

## Black Power

“THE TIME HAS COME for a declaration of independence in West Oakland,” Paul Cobb told an Oakland audience in 1968. “We live on an urban plantation. We have to plan our liberation.” Cobb, the son of an Oakland longshoreman and one of the city’s leading community organizers in the late 1960s, drew his metaphor from a language of anticolonial struggle that had become the dominant lexicon of black political movements by 1968. In that penultimate year of a decade of global uprisings against colonial rule, from Algiers to Prague, Luanda to Hanoi, African American intellectuals and activists in the United States cast the urban ghetto as an exploited colony, the liberation of which required new tactics. They moved away from the desegregation and opportunity politics of their forebears in search of a framework and a discourse to capture both the persistence of racial segregation in American cities and an affirming message of community empowerment. They found it in the spatial situating of black power and identity in the ghetto itself and in the political imagining of a nation within a nation. With this new lexicon of liberation came an economic and political agenda that called for black control over community job distribution and municipal levers of power—from the mayor’s office and city council to the school board and recreation department. The nation had to understand, to borrow Eldridge Cleaver’s formulation, “that it is a reality when people say there’s a ‘black colony’ and a ‘white mother country.’ . . . that there are two different sets of political dynamics now functioning in America.”<sup>1</sup>

Histories of post-1965 African American politics have long treated *black power* in terms of charismatic figures and ideological pronouncements said to mark a distinct, even fatal, break with the civil rights movement. This interpretation typically rests on the differences between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., splits within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the rise of the Black Panther Party, and the declarations of movement media icons like H. Rap Brown. Civil rights and black power have come to represent the divergent histories that are told about black-led political movements in the second half of the twentieth century. Civil rights is nonviolent. Black power is violent. Civil rights is normative, black power an aberration of late 1960s’ hyperradicalism. Civil rights was a long struggle, black power a brief and disastrous moment. But in their artificial halving of black politics and its ideological and strategic

spectrum, these inherited narratives flatten and distort the richness, complexity, and continuities of twentieth-century African American social and political movements. And in their conflation of black power, black nationalism, black radicalism, and violent urban rebellions and riots, they leave us bereft of the meaningful distinctions that provide a guide through a tangled and tumultuous period. For in truth, black power stood in the main currents of American politics in the 1960s and 1970s. As a product of liberalism and its failures, it represented a poignant effort to advance a political strategy beyond desegregation. Black power was a creative outgrowth of earlier efforts, not a radical and failed break from them. “[B]lack people must organize themselves without regard to what is traditionally acceptable, precisely because the traditional approaches have failed,” Stokely Carmichael insisted in his 1967 book, *Black Power*.<sup>2</sup>

As a political and a cultural credo, black power was an extraordinarily plastic concept. It meant everything from revolution to electing African American school board members to wearing a dashiki. Maoist revolutionaries and liberal reformers alike embraced its cultural purchase. Its flexibility was part of its attractiveness. Its adaptability to multiple contexts rendered it at once a potent discursive and psychological force and a generic and sometimes diluted cliché. However, black power has been deployed as an analytical category by scholars and observers more frequently than it was actually used by activists and leaders themselves. Black power in popular and many scholarly accounts of the 1960s and 1970s has obscured both the continuities within the postwar African American struggle and the key differences among ideologies and tactics as they developed over time. We need therefore to reclaim black power as part of the periodization of postwar African American political struggle and simultaneously to parse its varied meanings and diverse applications. Black power was merely one dimension of a broad terrain of ideological and strategic approaches to the urban problems of the 1960s and 1970s, especially to persistent patterns of economic disadvantage that liberal social policy had done little to alter or had exacerbated. All of those ideological and strategic dimensions, black power included, are central to narratives of postwar urban history.<sup>3</sup>

In Oakland, African American leaders used the term “black power” sparingly, and many black leftists avoided the phrase because of its nationalist overtones. African Americans in the East Bay spoke of the “white power structure” and “the people” or “the community” more often than they spoke of “black power.” Their language was equally filled with references to “rights,” “revolutionary struggle,” “colonialism,” “liberation,” “control,” and “the poor,” among many others. The Black Panther Party’s famous slogan, “all power to the people,” signaled their self-identification as leftist revolutionaries for whom “the people” represented a broad array

of colonized communities, and their allies, in the United States and abroad. Indeed, the Panthers' history underscores that one of the most important developments of post-1966 African American liberation politics was activists' self-conscious embrace of an internationalist language. In this context, "self-determination," as much as black power, emerged as an organizing framework. "In the U.S. the primary struggle is a revolutionary struggle," Eldridge Cleaver explained in 1970, "but at the same time we have to deal with the specific conditions of oppression of Black people."<sup>4</sup>

In cities across the United States, calls for self-determination emerged in the late 1960s primarily as a response to police brutality, the failures of Great Society liberalism, and the uneven economic development of the American metropolis. Black power and community empowerment grew up together as concepts in this period as challenges to local political elites and the federal and municipal bureaucracies that controlled civic resources. In Alabama and Mississippi, Stokeley Carmichael's famous summons—"I say we need black power"—resonated with a generation of civil rights activists facing the massive resistance of southern white society. But in Oakland and dozens of prominent cities in the urban North and Pacific Coast, calls for self-determination had roots in a set of institutional failures and the political-economic geography of the new city-suburb conglomerate. The War on Poverty and dozens of other federal antipoverty and jobs programs had foundered against intransigent municipal governments and the stubborn legacies of Jim Crow in the economy. Fair employment and housing laws had done little to remedy segregation, discrimination, and black poverty. At the same time, nearby all-white suburban communities diverted tax revenue and private capital away from older core cities. Advocates of self-determination in this context offered a critique of the whole of metropolitan development since World War II. Drawing on a spatial definition of community, the ghetto, they asserted a neocolonial relationship between African Americans and other spatially designated sites of power, downtown and the suburbs. But far from rejecting their predecessors in the civil rights movement, these activists revived an agenda that harkened back to the 1940s: defending the community against outside violence, delivering jobs, services, and economic development into the community, and using black solidarity as a springboard to gain local political influence.<sup>5</sup>

Between 1966 and 1972 two principal political strategies thus evolved in Oakland under the broad rubric of African American self-determination: Black Panther Third World nationalism and War on Poverty grassroots community empowerment. Both groups drew for their political language on metaphors of decolonization. Oakland's ghetto stood for "the community" and, more expansively, the black nation. Jobs, political power, and other resources that should have by right been located in the community

itself had been stripped from it by outsiders. The answer was liberation. According to this view, the liberal politics of desegregation had advanced the black struggle as far as the logic of those politics allowed—that is, until they came up against the underlying resistance of the white “power structure” and, especially for the Panthers, the structural inequalities and exploitation inherent in capitalist imperialism. Both groups saw the city’s African American community locked in a struggle against Oakland’s largely white business and political elite, as well as the white suburban “noose.” But in practice, black power and self-determination politics never worked out so neatly. They always contained contradictions of class, struggles over leadership, and broad ideological conflicts that divided African Americans as much as the symbolic notion of community united them. This period was also about coming to terms with that proposition. Both strategies politicized, rather than accepted as natural, patterns of East Bay metropolitan development and inaugurated a period of struggle more intense than any in Oakland’s history since the 1940s.

### Self-Determination and the Rise of the Black Panther Party

On a May afternoon in 1967, the slap of Panther leather echoed against the granite steps of the state capitol in Sacramento. Armed but peaceful, a contingent from the recently formed Black Panther Party for Self Defense entered the building, read a brief statement before the press, spoke with reporters, and left, rifles in full display. Images of the event ran on the evening news across the country and made headlines around the world. “The power structure depends upon the use of force,” Huey Newton wrote that year, “in order to get rid of the gun it is necessary to take up the gun.” Five months later, in the early morning dark, an Oakland Police officer named John Frey pulled over Newton driving in his girlfriend’s Volkswagen in West Oakland. A scuffle ensued in which Newton and Frey exchanged shots. Frey was fatally injured. In jail for the remainder of the decade for Frey’s murder, Newton emerged as the nation’s most celebrated prisoner—“Free Huey” became an instant mantra—his cause a potent symbol of the end of decades of anguished acquiescence to indiscriminate police power. The following spring, on an April evening two days after Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination in Memphis, Oakland police shot teenage Panther Bobby Hutton in the back during an ambush intended for Eldridge Cleaver. The killing of Hutton once more focused national attention on Oakland. It occurred at the height of the Free Huey campaign and signaled the beginning of uninterrupted police warfare against the Panthers on the streets of Oakland.<sup>6</sup>





Figure 6.1. A “Free Huey” rally outside the Alameda County courthouse in Oakland, 1968. Rallies were held frequently throughout that year and provided an important meeting ground for a range of activists from Oakland, Berkeley, and San Francisco, black and white. Courtesy of the *Oakland Tribune* Collection, Oakland Museum of California.

The events of 1967 and 1968 marked the ascendance of the Black Panther Party to a national stage. The party’s synthesis of radical nationalism and Maoist condemnation of capitalism took its place alongside the manifestoes of SNCC, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and the Revolutionary Action Movement in the evolution of 1960s’ new left political discourse. The Free Huey campaign made headlines and network television news, while Panther uniforms—leather jackets and black berets—redefined black chic. Party boldness in its dealings with police inspired a nationwide movement against police brutality. Inheritors of the discipline, pride, and calm self-assurance preached by Malcolm X, the Panthers became national heroes in African American communities by infusing abstract nationalism with street toughness, joining the rhythms of black working-class youth culture to the interracial élan and effervescence of Bay Area new left politics. Black Panther Party chapters opened monthly in city after city during the last years of the decade, and letters streamed into Panther headquarters from African American communities nationwide on a scale associated with rock stars. One young follower in Charlotte, North Carolina, wrote to Newton hoping that he “would write back . . . and if you would, send me a picture of you.” She concluded her

letter by stating “I’m in the eighth grade and very proud that I’m *black* (and I love you too).”<sup>7</sup>

But there was a local meaning, a local story, behind the rise of the Panthers. As much as they operated within the larger national theatrics of the late 1960s, the Panthers emerged out of, and played a critical role in, the milieu of African American struggle in North and West Oakland. Huey Newton and Bobby Seale launched the party in 1966 amid a rich and contentious period of debate and conflict over the direction of the African American community in Oakland and its relationship to the larger city. Oakland’s future hinged on these debates. Over the second half of the 1960s and first half of the 1970s, African Americans from diverse backgrounds and political affiliations were determined that they would shape that future. The party came to play an immensely important role in these efforts.

