, exploitation, unemployment, inadequate education, and negligent medical care—conditions also experienced by at least fifty million poor and working people of all colors.⁴⁷ This dynamic pointed to the central contradictions of race and class in U.S. cities and regions in the postwar era. They highlighted the unfinished business of the long civil rights movement.⁴⁸

Recognizing the “fierce urgency” of the situation, King argued for economic justice, thereby changing the terms of the debate and shifting the representation of the crisis. He increasingly called for a reallocation of public spending away from militarism and toward housing, health care, education, and jobs. By 1968 King was leading a fight for an Economic Bill of Rights for African Americans, Chicanos, Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, and poor whites. The Poor People’s campaign specifically demanded a guaranteed income, low-income housing, and a jobs program in the radical tradition of the labor movement of the 1930s.⁴⁹ As he carried out this organizing, he was shunned by prominent Cold War liberals and ultimately assassinated in Memphis on April 4, 1968, “in the consciously chosen company of the poor,” as the historian and civil rights activist Vincent Harding put it. Just as the freedom dreams unleashed during the First Reconstruction may have led to different outcomes but were crushed by counterrevolutionary forces, the revanchist response to the Second Reconstruction prevented the movement from fully realizing its visions.⁵⁰

NO NAME IN THE STREET

White America remains unable to believe that black America’s grievances are real; they are unable to believe this because they cannot face what this fact says about themselves and their country.

—James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, 1972

Following the assassination of King, a new wave of desperation and rebellion circulated through hundreds of U.S. cities. In response, the state deployed the largest number of federal troops since the Civil War to quell the insurrections.⁵¹ James Baldwin was living in California during the turbulent events of 1968, where Ronald Reagan was governor. Baldwin remembered that what he “really found unspeakable about the man [Ronald Reagan] was his contempt, his brutal contempt for the poor.”⁵² Reagan had ridden a wave of reaction into the governor’s mansion based on his promise to restore order in the wake of the Watts

rebellion of 1965. His 1966 gubernatorial campaign featured a rhetorical vengeance that appealed to a more punitive California political economy and culture. In turn, Reagan’s governor’s office became a war room for the development of revanchist solutions to social and economic crisis.⁵³

In particular, Reagan set his sights on the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, a group formed in Oakland by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in 1966 to promote self-defense against police violence in the wake of the Watts insurrection. Newton argued that the state’s reaction to this new development within the Black freedom struggle led to the expansion of a coercive state apparatus. Civil rights and nationalist organizations ranging from the SCLC to the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) to the NOI to the NAACP provided analyses of the conditions that led to urban rebellions, including racial segregation, unemployment, police brutality, poor health care, and unequal education. Noting that the Black Panther Party provided a socialist critique of the material causes and consequences of the rebellions, Newton claimed that the group was therefore targeted by the national security state.⁵⁴

The FBI had inaugurated its counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) in 1956 in order to crush the Communist Party. It expanded the program in the late 1960s during the counterinsurgency against the Black freedom struggle. Modeled on this counterinsurgency program, police and sheriff’s departments and other law enforcement agencies repressed Black freedom movement organizations, antiwar groups that challenged the legitimacy of the U.S. war in Vietnam, student activists, and working-class labor organizers. They particularly labeled the Black Panther Party as a national security threat.⁵⁵ During this period, a culture of counterinsurgency was nourished in police departments. This counterinsurgency took a distinct shape in Los Angeles in the post-rebellion restructuring of urban space. After Watts, LAPD police officer Daryl Gates developed the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team. Officers on the SWAT teams were trained in policing techniques that had been developed during the Vietnam War. On December 8, 1969, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense’s office on 41st and Central Avenue was attacked by a Gates-led SWAT team, and police officials understood the attack as a domestic counterinsurgency mission.⁵⁶

Baldwin depicted how the logic of counterinsurgency informed the policing of the crisis: “The Panthers thus became the native Vietcong, the ghetto became the village in which the Vietcong were hidden, and in

the ensuing search-and-destroy operations, everyone in the village became suspect.”⁵⁷ With these words, Baldwin signaled how counterinsurgent ideologies in media and popular culture justified aggressive policing as a strategy of racialized crisis management. He also suggested how racialized law-and-order narratives of events obscured the counternarrative articulated in the expressive culture of the Black freedom movement. Such works not only challenged U.S. racial capitalism, they also indexed how such resistance was criminalized by the forces of law and order. They demonstrated an escalation in the use of counterinsurgent solutions to domestic social conflict that had been developed in the U.S. war in Vietnam. Such deployment of force marked a critical moment in the development of the neoliberal carceral state. Its foundation was set by the political victories of Cold Warriors, neoliberals, and counterinsurgents in California during this conjuncture.⁵⁸

This dialectic persisted and intensified during the political and ideological struggle over the meaning of the dramatic events of 1967 and 1968. Activists, artists, and advocates connected to Black freedom, radical labor, and socialist movements attempted to complete the Second Reconstruction rooted in the 1930s. They would soon face the quandary of sustaining the freedom struggle amidst the economic crisis of the 1970s, the worst since the Great Depression.⁵⁹

Finally Got the News

Urban Insurgency, Counterinsurgency, and the Crisis of Hegemony in Detroit

The actual fact of the matter is the movement of Black workers is a class movement that is calling for a total change in the relationship between workers and owners all together.

—John Watson in *Finally Got the News*, 1970

Money, we make it
Fore we see it you take it. . . .
Bills pile sky high
Send that boy off to die. . . .
Trigger happy policing
Panic is spreading
God knows where we're heading
Oh, make me wanna holler

—Marvin Gaye, “Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler),” from the 1971 album *What's Going On?*

What's Going On? was Marvin Gaye's first self-composed album. The songs fused Gaye's political concerns with the perspectives of the social struggles being waged against racism, class exploitation, police repression, and the U.S. imperialist war in Vietnam. As Detroit's Black freedom and working-class struggles protested against racial capitalism and for economic justice while playing bongo drums, Gaye's music dramatized these struggles to its own bongo drum beat.¹ In doing so, it articulated the social visions of the masses in motion.²

In the late 1960s Detroit was an epicenter of Black freedom, radical labor, and student movements. In December 1968, John Watson, a