

## Discourses on Race and the Role of Government

*This country will not change until it reexamines itself and discovers what it really means by freedom... (It) is an inexorable law that one cannot deny the humanity of another without diminishing ones own.* James Baldwin (Goldfield, p. 349)

Freedom, liberty, equality and democracy have ever-changing and contested meanings in America. For people of color, much of daily life experience suggests that ‘freedom’ and ‘liberty’ are linked to hollow promises. Social movements based on the advancement of people of color have challenged America to embrace a ‘wider vision of freedom’ and an expansive understanding of democracy. At the heart of these struggles is the need to build progressive power. As the following overview of historic debates about race and the role of government suggests, advancing progressive agendas that challenge the injustices in our society requires building and sustaining broad-based, multi-racial coalitions united around both racial and economic justice demands.

Economic populism that does not embrace racial justice falls short of the mark, in terms of building power, in part because our opponents use race so effectively to undermine progressive agendas. Likewise, race-based politics that does not include economic justice falls short in terms of building sufficient power to challenge the forms of economic inequality that hold back the promise of civil rights. At the heart of both economic and racial justice struggles is a contest over the role of government in a democratic society. Should government actively promote economic and social equality, through anti-poverty programs, public investments, civil rights and labor laws and regulatory frameworks that protect peoples’ health, safety and economic wellbeing? Or should government provide minimal legal protections while leaving it up to communities to raise themselves up through self-help initiatives? How does a democratic government protect minority rights and interests in the face of the ‘tyranny of the majority’?

The African American experience is imprinted on the wide spectrum of debates about the role of government. It is through African American struggles—from Abolition through Civil Rights to Black Power, from the Rainbow Coalition and current forms of black activism—that we can see the contours of the debate about race and government most clearly. For immigrants of color, the relationship to government is complicated by the role that government institutions play in enforcing immigration and citizenship laws. The implications for democratic governance are important to consider, as anti-immigrant sentiment and policy are effective ways to divide constituencies against one another. The negative experience with ‘government as we know it,’ discourages political participation among recent immigrants. The Native American experience with government is even more complicated. Native Nations’ relationships with the U.S. Government have ranged from attempts to obtain tribal neutrality during the Revolutionary War, through assimilation policies of the late 1800’s to the current emphasis on self-determination. This particular strand of history deserves its own careful examination.<sup>1</sup> Workers of all races and ethnicities also have a mixed relationship with government, at times struggling within a legal structure that favors private property, and at times advocating militant resistance against ‘wage slavery,’ corporate domination of political parties and capitalism itself. For workers of color, class oppression and

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<sup>1</sup> This overview is not comprehensive. While it touches upon the experiences and perspectives of diverse groups of people who have been involved in struggles for social change over the years, *the lens is more narrowly focused on the contours of the debates about race and government.* The resources we draw upon—mostly from social movement scholars and historians—tap into archives about ideologies and belief systems that have informed various positions on government’s role in promoting justice, equality and freedom. There are many other narratives about race and the state that time and space have not allowed us to examine closely. Please feel free to supplement these examples with others.

race oppression intersect to shape attitudes towards the role of government in both economic and social life. For white workers, sometimes race gets in the way of seeing a common enemy in corporate domination of politics and the economy. Many have argued that racism is the main reason that the American working class, on the whole, is less class conscious than workers throughout the rest of the world.

Examining the relationship between ideas about race and ideas about government helps us bring into greater focus key questions about power: the limits that the current debate about government places on our legislative and electoral work (first face); the implications for building new relationships and a truly multi-racial progressive movement infrastructure (second face), and the central role of ideology and worldview in keeping social movements apart, in dividing constituencies against each other, and in stigmatizing all attempts to define an activist role for government in bringing about equality and creating conditions for more democratic power relations in the U.S. (third face).

We start with an assertion: to understand the Right's success in stigmatizing a progressive role for government, we have to deal with the way race is used. Likewise, to challenge racism and promote racial justice, we have to reclaim a progressive role for government. With this assertion in mind, we offer the following tour of major historical eras, starting with post-Civil War era of Reconstruction.