In 1962 Don Warden, a law student at the University of California at Berkeley, established the Afro-American Association, the West Coast’s first indigenous black nationalist organization. With the assistance of Berkeley undergraduates—including at various points Paul Cobb and Ron Dellums, nephew of C. L. Dellums—Warden promoted cultural nationalism on Bay Area college campuses in an era when the national media and even some civil rights organizations preached accommodation to white institutions and culture. Warden and the Afro-American Association embraced a nationalism that fused black capitalism, Afro-centrism, and Garveyite self-help. Stressing education and skill acquisition as the foundation of African American economic power, Warden inspired a small but dedicated following in the East Bay through a weekly radio program. If people “aren’t in church,” Warden said, “it’s through the disk jockeys that they have to be reached.” Along Grove Street in front of Merritt College, North Oakland’s public junior college, Warden was the most popular political speaker, remembered by Bobby Seale for his “artistic oratory” and the “laughing acceptance” he elicited from black audiences with his observations about black people going “to white people’s schools to learn about white people.” Warden’s Afro-American Association and the emerging black studies courses at Merritt and the University of California at Berkeley began to circulate an eclectic collection of texts among black students in the East Bay flatlands: James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*, Jomo Kenyatta’s *Facing Mount Kenya*, Kwame Nkrumah’s *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, E. Franklin Frazier’s *Black Bourgeoisie*, classics by W.E.B. DuBois, the revolutionary writings of Che Guevara and Mao Zedong, and Franz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*. “They got me caught up,” Bobby Seale said of the intellectual and political atmosphere in North Oakland. “They made me feel that I had to help out, be a part and do something, to help out in some way.” By 1966 Newton and Seale

had both been students at Merritt and members of the Afro-American Association. They frequented reading groups as well as the ubiquitous street-corner rap sessions at Merritt and along Bancroft Avenue adjacent to the Berkeley campus, a short drive or bus ride up Telegraph Avenue from North Oakland.<sup>8</sup>

The long corridor from West Oakland north through South Berkeley to the University of California campus, between San Pablo and Telegraph avenues, formed one of the most vibrant political landscapes anywhere in the nation in this period. Intellectual, social, and physical geographies intersected here in powerful combination. Home of the East Bay's largest African American community—representing all ages and classes—as well as thousands of white Berkeley college students, in these neighborhoods a quarter century of American labor and civil rights movement politics and the burgeoning student and antiwar movements overlapped with some of the poorest districts in the East Bay. Birthplace of the East Bay Democratic Club and the home of both the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the East Bay International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union, the African American triangle between West and North Oakland and South Berkeley remained the center of black life in the Bay Area. By the mid-1960s the East Bay student new left also flourished here: the Free Speech Movement was born near the corner of Bancroft and Telegraph, and the Vietnam Day Committee, the Peace/Rights Organizing Committee, and dozens of other white-led new left organizations met and organized in these neighborhoods. In early October 1966, the same month that Newton and Seale wrote the party's Ten Point Program, "What We Want, What We Believe," ten thousand people organized by the Vietnam Day Committee marched down Telegraph from the Berkeley campus to the Oakland city line to protest the war and the draft.<sup>9</sup>

More than coincidental, the proximity of old left and new meant that red diaper babies met the sons and daughters of longshoremen and Pullman porters; black and white members of the DuBois Club met SNCC veterans and white college students from around the country; and anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist readings circulated in ever wider networks. Free Huey rallies at the Alameda County Courthouse regularly attracted hundreds of demonstrators, drawing as many whites as blacks and large numbers of Chicanos as well. Beginning in 1964 and continuing through the early 1970s, this corridor was home to some of the most creative and inspired political projects on the American scene. The flatlands were no utopia of racial egalitarianism and intergenerational rapprochement, but they nonetheless formed a physical world where political milieus intersected: Berkeley emerged as the center of the white new left in the East Bay (and nationally), while Merritt College and North Oakland emerged as the center of African American radicalism (soon, also, nationally).

Drawn to the revolutionary political theory they were reading at Merritt, Newton and Seale initially sought to blend Maoist socialism with the cultural nationalism of Warden, all the while recruiting into their circle what Newton called his punks and thugs from the streets of North and West Oakland. “The street brothers were important to me,” Newton wrote, “and I could not turn away from the life shared with them.” But the Panther founders did not last long in the Afro-American Association, both because the “bourgeois” Warden resisted the street code of physical confrontation that Newton admired and because the cultural nationalists’ belief in the redemptive power of Africa rang false to him and Seale. With its embrace of African folk culture, religion, and moral authority, cultural nationalism seemed to Newton and Seale divorced from the grittier realities of their flatland lives. They left the Soul Student Advisory Council at Merritt College—a cultural nationalist organization under Warden’s guidance—in 1966 after Newton had failed to produce the desired ideological reorientation. The cultural nationalist “college boys,” as Seale called them, “jiving dudes who articulate bullshit all the time and don’t ever want to get into the real practice of revolutionary struggle,” had neither a style nor a program that Newton and Seale respected.<sup>10</sup>

Instead of cultural nationalism, Newton and Seale, joined subsequently by Eldridge Cleaver, rendered a version of Marxist-Leninism from an eclectic range of sources. Much of the immediate inspiration for and discourse of the early Panthers came from Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*, which Seale had read and encouraged Newton to look at in 1966. This treatise on the French colonial regime in Algeria helped to transform the nationalism of Warden, less the romanticized Africa, into a spatially situated revolutionary community ideology. Behind the guns—literally, as Newton often quoted Mao—lay an elaborate analysis of the black nation as a colony, exploited by an imperialist class system. Colonizers included city hall, white businessmen, the suburbs, and the police, the “pigs of the state.” Following the example of the Revolutionary Action Movement, which had preceded the party by half a decade, the Panthers turned to Mao for their basic revolutionary lexicon. Mao’s notion of a united Third World aligned against the colonial West and his program of moral self-improvement and revolutionary ethics inspired the Panthers’ internationalism as well as their internal program of personal discipline. Like Malcolm X, whose legacy the Panthers self-consciously embraced, Panther ideology stressed black self-determination and the necessity of armed resistance to “the brutal force used against us daily.” Yet unlike the Nation of Islam, and Malcolm X until the final months of his life, the Panthers never adopted a separatist language or line, believing



Figure 6.2. Following the teachings of Mao Zedong and Malcolm X, Black Panther Party members modeled discipline and calm self-assurance in their public appearances. The leather jackets and berets also helped to define a kind of black power chic. Courtesy of the Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation and the Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries.

that alliances with sympathetic anticolonial whites, as well as Chicanos, should remain a fixture of the black liberation movement.<sup>11</sup>

The Panthers gave concrete, radical expression to two currents of thought circulating in North and West Oakland's African American community in the 1960s: black pride and community defense. The vital seeds of the party came from the 1966 summer youth program at the West and North Oakland poverty centers. There, Seale and Paul Cobb taught black history to teenagers, while Newton worked as an organizer in the North Oakland War on Poverty office. The writings of Fanon, Malcolm X, Che Guervara, and Mao Zedong made the rounds among the youth instructors at the poverty center. This fertile intellectual environment, nurtured by Cobb and Seale, produced two organizations: the McClymonds Youth Council, which focused on educational and social activities that stressed black history, and the Black Panthers. "My objective in the program was to teach Black American history if I could, and teach them [young people] also some community responsibility . . . in terms of their own people living in the neighborhood," Seal wrote in his memoir, *Seize the Time*. "I knew there was a way to reach these brothers

because I wasn't too much different from them." Cobb and the Panther founders took divergent paths after 1966—Cobb into academia, political organizing, and journalism—but their relationship in the summer of that year was more than coincidental. All three were trying to work out, as were many others in West Oakland, a postliberal philosophy of black liberation capable of inspiring a new phase of struggle.<sup>12</sup>

Newton's application of Fanon, Mao, and the colonial analogy to the American ghetto enjoyed a resonance and explanatory power that other formulations, especially the liberal faith in desegregation and equal opportunity, could not match by 1968. The Panthers' colonial analysis was highly impressionistic and derivative of a much deeper set of inquiries made by other groups and institutions—namely, as we will see, War on Poverty activists and radical social scientists. Neither was it entirely original, based on variations of nationalism that ran from Harold Cruse and Malcolm X back through the midcentury Popular Front and black Communist Party activists, among others. But the Panthers brilliantly combined a theatrical *performance* of radical Maoist nationalism and one of its central promises, speaking "truth to power," with an elaborate metaphysics that captured both the crisis-driven cynicism endemic to American cities in the 1960s and the optimism that had run as a steady stream through African American political culture and resistance since at least Nat Turner. Such a combination resonated in Oakland in particular because the black community was so thoroughly marginalized from the political life of the city, and because West Oakland had endured so many years of virtual occupation by outside agencies reengineering the neighborhoods—BART, the Oakland Police Department, California Department of Transportation, and the Redevelopment Agency. The Black Panther Party advanced the language and strategies of decolonization further within the American polity than any other group in the late 1960s, bringing to African Americans a public language of resistance and action almost entirely outside of liberalism.<sup>13</sup>

