

YO' MAMA'S DISFUNCTIONAL!

Fighting
the Culture Wars

in Urban America

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ALSO BY **ROBIN D.G. KELLEY**

Hammer and Hoe:

Alabama Communists during the Great Depression

Race Rebels:

Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class

Into the Fire:

African Americans Since 1970

curity, support during hard times, and power over decision making was never a right. It always comes back to the bottom line: profits before people. And in a system like this, all the personal industriousness in the world will not necessarily result in a decent income if there are no jobs available, no requirements to pay a living wage, or no recognition that raising children is work. On the other hand, if we ever regarded the United Nations General Assembly as a governing body of a higher order, perhaps we can sue the state for violation of the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" adopted back in 1948. According to this document, now half a century old, everyone has the right to work, earn equal pay for equal work, join trade unions, and receive "just and favorable remuneration" that would enable working people and their families to live in comfort and dignity. Moreover, whether one works or not, everyone "has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself [herself] and of his [her] family, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care and necessary social services and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age, or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his [her] control."³⁹

Meanwhile, whether we dust off the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" or line up behind one of the more recent initiatives calling for a guaranteed "living wage," we must never lose sight of the bigger picture. We are more than workers and consumers; indeed, we are more than bodies in need of food, clothes, shelter. We are humanity, complex and multi-, the victims and shapers of the world we inhabit. Our oppressions are not always visible or tangible, but are serious and painful nonetheless. For this reason, we should consider reviving that slogan from the Black Women's United Front: "ABOLITION OF EVERY POSSIBILITY OF OPPRESSION & EXPLOITATION."

CHAPTER FOUR

LOOKING EXTREMELY BACKWARD

Why the Enlightenment
Will Only Lead Us into the Dark

You cannot link arms under a universalist banner when you can't find your name on it.

—MARTIN DUBERMAN,
"Bring Back the Enlightenment"

If we are to keep the enormity of the forces aligned against us from establishing a false hierarchy of oppression, we must school ourselves to recognize that any attack against Blacks, any attack against women, is an attack against all of us who recognize that our interests are not being served by the systems we support. Each one of us here is a link in the connection between antipoor legislation, gay shootings, the burning of synagogues, street harassment, attacks against women, and resurgent violence against Black people.

—AUDRE LORDE, "Learning from the 60s"

The beauty of the line "Abolition of Every Possibility of Oppression and Exploitation" is that it resists hierarchies. It refuses to privilege class over race, or race over gender, or sexuality over class, race, or gender. Yet, it seems like every time I invoke that line some holier-than-thou radical accuses me of left-wing utopianism. Apparently, in the age of defeat simply imagining a movement fighting to radically transform society is seen as a descent into utopianism—a horrible crime to those embroiled in the realpolitik of restoring the welfare state, building union membership, and providing minimal health care for the poor. Worse, to insist that the fight for women's studies on college campuses or the battle against racist representations in popular culture is as important as the "class struggle" (whatever that means) is to fall into the identity trap.

Welcome to the left-wing version of P. C. circus, where a handful of mostly forty-something white guys have courageously stood up to multiculturalism and "identity politics" in the name of Marx, Engels, or Thomas Jefferson. Usually renegades from the New Left, the most notable figures here are Todd Gitlin (*Twilight of Our Common Dreams: Why America is Wracked by Culture Wars*) and Michael Tomasky (*Left for Dead: The Life, Death and Possible Resurrection of Progressive Politics in America*), though some of their ideas have been echoed by the likes of Richard Rorty, Jim Sleeper, Eric Hobsbawm, and others.¹ Their main concern is that "class" has dropped out of our analytical vocabulary, swallowed up by a proliferation of "identities." It is precisely the disappearance of "class," they argue, that explains why the Left remains small, divided, and parochial, entrenched for better or worse in the groves of academe. To put it bluntly, class is the one universal-category that unites us all and can lift us out of the dismal swamp of identity politics.²

Tomasky and Gitlin, in particular, set out to explain why the Left failed to mobilize a mass-based response to the rise of the Right. Their explanation: "The Left" has lost touch with its Enlightenment roots, the source of its universalism and radical humanism, and instead has been hijacked by a "multicultural Left" wedded to "iden-

tity politics," which has led us all into a cul-de-sac of ethnic particularism, race consciousness, sexual politics, and radical feminism. Much of the blame falls on the shoulders of women, gays and lesbians, and colored people for the fracturing of the American Left, abandoning honest class struggle, and alienating white men who could be allies but will not because of the terrible treatment meted out to them by the loud minority. Universal categories such as class have fallen before the narrow, particularistic mantras of the radical chic: race, gender, sexuality, and disability. Indeed, in Tomasky and Gitlin's view class is not just another identity; it transcends identity. If the Left wants to save itself, we must abandon our ever shrinking identity niches for the realm of majoritarian thinking. After all, we are told, the majority of Americans are white and heterosexual and have little interest in radical feminism, minority discourse, and struggles centered on sexual identity.