## Reconstruction Era

We begin with Reconstruction for two reasons: First, this was a time in which the nation was sharply divided between those who supported an active, central role for government in promoting some form of racial justice, including redistribution, and those who felt that government intervention in social and economic orders and traditions was one of the worst forms of tyranny. The contours of the debate about race and government were very similar to the ones we see in the U.S. today. The outcome of this debate—and the triumph of 'states' rights'—had far-reaching and chilling effects on efforts to combine economic and racial justice. The second reason is that Reconstruction held such promise for the newly freed slaves. The experiences that mass numbers of African Americans had for that brief time after the war brought to life a determination to fight for full participation in political life.

Social scientist Robin D.G. Kelley looks back on Reconstruction and wonders at what might have been:

Imagine what the entire world would have looked like had the federal government fully empowered ex-slaves, allowed them to keep their guns and the vote, handed over the land on which they worked and allowed them to organize production on their own terms, and dismantled the master class (after all, they were war criminals). The death of Reconstruction was a tragedy not only for black people but for American democracy as a whole. "Democracy died save in the hearts of black folk," W.E.B. Du Bois told us in *Black Reconstruction in America*. (Kelley, p. 101)

A dense web of social organizations developed across the South. Black schools and churches, burial societies, debating clubs, fire companies, trade associations and more, became the backbone for broad political organizing. These networks mobilized mass numbers of African Americans to impact elections through both voter turn-out and candidate recruitment. Between 1870 and 1896, 22 African Americans were elected to Congress. By 1901, Congress was again a segregated institution. It would be almost 100 years before African Americans would serve in Congress again.

Reconstruction provided the first opportunity for mass numbers of blacks to combine ideological debate with political activity, organization and mobilization. The contours of the debate among African

Americans ranged from a form of egalitarian liberalism to a more radical, black-nationalist vision for a new social order.

### **The Role of the Federal Government during Reconstruction**

The Freedman's Bureau had broad duties and authority to assist newly freed slaves in the transition. Just after the war, the Bureau controlled large amounts of abandoned land. Some of this was distributed to former slaves, or 'freedmen.' Congress entertained bills to confiscate more land from planters and redistribute it to former slaves and to poor whites. While these bills never became law, confiscations did take place on a smaller scale.

Redistribution was done more indirectly through special taxes. For example, in South Carolina, taxes on planters were dramatically increased in order to support broad social programs. The penalties for failure to pay were severe, often leading to outright land seizures. State land commissions bought out bankrupt farmers. In Colleton County in South Carolina in the 1870s, several large plantations were being run collectively by a black laborers' society. In parts of Georgia, post-war government policies, growing black political power and lack of Northern investment provided conditions under which African Americans enjoyed extensive land ownership.

During Reconstruction, the labor movement was divided in its strategy. Unfortunately, ambivalence about joining forces with a new army of workers—the newly freed-slaves—fractured the movement. Economic conditions were ripe for labor insurgency. The sharp divisions between northern and southern capital could have worked to labor's advantage. W.E.B. Du Bois reflected on labor's missed opportunity in his landmark book, *Black Reconstruction*:

The South, after the war, presented the greatest opportunity for a real national labor movement which the nation ever saw or is likely to see for many decades. Yet the labor movement, with but few exceptions, never realized the situation. It never had the intelligence or knowledge, as a whole, to see in black slavery and Reconstruction, the kernel and meaning of the labor movement in the United States. (Quoted in Goldfield, p.113)

### **The Demise of Reconstruction**

Reconstruction efforts were greatly undermined by voting fraud in the South, economic intimidation, violence, and political murders on a scale never before or since seen in the United States. Violence on the part of whites against Blacks was widespread and mostly unpunished. The final blow to Reconstruction was the Compromise of 1877. During the 1886 election, the Republicans wanted to regain the White House. In order to gain Southern votes, the GOP quietly agreed to withdraw troops from the South. This effectively ended Reconstruction. Both parties had turned their backs on the recently emancipated slaves.