Combining revolutionary nationalism and male street bravado, the Panthers defined an actual and metaphorical space the defense of which had become their mission. During the fall of 1966, mostly in the poverty program offices, Newton and Seale put together the Black Panther Party Platform and Program, "What We Want, What We Believe," which became a seminal document of postliberal African American political ideology. Along with full employment, decent housing, and black history in the schools, the Panthers demanded an end to police brutality and committed themselves to "defending our black community from racist police oppression and brutality." Newton and Seale wrote of the "black colony" and "black colonial subjects" as they drafted a "declaration of independence" calling for revolution. Newton proved willing to act on the program,

bragging that the party's eagerness to turn words into actions distinguished them from other street corner orators and black revolutionary groups. After opening the Black Panther office at Fifty-sixth and Grove, a block from Merritt in the heart of North Oakland in January 1967, Newton, Seale, and new Panther recruits began "patrolling the pigs," tracking police cars as they made rounds through black neighborhoods in the flatlands. Openly carrying guns, party members also toted statute books and legal manuals in their Volkswagen Beetles and Ford Falcons, often reading the Constitution, citing court decisions, and enumerating rights for blacks detained by the police. "The main function of the Party is to awaken the people and teach them the strategic method of resisting," Newton wrote in the *Black Panther*, the party's newspaper. Over the course of the spring and summer of 1967, "patrolling the pigs" came to embody the tool of that instruction as well as the Panthers' assertion of community power within North and West Oakland. The Black Panthers "talk about liberation of the black community," Bay Area labor and civil rights activist Percy Moore observed. "They talk of politicizing the community. They talk of coalitions with radical white organizations . . . and that ain't where the black man's place is supposed to be." But, Moore stressed, "that's the risk a man has to take."<sup>14</sup>

The party's public performance on the streets of Oakland embodied the spirit of black empowerment, while "What We Want, What We Believe" drew together political demands that stretched back to the 1930s with a postcolonial agenda of self-determination and reparations. This Panther syncretism represented a creative, fluid engagement with decades of African American struggle. Their calls for "full employment for our people," "decent housing," and "an immediate end to police brutality," among the first seven demands of the Ten Point Program, had been central to various Popular Front, labor, and liberal civil rights political platforms in the 1930s and 1940s. The final point, "we want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace," strongly echoed the internationalist African American left of midcentury—men and women like William Patterson and Charlotta Bass. At the same time, their calls for the "power to determine our own destiny" and "a United Nations-supervised plebiscite to be held throughout the black colony" reflected an immersion in postcolonial discourse and politics. By demanding an "end to the robbery by the capitalist of our black community" and "freedom for all black men held in federal, state, county, and city prisons and jails," the party implicated capitalism and the federal state in the historic subjugation of black people. Sympathetic to the desegregation efforts of local black leaders like C. L. Dellums and Tarea Hall Pittman, as well as national leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Bayard Rustin, the Panthers nonetheless asserted that such efforts could not ultimately deliver liberation.<sup>15</sup>

Desegregation efforts suffered from another misapprehension, according to the party. In their admittedly raw anticolonial analysis, the Panthers contended that persistent white-enforced segregation had actually delivered to black people a measure of power. That power lay in spatial confinement, the concentration of African Americans in urban centers, where poverty and hopelessness had created a “lumpen proletariat,” ignorant but teachable, the core of a revolutionary movement. This did not excuse segregation. But like their counterparts in colonial resistance in Africa, the Panthers emphasized that the structures of colonial rule (i.e., the ghetto) could be turned against the imperial nation by creative leaders and appropriate tactics. The Panthers rose from the crossroads of West and North Oakland, where a particular kind of street culture met Garveyite notions of self-help, the radical internationalist black tradition, the socialist laborite culture of Oakland’s waterfront unions, and the armed community defense strategies of people like Malcolm X and Robert F. Williams. This eclectic mix, stirred equally by Newton’s idealism and megalomania, emerged in the late 1960s as one of the nation’s most elaborate and inspired attempts to reread the nature of American cities and the place of black people within them.

Panther memoirs offer compelling testimony to the complicated layering of violence within the party’s milieu, a violence that should neither be ignored nor be romanticized. The party issued a rallying cry for a generation of sincere young black intellectuals and political figures as well as street toughs. After that first summer, the street violence that had shaped the background of many party members on occasion blurred the line between radicalism and extortion. When local stores refused to donate food and other resources to their social programs, Panther members often threatened violent retaliation. On May 10, 1969, a group of Panthers firebombed a convenience store on San Pablo Avenue in North Oakland because the store owner refused to donate more than a dozen eggs to a breakfast program. In 1971 the Panthers staged a massive boycott of California’s largest black-owned liquor distribution network, Cal-Pak, to force its members to make cash donations to the party. “I was angered and amazed because I had never heard anybody publicly threatened like this,” Albert McKee, a black real estate broker, said of Newton’s behavior at one of the Cal-Pak meetings. “Some of us were fighting against racial injustice when Newton was running around barefoot,” McKee added. Accused in dozens of other incidents, the party faced increasing criticism from both white and black leaders for its alleged involvement in illegal markets in weapons and drugs. For Newton, Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* provided the final justification for translating the street violence and underground economic entrepreneurship of his adolescence into political resistance: the proletariat was the legitimate agent of revolution in



anticolonial struggle. In their hands, guns were justified. Newton deployed Fanon's notion of a revolutionary colonized proletariat to explain organizing "the brothers on the block" rather than the black bourgeoisie. But these "brothers" included some of Oakland's most alienated youth whose inclinations ran more toward firebombing than toward building an alternative vision of African American progress.<sup>16</sup>

The Party indulged in inflammatory speeches and at times provided cover for a violence not related to the legitimate defense of community. But such judgments are applicable to the white-led police and FBI Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) operatives as well, who met the Panthers with their own brand of violence and subterfuge that crossed both legal and moral boundaries. None of the Panthers' alleged connections to illegal activities justified the swift and terrible repression they encountered. The Oakland police department, long a bastion of both racial paternalism and virulent racism, responded to the Panthers with nothing short of guerrilla warfare—no less than three black men were killed by Oakland police in the spring of 1968 alone. For his part, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover called the party "the greatest threat to the internal security of the country" and supervised an extensive program of counterorganizing that included surveillance and eavesdropping, infiltration, harassment, false testimony, and a laundry list of other tactics designed to jail party members and drain the party of resources. In 1976 a Senate report on COINTELPRO operations charged that the bureau had "engaged in lawless tactics and responded to deep-seated social problems by fomenting violence and unrest." By the end of that decade, 233 out of 295 total FBI counterintelligence operations directed against black liberation groups across the nation were aimed at the Black Panther Party. The murder of Fred Hampton, leader of the Chicago branch of the party, by the Chicago police remains one of the signature political assassinations of the decade, but it was only the most extreme example of systematic efforts by local cops and federal agencies to harass and disrupt the party. State repression of the Panthers, along with the long FBI campaign against Martin Luther King, Jr., stands among the darkest and most cynical acts of American officialdom in the 1960s.<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, at some remove from these struggles, grassroots Panther activists brought a romantic idealism and practical agenda to their work in Oakland. As the party's leadership battled the city of Oakland in the courts and newspapers, fought a near-constant war with the FBI, and watched many of its principal figureheads, including Newton, Seale, and David Hilliard, go to prison, Panther recruits established a host of social programs for the East Bay's poorest African Americans. Beginning with their free breakfast for school children program in 1968 and stretching through a 1974 free ambulance program, the party introduced to Oakland



*Figure 6.3.* Children giving the black power sign at a grocery give-away sponsored by the Black Panther Party. The Panthers stressed black pride and black history, especially among young people who attended the party's Liberation Schools. Courtesy of the Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation and the Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries.

some of the most interesting and audacious community welfare experiments of the decade. The free breakfast program was followed in 1969 by the founding of Liberation Schools, which taught children "about the class struggle in terms of black history." The Intercommunal Youth Institute and the People's Free Medical Research Health Institute were founded that same year. A free clothing program followed in 1970, and the Sickle Cell Anemia Research Foundation, which provided free sickle cell anemia testing, came a year later. By 1972, when Panther rallies at DeFremery Park became larger and more numerous as components of their various political campaigns, a free food program, in which bags of groceries were given away, was added. While some of these programs were conceived and directed from the top of the Panther hierarchy, others, such as the Liberation Schools, were initiated by rank-and-file members, testifying to the relative openness and degree of experimentation possible within the interstices of an otherwise centrally directed organization.<sup>18</sup>

The breakfasts in particular embodied the Panthers' notion of practical revolutionary activity. Along with free sickle cell anemia testing and other periodic food giveaways, the breakfasts formed the core of what became known as the party's Survival Programs. By "helping the people survive," the breakfast program allowed the children of West Oakland's poorest neighborhoods to eat a healthy meal in a safe, supportive environment. Those among the Panthers who worked most closely with the program, particularly women, made sure that the free breakfasts offered concrete assistance to the city's poor while dramatizing a powerful symbol of racial injustice and ghetto marginalization in America: childhood hunger. Free breakfasts were both practical and idealistic in their commitment to ameliorating this social wrong. An important historical companion to Head Start, initiated by the federal government in 1965, the free breakfast program also stood as a powerful reminder that Title I funding under the 1965 Education Act should directly benefit poor schoolchildren, not middle-class school districts. It would be a decade or more before free breakfasts would become almost universally available to poor children, in no small part because of the party's ambitious example.<sup>19</sup>

Beyond their immediate material impact, the Survival Programs aimed at deeper spiritual and ideological transformations among the neighborhood men and women whom the party hoped to mobilize. A self-conscious model of black self-determination and pride, the programs combined self-help and education in revolutionary diction, with the free-spirited, animated public displays of political commitment that had become the *sine qua non* of left culture in the Bay Area. Schoolchildren at the party's breakfasts sang in uproarious tones, with their female teachers, "Black is beautiful, Free Huey!" Grocery giveaways and sickle cell anemia testing attracted large crowds to DeFremery Park in West Oakland, where party



*Figure 6.4.* Families like this one were the intended beneficiaries of the Black Panther Party's Survival Programs. Those programs had multiple goals: to draw community members to political rallies; to dramatize social inequality; to provide needed community services; and to educate people in the ideas and program of the party. Courtesy of the Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation and the Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries.

stalwarts gave speeches about black pride. Like “patrolling the pigs,” which Seale described as “bringing them [local residents] basic things in everyday life about the law,” the Survival Programs positioned the Panthers as a vanguard party and a vehicle of consciousness raising. The party had long held that “the people can’t understand and progress to the stage of communists right away because of abstract arguments.” Community programs, rather than the elusive grammar of radical politics, would win broad grassroots support for the party’s political objectives. At the same time, the Survival Programs solidified the party’s standing in the larger community. Many people in West and North Oakland, especially older adults, knew Newton when he was a C student and a bully. The party’s daily presence in the neighborhoods with breakfast, child care, sickle cell anemia testing, and other food programs changed this impression among people who knew him and, among those who did not, raised the Panthers’ profile as community leaders, not gangsters.<sup>20</sup>