In some ways, I can sympathize with these guys about the limitations of identity politics. While the growing interest in the politics of identity has extended our analytical scope to overlooked or trivialized cultural spheres and expanded our understanding of intellectual history, in some circles it has also tended to limit discussions of power to cultural politics. And while so-called identity politics has always profoundly shaped labor movements and—even more than vague, abstract notions of class unity—has been the glue for class solidarity, by the same token it has also become a noose around the necks of oppressed people, as in the case of white racism or certain variants of black nationalism.

On the other hand, we have to recognize that the backlash against so-called identity politics is also deeply personal, reflecting a tragic sense of loss or irrelevance experienced by some of these critics. Indeed, Gitlin feels personally victimized by identity movements because, in his words, they cast the "Straight White Male" as the "common enemy." Even when white guys are not seen as "an oppressor, the white male is a blank, made to feel he lacks roots, culture, substance." Similarly, British Marxist critic David Harris, in

his polemic against cultural studies titled *From Class Struggle to the Politics of Pleasure*, whined about cultural studies' obsession with black people and women (race and gender). He took it personally: "I find myself invisible, relegated to a 'natural' substratum, untheorized, an empty signifier, a mere 'Other' against which more glamorous identities are defined." If this isn't identity politics, I don't know what is.³

White male angst notwithstanding, whatever cul-de-sacs we might have entered, the Gitlin/Tomasz model will not lead us out. These critics assume that the universal humanism they find so ennobling and radical can be easily separated from the historical context of its making; indeed, that it is precisely what can undo the racism and modern imperialism it helped to justify. The racialism of the West, slavery, imperialism, the destruction of indigenous cultures in the name of "progress," are treated as aberrations, coincidences, or not treated at all. They insist that these historical developments do not render the Enlightenment's radical universalism any less radical, and those who take up this critique are simply rejecting Enlightenment philosophers because they are "dead white males." Their uncritical defense of the Enlightenment (which includes a strange tendency to collapse Marx, Locke, and Jefferson into the same category), betrays an unwillingness to take ideas seriously, let alone history. Gitlin certainly acknowledges these contradictions inherent in Enlightenment philosophy as well as the historical context of slavery, racism, and colonialism. But in an intellectual sleight of hand he brackets these contradictions, reduces a huge body of complex, historically specific ideas to transhistorical abstractions (which he uses selectively to make his case against identity politics), and then presumes that Enlightenment thought constitutes the central reservoir of ideas for the very identity movements he critiques:

The Enlightenment is not to be discarded because Voltaire was anti-Semitic or Hume, Kant, Hegel, and Jefferson racist, but rather further enlightened—for it equips us with the tools with

which to refute the anti-Semitism of a Voltaire and the racism of the others. . . . In none of these cases was bigotry at the core of the man's intellectual system; it reflected the routine white prejudice of the time. The Enlightenment is self-correcting. The corrective to darkness is more light.⁴

Good liberalism, to be sure, but its analytical insight leaves much to be desired. To pose the question as pro or con, keep the Enlightenment or discard it, sidesteps fundamental questions such as the legacy of eighteenth-century social thought for modern conceptions of race or the philosophical underpinnings of racial slavery in an age when free labor and free-market ideology triumphed. For example, while racist ideas can be traced to ancient thought and forms of domination internal to Europe, the Enlightenment also ushered in a transformation in Western thinking about race. How could it not? After all, as many, many commentators since the French Revolution have observed, the expansion of slavery and genocidal wars against non-European peoples took place alongside, and by some accounts made possible, bourgeois democratic revolutions that gave birth (in the West) to the concept that liberty and freedom are inalienable rights. This contradiction is fundamental to Enlightenment philosophy, notions of progress, and developments in scientific thinking. As the work of George Mosse, David Theo Goldberg, Cedric Robinson, and many others have demonstrated, modern racism is one of the "gifts" of the Enlightenment. It is not an accident that during the eighteenth century modern science moved toward classification as one of its primary endeavors, turning to aesthetic criteria derived from ancient Greece as the source of measurement. These Enlightenment scientists—in some respects, the founders of modern anthropology—began to associate outward, physical signs of "beauty" with inner rationality, piety, intelligence, and harmony. Thus a century before social Darwinism we see scientific justifications for racial hierarchy and domination. Christian Meiners's influential book *Outline of the History of Mankind* (1785)