The Panthers produced the late twentieth century’s most powerful and subversive articulation of revolutionary nationalism. Their notion of defending the community, embodied in the visible arming of party members and confrontations with the police, became a militarized, performative

expression of community power. But their importance to urban and African American history is far deeper than merely resistance to violence. They envisioned a reawakened ghetto, alive with possibilities, confident and assertive of a newfound capacity to shape the world. In their hands, the call for self-determination, the gesture associated with post-1965 African American movement politics, was joined to a spatial critique of urban America that deployed the ghetto to stand for the black nation. If the colonial analogy could be diffuse at times, it could also be trenchant. "We recognize the national character of our struggle," Eldridge Cleaver wrote in the *Guardian*. "We have to deal with both exploitation and racial oppression, and we don't think you can achieve a proper balance by neglecting one or the other." By reawakening and reclaiming the tradition of black radical internationalism that the Cold War had suppressed, the Panthers staked out an enormously broad terrain both for subsequent African American political projects and for evolving understandings of the relationship of urban black communities to the postwar American metropolis.<sup>21</sup>

### The War on Poverty and the Rise of Community Politics

The Panthers drew international media coverage to Oakland in the late 1960s, but they were not the city's only advocates of black self-determination. Others labored in comparative national obscurity but were much closer to the actual workings of civic authority in Oakland. In particular, a group of civil rights activists, grassroots community organizers, and social work professionals involved in the War on Poverty and other Great Society programs emerged in the middle 1960s to challenge the conservative political class that ran the city. Attempting to provide meaningful political content to the loose and formless black power credo, this group turned federal antipoverty boards and agencies into a set of autonomous institutions from which to lead political campaigns against city hall. Between 1965 and 1971 the Oakland Economic Development Council, the city's "poverty board," evolved from an appendage of the mayor's office into an independent, community-controlled body dedicated to "organizing the poor." The community action mandate of federal antipoverty legislation, which created an opening for the OEDC, helped to establish a new constituency for activists who attempted to mobilize the ghetto with a populist version of black self-determination. Less Marxist-Leninist than urban grassroots insurgency, this variation on black power stressed the return of power to local communities (the "people" or "the community") from the hands of an assortment of outside institutions that included private capital, business, the state, and the suburbs—the "power structure."

Unlike the Panthers, these community activists would never make news beyond Oakland, rarely appear on television, and never become heroes to millions. But they were as central to Oakland's political life and its emerging discourses of black liberation and self-determination as the far more celebrated and iconographic Newton, Seale, and Cleaver. Community politics in Oakland during the second half of the 1960s, however, was just that: politics. Even as grassroots leaders emerged, they faced a patchwork of conflict within the neighborhoods themselves. Middle-class African Americans, poor flatland residents, community organizers, liberal whites, and Mexican American leaders did not share a single vision of "the people" nor did they always present a united front against the white "establishment." The late-1960s' eruptions of community politics within the institutions created by the War on Poverty allowed grassroots activists to move into positions of authority, but their leadership was contested from all sides, even as they identified the "power structure" as their principal antagonist.

In building a mandate for community participation into the federal legislation that created the Office of Economic Opportunity, President Johnson's advisors and the Eighty-ninth Congress laid the groundwork for a revival of neighborhood-level politics. Self-conscious, if paternalistic, about helping the poor "enhance their confidence" and "improve their circumstances," federal poverty warriors improvised "maximum feasible participation": encouraging poor people to participate in the design and implementation of antipoverty programs. In Oakland this window for local input would be forced open as wide as possible. The OEDC never administered immense amounts of federal dollars—about \$5 million in 1968, for instance, an amount equivalent to just under 10 percent of the city budget—but control of the council came to have a symbolic importance far out of proportion to its influence. As a concept, community participation in antipoverty programs seemed tailor-made for Oakland. West Oakland alone boasted dozens of grassroots organizations active in everything from school desegregation to economic development, child care, and public health. A short list would have included the Ad Hoc Committee on Quality Education in Oakland (responsible for an African American school boycott in the mid-1960s), Organized Negro Women of the East Bay, United Tax Payers and Voters Union, Oakland Direct Action Committee, Conference on Religion and Race, Fair Housing Committee, Blacks United Mobilizing for Progress (BUMP), the Western End Help Center, and the West Oakland Citizens Committee, in addition to the Urban League, CORE, and the NAACP. Not all of these organizations opposed the city's political status quo with equal fervor, but they stood ready in 1965 to take up the mantle of "maximum feasible participation," to breathe life into an abstraction penned by federal poverty warriors.<sup>22</sup>

Community participation took on a vigorous life of its own nationwide that far outdistanced anything imagined by Great Society liberals, Lyndon Johnson, or his poverty chief, Sargent Shriver. In cities across the country, mayors, city councils, business interests, and neighborhood groups contended over control of federal dollars and, behind the money, political leverage. Despite changes at the federal level intended to depoliticize antipoverty programs in 1965, Oakland's neighborhood activists pushed the War on Poverty's political potential as far as any group in the nation. As we saw in the last chapter, community organizers in Oakland wrestled control of the poverty board, first from the mayor and city council, then from liberal black professionals. The OEDC community insurgents, like the Black Panther Party, cast the defense of community—and its corollary, community empowerment—as a new authenticity. Steeped in the language of anticolonial struggle, these community leaders proposed to “offer our assistance to any indigenous group seeking funding for its program,” which purposefully did not include the bourgeois OEDC board. Pressed from below, and from the left, middle-class black leaders on the OEDC were forced to change their politics or risk being outrun by emerging neighborhood radicals. At the same time, some of those black leaders—Don McCullum and Clinton White, in particular—had begun to embrace black power discourses and style because of their own frustration with intractable white elites and the failure of their liberal politics to change conditions in Oakland. McCullum had risen to become chairman of the NAACP's West Coast Region and was contemplating a run for Oakland mayor in 1968, but his views on politics and economy were increasingly moving to the left. Thus, once the OEDC and the Neighborhood Advisory Councils had negotiated the compromise “51 percent” control, the city's poverty program moved forward with the productive tension between grassroots community activists and professional leaders as its defining characteristic.<sup>23</sup>

This was the dominant, but not only, fault line in the emerging poverty program. To prevent their marginalization in the contest over the resources of the federal War on Poverty, Oakland's Spanish-speaking community also organized. Numbering between twenty and thirty thousand in the mid-1960s, Oakland's Spanish-speaking residents, primarily Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants, resided principally along Fruitvale Avenue between the tidal canal and the foothills in central East Oakland. As early as 1965, leaders of the Community Services Organization (CSO) and the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA) challenged the dominant conception of the city's War on Poverty as a remedy for black disadvantage. “We must categorically state our objection and opposition to the program proposals submitted by the City of Oakland,” a coalition of leaders from the Mexican American community wrote to Sargent Shriver

on the eve of the poverty program's first round of grants. "Neither in conception, planning, nor in its content will the needs or problems of the Spanish Speaking, Oriental, Filipino, or American Indian communities be taken into consideration." Bert Corona, a longtime labor activist and leader of both the California CSO and MAPA, along with James Delgadillo of the Oakland CSO, and Evalio Grillo, a Cuban and prominent member of the East Bay Democratic Club, helped to organize the Spanish Speaking Unity Council (SSUC). The SSUC in turn established the Spanish Speaking Advisory Council, based in Fruitvale, to advocate for antipoverty programs aimed at the city's ethnic Mexican residents. Between 1965 and the early 1970s, the SSUC and the Spanish Speaking Advisory Council were the pivots around which Oakland's Mexican American community organized both social programs and neighborhood politics. They challenged the OEDC's African American leadership and pushed the city's poverty programs and its Anglo elite to draw Mexican Americans more fully into political power sharing.<sup>24</sup>

These efforts bore fruit, but they never succeeded in transforming Oakland's War on Poverty or the city's essentially biracial political culture. In 1966 Jack Ortega of the SSUC appealed to Lionel Wilson and others on the OEDC to "resolve the problems of communication and cultural differences that are peculiar to the Spanish-speaking people of this area." In addition to a long history of entrapment at the bottom of California's dual-wage economy, the ethnic Mexican community confronted issues, as Ortega put it, "peculiar" to them: the need for bilingual education, language translation for job applicants, a more streamlined and democratic citizenship for immigrants, and a variety of programs that took into account the linguistic and national complexity of a working-class community long central to California's economy but consistently marginalized and taken for granted. By 1969, following three years of struggle with the OEDC, the SSUC sought and gained an independent status that allowed it to receive grants directly from the federal government and private foundations. This laid the groundwork for the more comprehensive development of both social programs and political organizing within the city's ethnic Mexican community during its rapid growth in the late 1970s and 1980s. With African American majorities in all of the city's other poverty "target areas," however, the SSUC in the 1960s could not dramatically shift the War on Poverty's existing programmatic and political emphasis.<sup>25</sup>

The widespread break with liberal fair employment premises among African American leaders in the years between 1964 and 1968, rooted in their experience of early War on Poverty programs and the civil rights push, forced them to consider new strategies and to search more creatively for leverage in what was increasingly seen less as a war against



poverty than a war over jobs. In the mid-1960s, black Oakland's most pressing problem remained the lack of accessible jobs. "When we consider matching men with jobs, we must ask, 'what jobs?'" J. M. Regal said upon leaving the city's Department of Human Resources in 1967. "Spending thousands of dollars on programs to motivate people to accept jobs which are not being offered is a shameful waste of human resources," he continued, a sentiment that neatly summed up a generation's flagging faith in federal antipoverty programs and their emphasis on preparation. In the OEDC's first year, the majority of War on Poverty money mostly supplemented the budgets of existing city agencies. To the leaders of the Advisory Committee revolt, this seemed both wasteful and irresponsible when the clearest need remained changing "the way jobs are distributed across the community." Don Warden spoke at a summit of East Bay African American leaders in 1967 of the "need to control our own work projects," a notion that would in time attract many War on Poverty activists. McCullum, once an enthusiastic supporter of the War on Poverty, had also become critical of its underlying assumptions. He began to favor "massive employment programs, massive rehabilitation of our cities, massive make-work projects" to create the needed jobs.<sup>26</sup>

While the debate over how to create or redistribute jobs raged, the OEDC and Mayor John Reading engaged one another in an increasingly bitter contest over the degree of the War on Poverty's independence from city hall. Reading never accepted the Advisory Committee's "51 percent" control and still resented the OEDC's revolt against city council authority. Retaining nominal oversight over Oakland's antipoverty programs, the mayor pressed when he could. After a trip to Washington, DC in the early summer of 1967, he demanded that all "directives and administrative data" as well as funding be sent through "existing administrative channels." But activists pushed the OEDC further away from city hall, not closer. When Norvel Smith departed as executive director of the OEDC, board members and the board chairman, Lionel Wilson, sought their own hand-picked executive director and the authority to develop independent antipoverty programs without city council veto. The mayor and council refused, and after two months of complicated negotiations the OEDC formally dissolved its relationship with city hall. Now called the OEDCI (for "Incorporated"), the city's poverty board had become an independent, nonprofit organization no longer subject to city council veto—an unprecedented level of independence. Under federal law, the mayor still appointed twelve public officials to the thirty-nine-member OEDCI, but for all intents and purposes the poverty board belonged to the community. Divorced from the city, the OEDCI hired Percy Moore as its new executive director. Moore recognized the potential of the board's new liberty and its grassroots base in the Neighborhood Advisory

Committees. Calling on the city's African American leaders to "organize the poor" and "unite for power," Moore brought a combative, community-centered agenda of jobs and political power to the OEDCI.<sup>27</sup>

That agenda met with hostile opposition from city hall. Mayor Reading maintained that the key to reducing unemployment in Oakland was to raise the skill level of the city's workforce. But the OEDCI controlled most of the city's resources to do that. Moore and the OEDCI, alternately, sought ways to redistribute jobs to community residents, the closest thing possible to Warden's "control of our own work projects." Training was important, but secondary, in their view. In addition, Moore had come to believe that the problems of the black poor would never be resolved until the African American community exercised real local political power. Reading and the federal OEO opposed both positions. "They want absolute political and economic control of the entire city," Reading told the *Oakland Tribune*. "They" were "a militant, extremist Negro minority" who had "seized leadership of the black community from more moderate leaders," according to Reading. As Moore and the OEDCI moved ahead on both jobs and politics, Reading's opposition grew more determined.<sup>28</sup>

The OEDCI could not create jobs, but it tried to shape how jobs were distributed. With the unemployment rate among African Americans stubbornly high in the late 1960s (often reaching above 20 percent), and the service sector slow in opening to black workers, the problem remained, in Norvel Smith's words, "that in Oakland we still don't have a genuine commitment from the private sector to share in the risk of employing marginal people. . . . the private sector just doesn't want to get involved." When the federal government awarded the OEDCI local sponsorship of the Concentrated Employment Program (CEP) beginning in 1968, the poverty board hoped to turn the new federal training dollars into leverage against local employers. One of the central issues, Percy Moore believed, was that too many people from outside Oakland held jobs in the city. Outsiders held half of all jobs in Oakland, Moore explained, and 75 percent of jobs paying \$10,000 or more—in 1966, two years earlier, a major federal survey had placed the figure at 41 percent of all jobs. To remedy the imbalance, in 1969 and 1970 Moore proposed, and the OEDCI approved, plans for the direct control of jobs by neighborhood councils. "If black folks don't work in Oakland," Moore proclaimed, "we can say nobody works in Oakland." In one program proposed by Moore, the OEDCI would approve and provide job training once employers committed to hire people living in the neighborhood where the jobs were located. In a later, more radical draft, the poor would be organized into neighborhood-level "central labor committees," according to the OEDCI proposal,

quasi-hiring halls that would have “first call” on all job openings referred through state and federal employment agencies.<sup>29</sup>

The OEDCI's community jobs plan ran headlong into a quagmire of resistance. Mayor Reading had opposed the OEDCI's control of CEP funds from the beginning and spent most of 1969 and 1970 trying to have the OEDCI's budget cut completely. “I washed my hands of that organization some time ago because of the way it was run,” Reading said in late 1970. “My sympathy goes wholly with the poor of this city who are being cheated by the maladministration of the OEDCI.” He had washed his hands of dealing with the OEDCI, not of fighting it. In a series of letters to California Governor Ronald Reagan, Vice President Spiro Agnew, and the Western Regional office of the OEO, Reading charged that the OEDCI was corrupt, irresponsible, and an explicitly political body. Even without Reading's intervention, however, it is unlikely that the OEO would have approved the OEDCI's jobs plan. The kind of community control proposed by Moore went beyond even the most radical notions of “maximum feasible participation” and “community action” envisioned by federal OEO liberals, not to mention the Nixon administration officials charged with retrenching the War on Poverty. Moore's proposal for a proto-union of Oakland's poor pushed the boundaries of the Great Society and challenged its assumptions that gradual desegregation, education, and uplift were sufficient to ensure economic opportunity and development in impoverished black communities. In a city where more than half of all jobs were held by whites who lived outside Oakland, these assumptions had come to seem naive by the early 1970s. But community-controlled job distribution was never put into effect precisely because its break with Great Society liberalism was so profound, as was its challenge to white control over jobs.<sup>30</sup>

Its jobs plan stalled, the OEDCI drafted a report in 1970, widely publicized and distributed, that criticized Oakland's political and business establishment in the language of anticolonialism. Indeed, the report emphasized that colonial or neocolonial structures preserved economic segregation and uneven development between black and white communities. The *Tribune* called it an “outsized, artistic political propaganda booklet.” The booklet, entitled “Discover Oakland—The Friendly City,” set quotations from Jack London alongside photographs of the city's contrasts: wealth and poverty, power and despair, white and black. London had lived in Oakland during much of his life and remained an iconic figure of the East Bay left, old and new. “Discover Oakland” articulated an anti-colonial critique of Oakland's poverty—emphasizing the police as an occupying force, the white monopoly on jobs in Oakland, and the political clique, backed by the *Tribune*, that ran the city—in playful mockery of

the “city-beautiful” style of chamber of commerce promotion. It castigated the city council for destroying housing in West Oakland, railed against large tax subsidies to corporations, and condemned such high-profile projects as the Oakland Coliseum, which “contains enough electrical cables to wire housing for 115,000 families.” The *Tribune* and the city council came in for especially vitriolic criticism. It was, in total, a powerful visual elaboration of the OEDCI’s critique of the city’s “ruling class.” Its broad indictment captured much that was true in Oakland’s postwar development, but its polemical tone suggested that the OEDCI had given up on working with or within the existing political channels in the city. The OEDCI had openly declared its outsider political standing. “Discover Oakland” further alienated Reading, who redoubled his efforts to strip the OEDCI of funding.<sup>31</sup>

On the heels of the publication of “Discover Oakland,” the OEDCI promised to make the poverty board a political “power base” for the city’s African American community. Moore announced that he would use OEDCI funds to support the 1971 city council campaign of Stephen V. Brooks, OEDCI’s community services director. In what seemed to Moore like the logical next step in the OEDCI’s ongoing war with Reading and the city council, the poverty board defied federal regulations that prohibited local agencies from engaging in political activity. As much as Moore hoped and believed that he had transformed the OEDCI into a bastion of community power, however, the federal government still held the purse strings. Events moved quickly following Moore’s announcement. Governor Reagan, who had been urged by Reading for years to act against the city’s poverty boards, denied OEDCI funding. The Oakland city council endorsed Reagan’s actions. By April 1971 the federal OEO had joined them, sinking the OEDCI. Moore and the poverty board had stretched the political capacity of the War on Poverty to its limit.<sup>32</sup>

When the OEDCI’s end came, it did not tell a single story. There was no easy lesson. Wilson, one of the city’s most highly regarded civil rights figures, and the man who had hired Moore, publicly warred with him and resigned from the OEDCI before its collapse in 1971. McCullum stayed on for a time, but he too resigned before the 1971 campaign. More broadly, there was a growing sense, especially among the city’s African American East Bay Democratic Club leadership, that Moore had taken the OEDCI too far, even in the hostile and polarized political climate sustained by Reading and the *Tribune*. Moore was defensible to a point, but no further. By 1970 Moore was under attack from two directions: the OEDCI board and, ironically, the Neighborhood Advisory Committees, Moore’s supposed constituency. Representatives from the latter accused Moore of the “gradual and near disastrous elimination of ongoing programs,” a “total disregard of rules and procedures set forth



Figure 6.5. In the late 1960s community activists hoped that the federal War on Poverty could become an effective platform for black self-determination in Oakland. That hope went largely unrealized, but a new generation of grassroots leaders, like those pictured here, nonetheless kept the problems of racial injustice, poverty, and exploitation before the public and challenged liberal assumptions that social inequality would ultimately disappear. Courtesy of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

by the duly designated OEDCI corporate body,” and “the blatant and outrageous involvement of political issues without justification” in the poverty programs themselves. Whatever his initial intentions, it does appear that Moore and his OEDCI staff increasingly operated with heavy-handed calculation, alienating many of the same neighborhood activists who had championed his hiring.<sup>33</sup>

Yet Moore made sense to many people, black and white. Involving “the community members themselves” in antipoverty programs “automatically becomes a more affirmative action,” Moore explained in early 1969. Given the battles over jobs during the previous five years, giving neighborhoods some say in who got to claim jobs did not seem entirely unreasonable. After the problems with EDA and BART, Mayor Reading’s insistence in 1968 that local employers simply needed more encouragement to hire black workers sounded insensible, a retreat to the ineffectual gradualism that had failed so spectacularly over the course of the decade’s intense fights over jobs. While Moore took the blame in some eyes and Reading in others for the OEDCI disaster, the poverty program’s

collapse into internal struggles over leadership should not obscure its more essential fault lines: access to jobs as real ladders of economic mobility versus underfunded training programs for a handful of people who may or may not be hired. In retrospect one thing is clear. The Great Society's commitment to grappling with the legacies of segregation, with black poverty and unemployment, and with the sinking fortunes of almost an entire generation of working-class African Americans was weak and philosophically flawed from the beginning. Its structure and funding streams encouraged a civic struggle over meager resources: between the existing municipal bureaucracy and neighborhood activists and among various neighborhood constituencies, such as the long and often bitter contest between the Spanish Speaking Advisory Council and other, black-dominated councils in West, North, and East Oakland. When faced with its own internal failings as well as determined local opposition in cities like Oakland, it collapsed altogether.<sup>34</sup>