put it bluntly: "One of the chief characteristics of tribes and peoples is the beauty or ugliness of the whole body or of the face." At the same time, the idealization of the so-called primitive (the noble savage) espoused by several seventeenth-century travel writers as well as Rousseau began to give way to notions of European superiority vis-à-vis Africans and Native Americans. Non-Europeans were unambiguously classified as representing a lower stage of human development. The primitive mind was constructed as the very opposite of Reason: atavistic, regressive, barbaric. Again, science provided a rationale for racial hierarchies. Climatic theories explaining the origins of racial difference were called into question by Enlightenment thinkers who proposed the radical idea that Africans, Asians, and "Indians" originated from different species. Voltaire certainly made this claim, as did Scottish jurist Lord Kames in his *Sketches of the History of Man* (1774), and Charles White in his celebrated *An Account of the Regular Gradation in Man* (1799). Enlightenment thought not only opened the door for future arguments about the inherent inferiority of different "races," but also sharply limited the definition of *humanity*. Thus, at the very moment when a discourse of universal humanism was finding voice in the bourgeois democratic revolutions of the era, colored people and Europeans rendered marginal to civilization (such as Jews and Irish) were being written out of the family of "Man." (Is this why the Haitian Revolution is still not considered one of the most important revolutions of the bourgeois democratic era?)⁵

Besides assuming that the "universal" is truly "self-evident," the neo-Enlightenment Left cannot conceive of movements led by African Americans, women, Latinos, or gays and lesbians speaking for the whole or even embracing radical humanism. The implications are frightening: the only people who can speak the language of universalism are white men (since they have no investment in identity politics beyond certain white working-class ethnic movements) and women and colored people who have *transcended* or *rejected* the

politics of identity. Moreover, they either do not understand or refuse to acknowledge that class is lived through race and gender. There is no universal class identity, just as there is no universal racial or gender or sexual identity. The idea that race, gender, and sexuality are particular whereas class is universal not only presumes that class struggle is some sort of race- and gender-neutral terrain but takes for granted that movements focused on race, gender, or sexuality necessarily undermine class unity and, by definition, cannot be emancipatory for the whole.

Don't get me wrong. I am not defending "identity politics" over the struggle to build a world we have never seen before—a world free of market forces and all the terrible things that go with them. Rather, I have trouble with these critics' characterization of race, gender, and sexuality as narrow identity politics while class is regarded as some transcendent, universal category that rises above these other identities. Indeed, Gitlin calls the first three "birth-rights," and despite an obligatory nod to Anthony Appiah, he fails to treat these categories as social constructs that have enormous consequences for how class is lived. Along with these so-called identities come regimes of oppression. Are churches being burned because black people are alienating white folks? Is this why the Justice Department focuses much of its investigation on black congregations rather than on white supremacist groups? Is pro-Proposition 187 sentiment [a California initiative denying immigrants' basic rights] and callousness toward immigrants the result of Mexican and Central American immigrants' refusal to be "inclusive"?

I find the neo-Enlightenment position incredibly problematic given what we know of the history of class struggle in the United States.⁶ These writers' arguments rest not on a serious analysis of the social movements they lump together under the heading "identity politics," but on caricature, stereotypes, omissions, innuendo, and historical analysis that borders on comical at times. Indeed, these movements are rarely ever named and their positions never

spelled out in any detail. Yet, despite the lack of depth and scholarly rigor as well as an overreliance on personal impressions, their arguments seem to be winning over a broad section of high-profile liberals/leftists who believe the time has come for us to "transcend" all this race and gender stuff and get to the matter at hand: class warfare against the bosses. During the recent labor teach-in at Columbia University, for example, both Betty Friedan and Richard Rorty, taking a page from Gitlin's book, told the audience that the time had come to graduate from narrow identity movements to the bigger picture. It was as if antiracist and antisexist struggles were not fundamental to the struggles of working people across race and gender lines, or worse, that they had been essentially resolved and were no longer pressing problems.⁷

Although their books have been widely reviewed, we have yet to subject the neo-Enlightenment position to a serious political critique. I don't know how many times I have been told, "Don't attack them, they're on our side!" Besides the obvious analogy to the issue of the Left's stance toward Clinton, I am always inclined to repeat Tonto's response to the Lone Ranger: "What do you mean, 'we'?" Of course, to say "we" invites accusations of identity politics, of identifying with colored people at the expense of the poor Lone Ranger, who is merely a low-level manager of capital rather than an owner. But this is precisely the problem: the "we" I am speaking of includes all oppressed people, including Mr. Ranger if he chooses to join. The Gitlin/Tomasky group makes the grave error of rendering movements struggling around issues of race, gender, and sexuality as inherently narrow and particularistic. The failure to conceive of these social movements as essential to the emancipation of the whole remains the fundamental stumbling block to building a deep and lasting class-based politics.

Part of their problem has to do with their perennial failure to take seriously the ideas coming out of these identity movements.

Their arguments rest less on what these movements espouse than in their racial, ethnic or gender makeup or their sexual orientation. "Choose a nonwhite ethnicity," Tomasky sneers, "combine it with a sexual practice or a physical condition, and there probably exists a movement to match." Let us take one of their favorite whipping girls: the black feminist, particularly of the lesbian variety. In a bizarre tautology, black feminists are narrowly concerned with their race and sex because they are black feminists. In fact, aside from Alice Walker and the statement issued by the Combahee River Collective (a radical black feminist group founded in the mid-1970s), black feminists in their texts have no names or organizations—they function as little more than signifiers (or, to put them in a more traditional context, as scapegoats). Tomasky was kind enough to quote one line from the Combahee River Collective's 1977 statement, though the line he quotes is intended to demonstrate how narrow identity politics can get. For him, the principles of black feminism are succinctly expressed in the following sentence: "We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity." What he neglected to mention, however, is that the same statement proposed a clear socialist agenda, argued that emancipation for everyone could not take place until racism, homophobia, sexism, and capitalism are annihilated, and criticized mainstream feminist organizations for not being inclusive enough—for not dealing adequately with the needs of the poor or with racist oppression of men and women. Nor did Tomasky acknowledge the important line in the statement that "as Black women we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic."⁸

In other words, had Tomasky and Gitlin taken the time to read the material written by black feminists instead of simply reducing them to caricatures of their own imagination, they might have discovered some of the most sophisticated statements of the kind of

radical humanism they claim to embrace. Anna Julia Cooper, whose writings continue to have a profound impact on black feminism, wrote in 1893:

We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life, and the unnaturalness and injustice of all special favoritisms, whether of sex, race, country or condition. . . . The colored woman feels that woman's cause is one and universal; and that . . . not till race, color, sex, and condition are seen as accidents, and not the substance of life; not till the universal title of humanity to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is conceded to be inalienable to all; not till then is woman's lesson taught and woman's cause won—not the white woman's nor the black woman's, not the red woman's but the cause of every man and every woman who has writhed silently under a mighty wrong.⁹

This radical humanism, as theorist Patricia Hill Collins points out, has been a consistent principle of black feminist thought. Alice Walker insists that a "womanist" is "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female," and is "not a separatist" but "traditionally a universalist."¹⁰ Pauli Murray is even more explicit:

The lesson of history that all human rights are indivisible and that the failure to adhere to this principle jeopardizes the rights of all is particularly applicable here. A built-in hazard of an aggressive ethnocentric movement which disregards the interests of other disadvantaged groups is that it will become parochial and ultimately self-defeating in the face of hostile reactions, dwindling allies, and mounting frustrations.

Audre Lorde's reflections on the politics of the 1960s go much further, illustrating the delicate balance between particular struggles and the interconnectedness of social movements: "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives. Malcolm knew this. Martin Luther King, Jr. knew this. Our struggles are particular, but we are not alone."¹¹ One can see

this vision in the writings of many black feminists, including June Jordan, Barbara Christian, Angela Davis, Elsa Barkley Brown, Sonia Sanchez, Pat Parker, Barbara Smith, Cheryl Clarke, Julianne Malveaux, bell hooks, Margaret Simms, and Filomina Steady, to name a few.¹²

Of course, had Tomasky or Gitlin actually read these works, they might jump up in agreement and dismiss them as exceptions to the rule. (Whatever the rule is, however, always goes unnamed.) But a close reading reveals that they are not saying the same thing. "If all human rights are indivisible," then why privilege majoritarian concerns over all others and ridicule movements organized around sex, race, and gender? Why presume that such movements are necessarily narrow simply because black women and their concerns are central to them? Nothing could be further from the truth. One vital outgrowth of radical black feminism has been the black women's health care movement, its most notable manifestation being the National Black Women's Health Project.¹³ Among other things, it has sought to create a healthier environment for poor and working-class women and reduce women's dependence on a health care system structured by capitalism and run primarily by men. If they succeeded, imagine how such a transformation might benefit all of us, irrespective of race or gender?