### Model City in West Oakland

By seeking control over federal employment funds for community-controlled job placement, the OEDCI challenged existing job distribution mechanisms. In addition, OEDCI Advisory Committees helped to mobilize a new group of leaders, often called "indigenous" in the language of anti-colonialism. The two principal demands of the OEDCI—jobs and political representation for African Americans—marked and politicized the spaces of the metropolitan region. As in the Black Panthers' Ten Point Program, the ghetto stood for the black community. The defense of that territory, and the redirection of capital, jobs, income, and authority to black communities, had become the new project. OEDCI leaders like Moore imagined themselves at the head of a unified "community" against an ancien régime, the white "power structure." But who got to claim authenticity in that community, who got to speak for it, remained constantly contested. The colonial analogy had produced a powerful critique of the distribution of resources across space and race in the new East Bay metropolis. But its suggestion of an offensive strategy—liberate the community in the name of self-determination—posed as many difficult questions in the context of urban American political economy as it answered.<sup>35</sup>

The challenges of forging a liberation politics surfaced in even greater relief in a second, nearly parallel, War on Poverty arena in the late 1960s—Oakland's Model Cities program. Negotiations over control of Model Cities, like the OEDCI struggle, posed the African American community against city hall and drove debates about black power to the heart of the city's decades-old plans for remaking West Oakland. A late-1960s' revamp-

ing of federal antipoverty strategy, Model Cities attempted to correct the shortcomings of national urban policy by restoring community control to neighborhood renewal projects. Model Cities legislation targeted federal grants at specific neighborhoods for a variety of job creation, small business, and social service programs, funded through the newly created Department of Housing and Urban Development. Most important, Model Cities sought to overcome the neglect of impoverished neighborhoods that liberal federal poverty warriors had come to associate with many city governments by channeling funds through nominally independent community agencies. Locally, Model Cities promised both new infusions of capital into West Oakland and a second community-centered administrative apparatus independent of city council control—the West Oakland Planning Committee (WOPC). Both possibilities raised expectations in West Oakland and drew neighborhood activists into the larger civic conversation about renewing and remaking the city.<sup>36</sup>

Before embarking on specific projects, the WOPC had to settle two highly charged issues in its relationship to city hall: the extent of WOPC authority and the geographic scope of the Model Cities program. Each issue went to the core of how power and resources were distributed in West Oakland and across the broader metropolitan area. Resolution of the first issue required six months of negotiation between the city council and the WOPC, the latter led by Ralph Williams, Paul Cobb, and Elijah Turner, three West Oaklanders who had helped to secure “51 percent” control of the OEDC for the neighborhoods. In a compromise plan, the city council and WOPC agreed to share power, each retaining a veto over proposed programs. The second issue was more complicated and represented a far more fundamental challenge to the balance of power in the city. Williams and Cobb pressed the city council for veto power over all federal programs and agencies with federal funding operating within the Model Cities boundaries. This would have included, among others, the Port of Oakland, BART, the EDA, and, depending on how the physical boundaries of the Model Cities area were drawn, the proposed downtown City Center, a hotel-retail redevelopment project that promised more than five thousand jobs. After a bitter fight with the city council in April 1968, the WOPC softened its position and accepted the best it could get: veto power over Model Cities projects only.<sup>37</sup>

The WOPC sought broad authority over federal projects in West Oakland because those projects represented concrete jobs. By mid-1968 Williams, Cobb, Turner, and other WOPC leaders had grown cynical about the War on Poverty’s underlying premise: federal funds were allocated to services that, in the words of one WOPC memo, merely “maintain the status quo.” The EDA, BART, Port of Oakland, and the City Center project, however, contained funding for *actual* jobs, what nearly every

observer of Oakland during this period counted as the city's most pressing need. Like Moore's plan to secure community control over job distribution through the OEDCI, WOPC leaders hoped to leverage Model Cities into a power base from which to exercise control over job distribution. To men like Williams, Cobb, and Turner, such a move seemed natural, because in their view the city's black neighborhoods had been marginalized by the economic and political power structures of the city and the surrounding suburbs. To secure jobs, this institutional form of black power was essential. Mayor Reading and the city council, however, opposed what they considered blatant and irresponsible grabs for power that failed to recognize "legitimate" political channels.<sup>38</sup>

These early struggles over Model Cities were complicated in May 1968 by a series of police actions against the Black Panther Party that began with the killing of Bobby Hutton. Protest politics and the War on Poverty became even more firmly linked, as African American activists, including Cobb and others involved with the WOPC, redoubled their efforts to stop police violence and defend neighborhood institutions from city council encroachment. In the week following Bobby Hutton's death, a half dozen former CORE members, many of them now working in War on Poverty agencies, formed the Black Strike for Justice Committee to reclaim control over what Paul Cobb called "community domain." Three of the five principal figures on the Black Strike for Justice Committee, including Cobb, were members or staff of the West Oakland Planning Committee. In early May the committee called for a boycott of Housewives Market, a major downtown retail store—an appealing target because of its substantial African American clientele and connections to the city's political establishment. Black Strike for Justice Committee members threw a line of pickets around Housewives Market and demanded the indictment of police for the murder of Bobby Hutton, "an end to police harassment and brutality," the "decentralization of the Oakland Police Department," and "community control of policy and administration." In total, the committee listed eleven demands for police reform and a variety of neighborhood-level checks on police authority.<sup>39</sup>

Negotiations between the Black Strike for Justice Committee, the mayor's office, and the downtown merchants—facilitated by a group of liberal whites called Community Organization United for Progress (COUP) and a number of the city's prominent churches—broke down repeatedly. As the rhetorical exchanges escalated on both sides, Knowland's *Tribune* stepped into the fray. For one week in late May, every issue of the *Tribune* included a full-page advertisement featuring a disembodied, gloved hand pointing a revolver directly at the reader. In his accompanying editorials, Knowland called the Housewives Market boycott "extortion." He suggested that "Negro militants" were holding the city hostage. The advertise-



ments, widely supported by the downtown business community, shocked both African Americans and liberal whites, who accused the *Tribune* of irresponsible propaganda and fear mongering. In response, the Black Strike for Justice Committee expanded the boycott. Meanwhile, bodies accumulated. At least three young black men were shot and killed by police between Bobby Hutton's death in May and the first of July. The last, Dallas Charles, was shot in the back.<sup>40</sup>

Cobb pushed for inclusion of the City Center and the Port of Oakland in Model Cities at the same time that he was leading the Black Strike for Justice Committee. "If these tactics and totally irresponsible demands are any indication of how they intend to run the Model Cities program—then we should forget it," Reading scolded West Oakland activists in the paternalist tone he increasingly took in public forums. At the heart of those tactics, Reading charged, was "a social revolution, a political battle for political control of the community." "As long as the WOPC is controlled by these three or four people [he meant especially Cobb and Elijah Turner]," Reading continued, "we are not going to see the Model Cities program come to fruition." By mid-July, however, the Downtown Retail Merchants Association had relented, coming out in support of eight of the committee's eleven demands for police reform. Cobb met separately with Reading and Knowland, and the *Tribune* posturing temporarily ebbed. This series of compromises, in which Cobb, Reading, and the chief of police each stepped back from the brink of their most extreme positions, preserved a semblance of working harmony between the WOPC and city hall. Cobb and Williams, however, had failed in their bid to have the City Center and port included in the Model Cities project.<sup>41</sup>

The battle over the inclusion of the port, BART, and City Center in the Model Cities proposal reignited debate about the meaning of black liberation in Oakland. Reading accused the WOPC in general, and Cobb in particular, of manipulating events to amass "political muscle." There is little doubt that Cobb saw the War on Poverty as a vehicle for black political power. In the midst of Model Cities negotiations, Cobb issued his "declaration of independence" for West Oakland and its "urban plantation." At the same time, both Cobb and Williams identified black political power with the fate of the city as a whole. Williams said repeatedly, as he told the *Oakland Tribune*: "we're not trying to take over anything . . . we're trying to be part of the city." Privately, Cobb might have admitted to having more ambitious aims for African American political leadership than Williams, but he shared the latter's deep and sincere concern for the welfare of Oakland. What Reading interpreted as irresponsible grabs for power, Cobb explained as attempts to ensure that the city's most underprivileged group, African American workers, had concrete opportunities opened up to them. Because Cobb saw the black working and middle

classes as Oakland's future, his understanding of black power and the critical need to redistribute jobs reflected a deep regard for the long-term health of the city, not merely a self-interested run at power. In the hyper-politicized environment of 1968 nurtured by the aggressive and reactionary *Tribune*, however, such subtleties, and their echoes of deep traditions in urban interest group politics in the U.S., were lost or ignored.<sup>42</sup>

Oakland's War on Poverty activists politicized the city's socioeconomic institutions and neighborhoods, enlarging both the conceptual and the ideological scope of the black liberation struggle. Conceptually, these African American leaders drew all of the city's major institutions, as well as its adjoining suburbs, into the orbit of political contest and rhetoric: the Port of Oakland, the City Center, BART, the Redevelopment Agency, all active federal programs, and even such notoriously white suburbs as San Leandro and Fremont. Ideologically, Moore, Cobb, McCullum, Turner, Williams, and others insisted that black power embrace specific objectives: the establishment of an African American political presence in the city, the redistribution of jobs, and the reordering of civic priorities around the neighborhoods, at the expense of the downtown oligarchy. One of the central projects of black self-determination in northern cities like Oakland was the creation of an "imagined community," a politically self-conscious nation, defined by race and place. The narrative of Oakland's War on Poverty exhibits this complicated dynamic, as black power advocates spoke *for* a putatively united community, even as they struggled to define the spatial and ideological context in which such a community existed. Neither Moore nor Cobb ever won the kind of control over job distribution they believed necessary, but their efforts to provide programmatic content to the call for black self-determination had begun to remake Oakland's political culture and to construct a language, style, and set of institutions through which to mobilize Oakland's heretofore disengaged grassroots black electorate. "The real issue is not me and it is not the mayor," Cobb explained to the *Tribune*. "The real issue is the economic development and advancement of the black community in Oakland."<sup>43</sup>

### The Black Caucus

As the OEDCI and WOPC pushed against the boundaries of War on Poverty institutions, Paul Cobb founded the Black Caucus. Independent of Great Society funding streams and city hall, the Black Caucus was designed to unite Oakland's black voters around a political agenda and a series of candidates for local office. The *Tribune* would later demean it as a "gadfly," but Cobb had larger ambitions for the organization. The Black

Caucus brought together dozens of African American organizations in Oakland, from the NAACP and CORE to JOBART, merchants groups, and the smallest block clubs and revolutionary sects. It thrived for three years, parallel in structure to the WOPC but more inclusive geographically, taking in North and East Oakland as well as the new Model Cities area. Because it did not depend on federal funding for legitimacy, it could operate with an independence not possible for the OEDCI and WOPC. By providing a unique forum for people and organizations unaccustomed to being taken seriously in Oakland politics, the Black Caucus gave the grassroots mobilization already underway in the poverty program another institutional expression. The Black Caucus embodied dramatic changes in the tenor of African American political organizing in Oakland and the nation since the height of the desegregation fights only half a decade earlier. Previous coalitions of African American organizations in Oakland—the CRCC of the early 1960s, for instance—had sought either to pressure the city's leaders into dismantling Jim Crow with moral suasion or to force businesses and government to comply with the state's fair employment and housing laws by threatening legal action. The Black Caucus sought local political power.<sup>44</sup>

Under the leadership of Cobb and Elijah Turner, chairman of the Oakland CORE, the Black Caucus hoped to solve the decades-old problem of Oakland municipal politics: the lack of a mechanism for mobilizing grassroots voters and making city politics more than a strictly middle-class endeavor. Citywide voting for council seats still crippled black electoral ambitions. However, the Black Caucus developed an alternative formula of civic engagement—demand that city agencies become accountable to the African American community, raise a key set of issues, and hope that black unity could galvanize the community into a voting bloc that could swing elections. In the summer of 1969 Cobb initiated the strategy when he brought three hundred people to a meeting of the Board of Education and requested a citizens committee to involve the black community in upcoming decisions. Without such a committee, Cobb insisted, “the Oakland Black Caucus has no alternative other than to initiate elections to recall individual board members to accomplish its ends.” At another meeting, the Black Caucus issued a request for \$25 million from the Oakland business community and federal government for economic development. It also attacked the Port of Oakland for its poor record of employing the city's black and ethnic Mexican workers and for recognizing no citizen input into the port's decisions, especially personnel decisions. With thirty-eight member organizations representing sixty thousand individual members, the Black Caucus in a short period emerged with a confident political voice. But when it came to translating that voice into electoral politics, it was less successful. Keeping its promise to run candidates for local

offices, the Black Caucus backed Lawrence Joyner, vice president of the OEDCI, for mayor and Booker Emory for school board in 1969. Both lost. Cobb had established the Black Caucus as a formidable new presence in the city's political culture, but it had yet to develop a consistently mobilized electorate or a strategy capable of overcoming the disability of the city's governing structure.<sup>45</sup>

The leaders of the Black Caucus invoked as their adversary the city's traditional power "elite," the *Tribune* and the Knowland family. The latter had come to symbolize, much as they did to the generation of labor activists of the 1940s, Oakland's tight-knit conservative economic and political interests. Like their insurgent predecessors in the OVL, Black Caucus leaders hoped that a barrage of public attacks on this "elite" would unite an opposition and rally people to the polls. Beyond political calculation, they were also simply furious at the city's leadership class. Exchanging the 1940s-era language of "downtown interests" for the 1960s' "power structure," Cobb and the Black Caucus identified a familiar set of villains in league with the *Tribune*—the mayor and city council, the Downtown Merchants Association, and the Chamber of Commerce. The mayor in particular came in for steady criticism. In late 1968 and early 1969, when Reading broke with the OEDCI, the Black Caucus rushed to Percy Moore's defense and attacked the mayor's office. In a characteristic pronouncement late in 1969, the Black Caucus described upcoming Neighborhood Advisory Committee elections as "a contest between the establishment, headed by John Reading, and the poor of the city, headed by Percy Moore" for which they distributed a pamphlet entitled "Get Busy—Let's Defeat the Mayor." The *Tribune* also drew the Black Caucus's fire because the paper's editor, William Knowland, had defended Reading in editorials, accused civil rights and black power advocates of disturbing "law and order" in the city, and responded to the lawful boycott of Housewives Market in the summer of 1968 with the incendiary revolver ad.<sup>46</sup>

Oakland's political class in the 1960s was unsuited to dealing with the emerging grassroots political movement and resistant to a full power sharing with the city's black community. The notion of a "power structure" or "power elite" holding the city in its grip may have been exaggerated, but opponents played on the quite real perception that this was the case. The charges came from a variety of sources, from academic studies to personal observations. In the early 1970s a University of California political science professor, Edward C. Hayes, published *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules in Oakland?*. Hayes confirmed that Oakland had been run for many years, to its detriment, by and for the interests of downtown property owners. Between 1929 and 1945, he argued, the tax assessments on all major downtown properties had declined precipitously,

gifts to retailers, banks, and hotels from the business-dominated city council. This had been one of the central issues of the labor-led OVL campaigns of the 1940s, but Hayes brought his story of the “power structure” into the 1960s as well. He showed that OCCUR, the organization responsible for designing much of the city’s early redevelopment priorities and nominally a “citizens committee,” was composed of, and controlled by, members of the “power structure”—the Oakland Real Estate Board, Homebuilders Association, Downtown Retail Merchants Association, and Chamber of Commerce. This corps of economic interests, Hayes claimed, maintained tight control of city politics because the *Tribune*, the chief downtown booster, ran the city’s Republican Party and dominated city council elections.<sup>47</sup>

Hayes was not alone. Oakland’s critics carried on a running dialogue over this “power elite” throughout much of the 1960s. Among outsiders, the Ford Foundation commented extensively. David Gordon, a Ford field representative, wrote that a “large part of the explanation [for problems with race relations in Oakland] lies in the so-called power structure, the attitudes of which are fully as backward as many claim. . . . And there’s little doubt that Oakland is a much worse city in which to live because of the predominance of that elite.” In the same year, 1966, Warren Hinckle wrote a story for the new left magazine, *Ramparts*, castigating “the elite group which makes 99 percent of the decisions in Oakland.” Hinckle portrayed the city’s “power elite” as a group of frightened oligarchs afraid to descend from the Oakland Hills to face the “people” in a truly democratic city. Hinckle’s claims were thick with the hyperbole of late 1960s new left political discourse, but they captured the essential reality of twenty years of postwar politics in Oakland.<sup>48</sup>

Mayor Reading, the city council, and the political “establishment” envisioned the world differently and refused to adjust their views over time. Reading entered public office with a more sincere desire to tackle the city’s social problems than any postwar mayor. In 1966, his first year as mayor, he announced that “the wall around city hall must come down” in order for civic leaders to communicate with the African American community. But by 1968 he was primarily concerned with keeping the city from burning—with preventing the kind of riot in Oakland that had ravaged so many cities between 1965 and 1968. He believed that black leaders were obligated to tone down their rhetoric and cooperate with the city’s white officials. “For every headline produced by groundless charges,” Reading told the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, “there are a dozen unwritten stories of progress. For every militant spokesman who seeks to justify the allegiance of his followers by issuing scorching demands, there is an army of patient builders constructing improvements in our city.” Reading was not, nor were many city officials, a one-dimensional

representative of an abstract “establishment,” bent on controlling the city’s black population. But he conceptualized the new grassroots African American politics in terms of the “good” patient builders and the “bad” militants. It was an assessment that rendered him ineffectual and hostile in relating to leaders like Cobb, Moore, and Turner, and eventually to moderates like McCullum and Wilson.<sup>49</sup>

Reading and the city council did not understand or appreciate the complexity of African American politics. In the middle of the summer of 1968, Reading gave an interview to the *San Francisco Examiner* in which he complained that when he had come into office three years before, black people wanted civil rights, equality, and jobs. Now, he said, they want nothing short of absolute political control of the city. The *Oakland Post* rebutted, accusing Reading of defining leadership in terms of militancy, then tautologically identifying the militants as the black community’s leaders. “This interview with the mayor does a disservice to the black community and its leaders,” the *Post* observed. “The black community has many members they look to and follow.” From the Black Panthers to Democratic politicians to black ministers, the *Post* continued, black leadership fell across a range of styles and issues, “each in his own bag.” A militant, the *Post* insisted, is simply someone “dissatisfied with the status of the Negro and uses all his abilities to correct this evil.” The *Post*’s comments cut in two directions. First, the *Post*’s editors, in this piece and in previous editorials commenting on Model Cities, hoped to stir the city’s black middle class into greater political involvement while carving out legitimate space, in the minds of African American readers, for those “middle-class leaders.” Second, the *Post* wanted to discredit Reading (the “cry baby mayor”), whom its editors saw as crippled by his misapprehension of black political struggle. Either way, the *Post* marked out a more complicated map of African American politics in the city than Reading or any mainstream white leader was prepared to admit.<sup>50</sup>

Despite these complexities, representatives of the Black Caucus were not shy about speaking for “the black community,” especially when the target was Reading. But, as events between 1969 and 1971 revealed, it was a hoped-for but unrealized unity. Cobb’s aggressive stance with city agencies and the “power structure” inspired many African Americans, because he raised issues in public forums with a directness rarely seen in Oakland politics. That same aggressiveness, however, alienated others and helped to precipitate a split in the city’s African American political forces. The result was a complicated set of political maneuvers over the course of three years, in which the OEDCI, the WOPC, and the Black Caucus contended over the direction of the new grassroots movement. By 1971 the contests had strained the unity of the city’s African American community while producing few concrete electoral or policy victories.