Unfortunately, these neo-Enlightenment leftists are blind to the radical humanist traditions that have undergirded black feminist movements, and this blindness has kept them from seeing how black feminism could contribute to their own emancipation. Similarly, they do not see how gay and lesbian movements might also contribute to our collective emancipation—a criticism made eloquently by Martin Duberman in his review of Tomasky's book in *The Nation*.¹⁴ Some things are obvious: the continuing struggle of gays and lesbians against discrimination in public and private life has important implications for national civil rights law; the work of ACT UP and other movements has made AIDS visible—a disease

that is now killing many more heterosexual people, especially poor black women. Less obvious is the role of scholarship coming out of gay and lesbian studies programs as well as women's studies programs—grist for the anti-identity politics mill. Queer theory, for example, begins with the premise that sexuality is a vital part of human existence, and that how sexual identities get defined (and policed) has to do with social relations of power, the role of the state, public institutions, and social movements. The best work understands that sexual identities and practices are lived through race and class and can only be understood historically. What does this scholarship have to do with the rest of us? What are the implications for the “universal”? For one, we know now that there is no universal masculinity or femininity. The idea of “normal” behavior is a social construction, which means that there is nothing natural or inevitable about male dominance, the overrepresentation of men in positions of power, or the tendency of men to use violence as a means to resolve conflict.¹⁵ These are all obvious points, to be sure. But how many heterosexual men and women stop to think about the emancipatory potential a more flexible sexual and gender identity could have on all of us? Besides reducing homophobic anxieties, freeing up self-expression, and enabling us all to reconstruct our relationships to one another (isn't that what revolution is all about?), I believe a less rigid definition of masculinity may actually reduce violence—from police brutality to domestic abuse.

While Gitlin tends to be slightly more sympathetic to feminism and gay and lesbian movements than Tomasky, both critics view them as prime examples of dead-end identity politics. On the other hand, when they proclaim a movement or issue “universal,” they do not stop to analyze how race and gender shape various responses to issues. For example, Tomasky believes he hit on a common value/agenda when he writes: “Working people in this country need a movement that will put their interests and livelihoods first.” Fair enough. But without an analysis that takes racism, sexism, and

homophobia seriously, or considers deep historical differences, we won't know what “interests” mean. Let's take crime and the issue of neighborhood safety. It is an issue on which many people across race, gender, and even class lines can find common ground. Yet, racism—not narrow identity politics—persuaded many African Americans to oppose Clinton's \$22 billion crime bill and the majority of white voters to support it. For many black people, the issue of neighborhood safety is not just about more police but what kind of police—where they live, how they relate to the community. Indeed, no matter what we might think of the Nation of Islam, many non-Muslims see the NOI's fight against drug dealers in black communities as more effective than the police.¹⁶

It is precisely this kind of economism that enables these critics to claim, without evidence, that declining wages are more important to most black people than police brutality or having to wait an hour for a seat at Denny's. One is hard economics, what unites people; the other is just narrow identity politics. Thus, when black gays and lesbians take to the streets to protest violence against them, that is “identity politics.” When angry white males claim that affirmative action is taking jobs from them, that is class politics muffled beneath a racial blanket they themselves do not understand. When white people vote for David Duke and Pat Buchanan, that is class-politics, not identity politics. Something is wrong with this picture.

WHOSE LEFT?

Central to the neo-Enlightenment Left's case against so-called identity politics is a nostalgia for the Old Left, back in the days before the sixties, when everyone who joined checked their race and gender identities at the door and embraced a radical universalism that transcended skin color, ethnic affiliations, and sex. Intense debates over the Negro Question or the Woman Question, not to mention charges of “chauvinism,” simply vanish from this romantic narra-

tive. Those were the days of "real" class struggle, the days of the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO), the Knights of Labor, the IWW, the Reds, the rugged and manly Republican artisans in the Age of Jackson (Andrew, not Michael), the days before identity politics eroded the class struggle and we knew what the working class looked like. Then, around 1970, according to Tomasky, everything fell apart "when the American left cashiered traditional class-based politics for a new variant in which race and gender were preeminent. . . . For black activists, racism became more important than the exploitation of workers by capitalists; for women, sexism."¹⁷

Who is he talking about? Black Power and feminism had radical and conservative tendencies, and neither uniformly privileged race or sex or ignored class, for that matter. And what about the *black* Left? If these activists and the New Left more broadly abandoned "the exploitation of workers by capitalists," why did so many of these folks join Marxist-Leninist organizations in the early 1970s and begin working in factories to organize industrial workers? Workers became very important for the New Left, particularly for African American radicals. In 1968 and 1969, a fairly large contingent of black radical students at Duke University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill helped organize key strikes of maintenance and dining hall workers. A few former Wayne State University students helped organize the Revolutionary Union Movement in Detroit's auto plants, which culminated in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW). Some of the organizers who split from the League joined former Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) leader James Forman and founded the Black Workers Congress. Not surprisingly, in his book Gitlin dismisses the industrial concentration movement coming out of the New Left in a sentence, probably because it contradicts his central thesis that the late sixties witnessed the flight from universal class struggle. Yet, some of these same people contributed substantially to labor struggles during the "dark ages" (the 1980s) and can take