In the first phase of these political battles, Wilson, McCullum, Ralph Williams, and others involved with the OEDCI grew weary of Moore's aggressive and overblown rhetoric and his heavy-handed exercise of personal authority. Moore faced accusations on many counts: that he misused funds; that he forced his proposal for new employment plans through the OEDCI without proper democratic procedures; that his use of anticolonial discourse diverted focus from "the poor" and kept white liberals from assisting the poverty programs. Williams attacked Cobb and the WOPC on similar grounds. In November 1969, after seeing the WOPC through its most difficult first year, Williams resigned from the committee. Of the WOPC and OEDCI, he said: "The poor have not really been helped. They are more divided now than have been in the whole history of Oakland." At the same time, Booker Emory resigned as chairman of the OEDCI's West Oakland Advisory Committee, charging that the Black Caucus, which supported Moore strongly in 1969, was determined to take over the city's poverty board. He added, echoing Williams, that the poor had not been helped by the OEDCI but were "in the same fix as when it came." Williams and Emory subsequently worked together in the latter's organization, BUMP. Their charges and defections undermined the unity within black communities that both Cobb and Moore had worked to cultivate.<sup>51</sup>

Subsequent developments in these political scuffles focused on Cobb and Moore. Both men had advanced an anticolonial philosophy and rhetoric through the OEDCI, WOPC, and Black Caucus. Despite their similarities, however, Cobb and Moore struck people in quite different ways. Cobb, an accomplished scholar and political theorist (he would later turn down a Kennedy Fellowship to remain active in Oakland politics), grounded his politics in thoroughly researched and sophisticated arguments. Personally, he was affable, articulate, and studious. In contrast, many found Moore to be more chaotic and unpredictable, taken to political posturing but not schooled or disciplined in the art of politicking. The two men had extraordinarily different styles. Still, they remained allies through the summer of 1970, when they appeared together to call for Reading's resignation. They split almost immediately, however, over who would receive the support of the Black Caucus in the upcoming city council elections. Moore lost and resigned from the Caucus (or was ousted, depending on the version). The Cobb "bloc" and the Moore "bloc," thus divided, launched parallel campaigns for four open council seats in early 1971, driving a deeper wedge into African American political unity. In the campaign, Wilson, Williams, Turner, and McCullum all supported Cobb, their alienation from Moore seemingly final. Indeed, on his resignation from the OEDCI in late 1970, McCullum said that Moore "has been isolated by a coterie of sycophants" and was no longer operating

the poverty program in the legitimate interests of the city's residents. What were normal political divisions within a complicated set of communities became—because of segregation, black underrepresentation in local government, and the city's voting system—a liability. Unity seemed a prerequisite to political influence, but it was not easily found.<sup>52</sup>

Cobb's city council campaign was important, however, because it provided a bridge to much of the political activity that was to follow in the 1970s. Cobb was officially endorsed at a community meeting attended by nearly a thousand registered voters at Technical High School in North Oakland. He joined other candidates backed by what organizers called the Oakland Coalition, a group of liberal whites and African American activists who joined together in 1971 to launch a slate of reform candidates for municipal offices. Many of the candidates came from the Black Caucus, including Cobb, Alphonso Galloway (who ran for the Peralta Community College Board), Rev. Frank Pinkard (who ran for the at-large city council seat), and Doug Jones (city council). But Oakland Coalition members did not draw candidates solely from the Black Caucus. The coalition was fueled equally by a liberal resurgence among whites that, as we will see in a subsequent chapter, helped to transform the city's politics in the early 1970s.<sup>53</sup>

The central message of Cobb's campaign came directly from his colonial analysis of Oakland. His campaign highlighted the spatial distribution of resources in the city, drawing from his experiences with the OEDCI, WOPC, and the Black Strike for Justice Committee. It represented a culmination of the spatial critique of Oakland that had been generated by the eruption of grassroots community politics during the previous four years. He focused on the Port of Oakland and the distribution of jobs in the East Bay. According to Cobb, "the Port has over \$100 million cash flow annually, but 78% of the people who work for the Port don't live in Oakland." Indeed, as Cobb would tell reporters and audiences, more than half of the city's government and school employees did not live in Oakland; more than half its police force lived outside the city; and only 39 of the city's 725 police officers came from minority groups. Cobb proposed an alternative: a formal affirmative action policy for the City and Port of Oakland, a program through the Redevelopment Agency to encourage African American and other minority residents to become owners and managers of housing; and an affirmative action policy for the new City Center and the businesses that located there. Cobb proposed to rebuild the city's working and middle class through the redistribution of new and existing jobs, the cornerstone of the OEDCI and WOPC agendas since 1968. Though his campaign generated a good deal of attention, particularly among East Bay liberals, he lost in the primary to the incumbent, Raymond Eng. Cobb's campaign for city council in 1971 drew



considerable attention and widespread support (he garnered 36,000 votes out of 84,000), but the rending of the political consensus of the poverty program forces was the bigger story that year. Moreover, the old nemesis of neighborhood politics—at-large voting—meant that Cobb's enormous support in West Oakland was diluted and inconsequential. What had looked like an emerging new political movement with a grassroots base and dedicated leaders fizzled out in the spring of 1971.<sup>54</sup>

In the waves of neighborhood-driven and self-determination politics that swept over Oakland in the decade between 1967 and 1977, the year 1971 represented a lull, a moment in between two relatively distinct periods. Cobb's defeat, and the defeat of every Oakland Coalition candidate, marked the end of the War on Poverty's central role in the city's political culture. The black power, revolutionary, and reform currents of thought lifted into the city's political mix by the OEDCI, the WOPC, and the Black Caucus lost the vital institutions and leaders that had carried them through the late 1960s and the first two years of the 1970s. The OEDCI was without Lionel Wilson, Don McCullum, Ralph Williams, and Paul Cobb and would soon be without funding. The WOPC was without Williams and Cobb, its most dynamic leaders. The Black Caucus folded. Those institutions, and that leadership combination, had proven unable to win the local political offices that activists believed necessary for the city to solve its problems. But the door on Oakland politics had not been closed, and no one walked away permanently. The subsequent phase would see the resurgence of the Black Panther Party and the return to local politics of the East Bay Democratic Club, the thirty-year-old brainchild of D. G. Gibson. First as opponents, later as allies, both would work to bring the city's African American communities fully into civic power sharing.

What at first appeared like a useful route to power, the various War on Poverty programs, boards, and committees, ultimately proved to have limited potential. The city's conservative political class resisted the challenge of these federally sponsored seats of neighborhood power and ultimately annulled the program altogether. Advocates of self-determination ironically had come to rely on the federal government as an avenue to local political influence. Black nationalism and radicalism in Oakland had limited political success in the late 1960s, but they had invested African American political struggle with a set of issues—affirmative action, jobs, social services—and symbols—the port, City Center, police, and suburban power—that would come to dominate the city's political culture in the 1970s. In linking the larger African American rights movement to mobilizations in the name of the black poor, community organizers in Oakland had taken steps similar to those of national civil rights leaders. The 1968 Poor People's Campaign, under the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr.,

was the best-known example of this trend, but Whitney Young of the National Urban League and George Wiley of the National Welfare Rights Organization, among others, linked antipoverty work to black struggle and the fight for political power. Skeptical that “affluent, middle-class Americans are going to move over and share their wealth and resources,” Wiley did express hope “if the poor people who have the problems can organize, can exert their political muscle.” The failure of Oakland’s War on Poverty mobilizations, and the mixed successes in cities nationwide, demonstrated that finding a home for liberation politics would not be a simple task.<sup>55</sup>

Nationally, too, calls for power were fluid and came from multiple courses. Bayard Rustin, who would never have identified himself with a phrase and cultural style he abhorred (he called black power “a psychological solution to problems that are profoundly economic”), wrote in 1964 that a “total program” of black liberation could only be achieved “through political power.” In 1965 Adam Clayton Powell introduced in Chicago a seventeen-point program entitled “My Black Position Paper for America’s 20 Million Negroes.” Black Americans must seek “audacious power,” according to Powell, who called upon the movement to “shift its emphasis to the two-pronged thrust of the Black Revolution: economic self-sufficiency and political power.” Eldridge Cleaver told an interviewer in 1969 that blacks “didn’t choose to be packed into ghettos, but since that’s where we are, we’re not going to get any real power over our lives unless we use what we have—our strength as a bloc.” Indeed, in U.S. urban historical context, the call for black power echoed both a long tradition of interest-group claims on political authority and newer efforts to find an ideological and strategic position for black liberation that did not rely on the assumptions and institutions of midcentury liberalism. That is, “black power” could relatively easily translate for liberal politicians into a convenient interest group claim. But in the hands of others, it could also mean a far more radical politics aimed at social transformation and international solidarity among colonized peoples. It was precisely this combination, and the tension among its various elements, that made the post-1966 era so rich and its legacy for urban politics as a whole profound.<sup>56</sup>

We can appreciate that legacy by following continuities between the left and liberal generations of African American activists emergent in the 1940s and the subsequent nationalist and radical generations of the 1960s without downplaying the real differences between the two. Such an effort helps to contextualize the emergence of black power within the longer sweep of urban history and political economy in the twentieth century. Historians and popular critics alike have devoted insufficient attention to the evolution of black power and self-determination politics

out of earlier liberal efforts, have downplayed the effective grassroots organizing undertaken in the name of black power, and have too often marginalized a broad and diverse set of strategies and analyses in favor of tropes of violence and alienation. For some black people, black power symbolized their alienation from racist mainstream America. For many more others, however, it symbolized their profound engagement with the institutions and traditions of American political culture and intellectual life. Some of those traditions were liberal, in their calls for political representation and reform within an interest-group framework. Others were traditions of African American radicalism, like leftist internationalism, that the Cold War had forced underground. Seeing through the latter lens provides an important counternarrative to accounts of black power as an emotional, rhetorical, and ultimately marginal and self-destructive political phenomenon. Its continuities with previous African American political traditions notwithstanding, in the longer sweep of twentieth-century urban history, advocates of black power and self-determination articulated a profoundly important rereading of the landscape of metropolitan America. Their penetrating insights would shape debate over American cities for more than a decade. Oakland stood out in this national context. The Black Panther Party and the loose network of War on Poverty activists and social program advocates infused their calls for black self determination with a critique of metropolitan America and its legacy of development and underdevelopment that reformulated the class and racial politics of the New Deal and World War II era by indicting liberalism for its complicity in racial segregation, black poverty, and disfranchisement.