some credit for the current regeneration of the movement—from Eric Mann, who led the campaign to keep General Motors' Van Nuys plant open in the 1980s, to labor militants like Joe Alvarez, currently the political director for the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE). Alvarez's presence is no small matter, for UNITE is one of the biggest unions in the country, formed in July 1995 as a result of a merger between the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) and the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU). UNITE has also taken the lead in the fight against sweatshops throughout the Western hemisphere, building cross-border alliances from Latin America and the Caribbean to Canada.¹⁸

On the other hand, those white construction workers in the 1960s who battled antiwar protesters and supported Nixon—the folks Gitlin calls "the Common men"—were also notorious for having the most racist, exclusionary unions around. In Chicago, for example, racism ran so deep that in 1988, black pipe fitter Frank Daniels sued his union local and won a \$331,000 settlement. Despite the Daniels case, the pipe fitters', electrical workers', plumbers', carpenters', and related building trades unions continued to discriminate against African Americans and women (in 1993 women made up only 2 percent of the construction workforce). In 1955 Black tradesmen in Chicago and throughout other parts of the country established the American Allied Workers Laborers International Union (AAWLIU), a black independent union, to challenge racism in the building trades unions. The situation for black construction workers has been so bad that AAWLIU held Labor Day rallies to protest union discrimination. With support from the Chicago-based Black United Communities (CBUC) and the Black Independent Political Organization (BIPO), the AAWLIU initiated training programs in 1996 to help African American workers get their journeymen cards, which will, one hopes, make it easier for them to find work throughout the nation.¹⁹

Now, compare these unions to the local, state, and federal employees' unions that supported black struggles for justice. Or compare them to, say, 1199 hospital workers union or Service Employees Industrial Union (SEIU)—unions that embraced the spirit (and the people) of the Civil Rights movement. Multiracial public sector unions were able to survive, even thrive, while construction workers belong to some of the most devastated unions in the country. Indeed, when unionization all around was on the decline, public sector unions rose by 37 percent.²⁰

In other words, given black workers' commitment to organized labor, despite being overrepresented in the unemployment rolls and in occupations that have historically been difficult to unionize, it is ironic that African Americans bear so much of the burden for the decline of "class politics." Black workers, after all, have the highest union participation rate—in 1994, 21 percent of the African American workforce was unionized—compared to 15 percent of whites. Furthermore, a 1989 AP/Media survey revealed that people of color had stronger union sympathies than whites. When non-union workers were asked: "Would you join a union at your place of work?" 56 percent of African Americans answered yes, as did 46 percent of Latinos. Among white workers, only 35 percent responded affirmatively.²¹

If rebuilding class politics is the goal of the neo-Enlightenment Left, and the labor movement is one of the vehicles for doing so, then I do not understand why the neo-Enlightenment Left would invoke Enlightenment universalism to promote a version of *American nationalism* and support for "majoritarian" values which—it seems to me—is the very opposite of the cosmopolitanism they claim to be embracing. Gitlin derides the fact that the Republicans have seized the symbols of patriotism and progressives failed to promote "Democratic Americanism—an Americanism of constitutional faith strong enough to override the racism of American history." What an incredibly naive statement; it ignores actual historical context

and presumes one can miraculously disentangle the language of "Americanism" from its roots in white supremacy, conquest, and xenophobia. Tomasky's chauvinism is even more strident:

The United States alone, simply because its power and wealth are still so vast, can set the direction for the rest of the advanced world to follow. . . . An America that rises above its own particularisms and ethnic rivalries might be able to posit itself as an example for others, in Bosnia, in Macedonia, in Russia, in the Middle East and, with some credibility, lead a Western coalition that lays down principles that factions there must adhere to. And for the Third World, especially for those people making six dollars a day weaving those designer garments, an America devoted once again to working people will surely bear fruit.²²

Can labor really afford to rally behind this sort of nationalist rhetoric in the age of global capital? Imagine if the AFL-CIO had been supporting progressive-unions across the world rather than U.S. foreign policy driven by Cold War imperialism? It took the North American Free Trade Agreement to spur the AFL-CIO to take cross-border organizing more seriously, and though some campaigns are succeeding, labor leaders now have to break through a wall of suspicion and distrust following decades of AFL-CIO-supported Cold War policy. And yet Gitlin lampoons all Third World solidarity movements. The fact is, the South African divestment campaign as well as Central American solidarity movements opened doors to labor that might have otherwise been shut.

Rather than worry about offending "majoritarian sensibilities," the labor movement must make antiracism, antisexism, and antihomophobia foundational. This absurd argument that minority aggressiveness was responsible for white male backlash at the tail end of the 1960s masks the fact that the tragedy of most progressive movements in the United States has been white racism. As W. E. B. Du Bois, Dave Roediger, Alexander Saxton, Theodore Allen, Noel Ignatiev, Michael Goldfield, Eric Lott, David Wellman, and oth-

ers have demonstrated, racism has been a noose around white workers' necks since the American Revolution. In the South during Reconstruction, a misguided white majority sided with the wrong class and rejected the black workers and sharecroppers who proposed a Democratic South with massive land redistribution. Despite the fact that the black freedom struggle, in alliance with the radical wing of the Republican Party, enfranchised poor whites who did not have the right to vote before the Fifteenth Amendment, the vast majority of exploited white labor still chose color over class. And in California, it was precisely anti-Chinese sentiment that galvanized the multi-ethnic "white" working class and forged a dynamic union movement on the West Coast during the late nineteenth century. Of course, white workers were never uniformly racist and there are enough stories of interracial working-class solidarity to fill volumes. But we also must recognize the price these men and women had to pay: white workers willing to commit "race suicide" often faced the worst of state repression, ostracism, and sometimes criticism from within their own ranks. It is not an accident, for example, that the most militantly antiracist unions emerging out of the CIO campaigns of the 1930s and 1940s were the main targets of McCarthyite witch hunts.²³

I can not stress enough how important the fight against racism is right now, especially with a growing backlash against affirmative action under the guise of supporting a "color-blind" society. Anyone seriously concerned about the labor movement and building multiracial unity must recognize the fundamental role racism has played in destroying internationalism. Anti-immigrant sentiment, for instance, is not just about class anger, because there really is no mobilization against Canadians or European immigrants taking what are essentially skilled jobs. It is about dark people, whether wetbacks or some invisible Pacific Rim empire run by sneaky Orientalists. The history of conquest, repatriation in the Southwest, stereotypes of "Latin" hypersexuality, even racialized and gendered

myths of the welfare mother, are fundamental to understanding anti-immigrant sentiment, the English-only movement, and Proposition 187. They derive from a deep racism that conceals the structural relationship between the white middle class's standard of living and the exploitation of immigrant labor. As historian and social critic George Lipsitz explains,

In their television and newspaper advertisements, in public pronouncements and privately circulated propaganda, supporters of Proposition 187 relied on racist and sexist stereotypes, on the "menace" posed by Mexican women coming to California to have babies at taxpayers' expense. This argument has little basis in fact; the amount of public funds spent on pre-natal care and childbirth for undocumented immigrants is both minimal and cost-effective. Yet by feminizing and infantilizing the enemy, by connecting the social transgression of non-white immigrants coming to California with the fear of unrestrained "Latin" sexuality and procreation, the advocates of Proposition 187 "played the race card," evoking powerful stereotypes that are especially well-suited toward concealing the real social relations between undocumented immigrants and California's white voters.²⁴

Blanket support for "majoritarian" positions simply plays into American nationalism and chauvinism, reinforcing the very racist and sexist social policy that keeps poor people poor, the middle class relatively comfortable, men in positions to legislate women's lives, and whiteness on top. Besides, when have emancipatory politics ever reflected majoritarian principles? Activists of any kind have never been in the majority of any population, so what does this mean numbers crunching mean in terms of "majoritarian" ideology? As Jesse Lemisch makes clear, "many of our greatest successes have occurred when we have taken principled and unpopular stands and persuaded a majority. And the American left has contributed a good deal to the international left precisely because of its distinctive diversity."²⁵ The Labor Party, for example, was not created to represent the entire working class, but a vision of progressive class politics in

which social justice and workers' empowerment are central to the broader agenda. As Tomasky himself admits, in the 1990 elections 40 percent of the union membership voted Republican.²⁶ Labor parties in most countries never claimed to represent all opinions expressed by the working class, or even the majority opinion, but a largely social democratic vision rooted (at least theoretically) in the working class.

So, how might people build class-solidarity without suppressing or ignoring differences? How can we build on differences—by which I mean different kinds of oppressions as well as different identities—rather than in spite of them? One way to conceive of alliances across race and gender is as a set of “affiliations,” of building unity by supporting and perhaps even participating in other peoples' struggles for social justice. Basically, that old-fashioned IWW slogan, “An injury to one is an injury to all!” After all, contrary to the neo-Enlightenment narratives, African American social movements have been practicing this principle for a very long time: black male abolitionists supported woman suffrage when few white men would; black radicals throughout the early part of the century supported the Irish struggle for self-determination; black soldiers and journalists shed tears at the sight of Nazi death camps; and after Roosevelt, we have been mainstays in the Democratic Party even to our own detriment. Black trade unions were never exclusionary; black labor leaders did not implement Jim Crow locals. And when the Chinese Exclusion Act seemed to have universal support among non-Asian workers, it was a black man, Frank Ferrell of the Knights of Labor, who told his comrades that they ought to organize the Chinese rather than attack them.²⁷

In short, it is ludicrous to blame so-called identity politics of the 1960s for the collapse of the Left, the derailment of progressive social movements, or our inability to roll back poverty and unbridled corporate wealth. We have others to thank for that: Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, George Bush, Bill Clinton, white flight, red squads,

redlining, Contra-backed crack dealers, economic restructuring, the NRA, right-wing think tanks, complacent labor leaders . . . and the list goes on. Of course, the Left—whatever that means now—is not blameless. The scars of sectarianism run deep and trace their roots to the glorious days when the Old Marxists were supposedly more “universal.” Street fights erupted between socialists and anarchists; battles raged between the Trotskyists and Stalinists and a variety of sects claiming to be the true heirs of Lenin. And then China entered the picture, along with Albania. These battles within the Marxist world contributed more to the internal implosion and proliferation of left-wing parties than feminism and black nationalism.

Although identity politics sometimes works as a fetter on genuine multiracial/multicultural alliances, I believe it has also enriched our conception of class, not moved us away from it. Indeed, there are many serious scholars—I count myself among them—trying to understand how various forms of fellowship, racial solidarity, communion, the creation of sexual communities, and nationalisms shape class politics and cross-racial alliances. We are grappling with how self-love and solidarity in a hostile context of white supremacy, the embrace of certain vernaculars, and community institutions, can be expressions of racial *and* class solidarity, and how class and racial solidarity are gendered. Not to recognize this is to wonder why more West Indian workers participate in Carnival than in the Labor Day parade, or why 1199 had the foresight and vision to maintain an 1199 float and/or banner in the West Indian Day parade. Those who pine for the good old days before identity politics, when class struggle was simply rough guys who understood that simply fighting the bosses united us, forget that Yiddish was a source of solidarity within the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, to the point where union leaders were offering courses in Yiddish for Black and Puerto Rican workers in the late 1950s. *Identity politics, in other words, has always been central to working-class movements, from minstrelsy on up.*

More importantly, a careful examination of the movements dismissed as particularistic shows that they are often "radical humanist" at their core and potentially emancipatory for all of us. We need to seriously re-think some of these movements, shifting our perspective from the margins to the center. We must look beyond wedge issues or "minority issues" and begin to pay attention to what these movements are advocating, imagining, building. After all, the analyses, theories, and visions emerging out of the Black Liberation movements, the Chicano and Asian American movements, the gay and lesbian movements, and the women's movements, may just free us all. To extend the metaphor a bit, we simply can not afford to abandon the subway, with all of its multicultural messiness, to jump on board the Enlightenment train of pure, simple, color- and gender-blind class struggle. Neither Locke nor Jefferson offers a truly emancipatory vision—not then and certainly not now. Attempts to "transcend" (read: outgrow) our race and sex does not make for a unified working class. What does is recognition of the multiplicity of experiences and perspectives and a willingness to fight on all fronts—irrespective of what "the majority" thinks. We need to recognize the importance of environmental justice for the inner city; the critical role of antiracism for white workers' own survival; the necessity of men to fight for women's rights and heterosexuals to raise their voices against homophobia. It is in struggle that one learns about power and how it operates, and that one can imagine a different world. And it is in struggle, not in the resurrection of ideas that have also provided the intellectual justification for modern racism, imperialism, and the traffic of human beings, that we must begin to develop a new vision. It is to those contemporary struggles that I now turn.

CHAPTER FIVE

LOOKING FORWARD:

How the New Working Class Can Transform Urban America

The people who dominate the inner cities numerically cannot possibly work out a plan or have any programme by which they can improve their own situation which does not take into consideration the city as a whole. A new situation has arisen for the urban black, for thinking in terms of the whole city means that you are automatically thinking in terms of the state and from the state you find yourself facing the whole nation.

—C. L. R. JAMES,
Black People in the Urban Areas of the United States, 1970

James's insights from over a quarter century ago still hold true. The predominantly black, Latino, and Asian American working classes who occupy our cities can win only if they are willing to challenge the problems of the whole city—together. Corporate downsizing, deindustrialization, racist and sexist social policy, and the erosion of the welfare state do not respect the boundaries between work and community, the household and public space. The battle for liv-