With the death of Reconstruction came the triumph of 'States' Rights.' This has always been a tension in the United States: How strong should the Federal Government be? How much of economic and social life should be legislated and regulated by the states? From the time of the Constitutional Convention, southern politicians have used 'states rights' arguments to prevent the federal 'imposition' of universal civil rights and civil liberties standards. The Supreme Court has tended to lean toward states' rights through most of its history, with the exception of the period between 1946 and 1974. African American activists and leaders from Reconstruction onward have understood the vital role of the Federal government in establishing and enforcing civil rights. Racial justice activists have seen through states' rightists' appeals to local, direct democracy as a smokescreen for maintaining white supremacy and power. Still, the 'states' rights' principle has indelibly shaped American governance, and notions of what democracy means.

## The Populist Era of the 1880s and 90s

From the end of the Civil War until the turn of the century, farmers in the Midwest, parts of the West and throughout the South mobilized on a large scale. Farmers were developing an intense class consciousness. They were joined by more radical forces in the labor movement. Together, they pushed for government intervention against monopoly powers and economic exploitation. Here are some highlights of populist activism:

**The Grange.** Founded in 1867, the Patrons of Husbandry, or Grange, took an economic approach to solving farmers' problems at first by establishing cooperatives. Although officially non-partisan, the Grange promoted state-level railroad and grain elevator regulation with significant effect in the Midwest. The Supreme Court, however, ruled the state "Granger Laws" unconstitutional in *Wabash v. Illinois* in 1886. This became the catalyst for establishing the federal Interstate Commerce Commission in 1887.

The **Farmers' Alliance** gave voice to poor farmers throughout the Midwest and the South. In the 1870s, farmers in the Midwest and Western regions surprised both parties by voting for independent legislators and judges. In the 1880s and 90s, well-organized alliances of farmers and workers became a major force in U.S. politics. The Farmers' Alliance formed their own political party—the **Populist Party** (aka the Peoples' Party). As Lawrence Goodwyn argues in *The Populist Moment*, the Alliance may have moved too quickly toward an independent party formation.

The **Knights of Labor** became a national force in the late 1870s. It offered workers of all races, skills, and sexes an alternative to the reigning exploitative culture. The Knights formally opposed the wage system and called for land reform, the eight-hour work day, monetary reform, an end to child and convict labor, and equal rights for women. Unable to move the mainstream parties on their issues, the Knights organized third party efforts in 189 towns and 34 states in the mid-1880s, with significant success. Labor's national third party effort of 1888, the Union Labor Party, was a failure.

The **American Federation of Labor** (AFL), founded in 1886, promoted the tactic of working within the contemporary political structure through strikes, lobbying, and selected political endorsements of individuals. Unions in the AFL were fractured by ethnicity, skills, and sex. At the same time, its decentralized organizational structure accommodated ethnic diversity.

Destruction of the Populist Movement in the South

White southern populists were among the most radical activists of the era. They realized that they could not succeed without African American support. Questions of race were integral to the development of this most militant agrarian revolt. In the 1890s, black and white farmers briefly joined hands to fight against banks, railroad magnates and trusts. Here's an example:

In 1896 the Populist Party platform of Georgia contained a plank denouncing lynching. When an African American populist was threatened with lynching, 2 thousand armed white farmers, some of whom rode all night, responded to the party's call for aid and maintained guard for two nights to avert the threat of violence. (Woodward, p 161)

Still, the violence, lynching, murder, corruption and electoral fraud that had been permitted in the 1870s proved too overwhelming to dislodge. Populists experienced violent repression. Whites who preached solidarity with Blacks were intimidated; their potential supporters often succumbed to racist appeals for white solidarity. Populist candidates were denied victories through ballot-box stuffing and theft of boxes in populist strongholds. Populism in the South was forcibly split along racial lines.

## Race and Party Politics in the Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century

The struggle around race was significant for both Republicans and populist/progressives. The Republican Party had an economic agenda that favored a stronger role for government in curbing monopoly abuses, protecting farmers and workers to some extent, and fighting corruption. Republican efforts to protect African-American rights during the Populist Era often were either ineffective or quickly subverted. Democrats denounced the GOP as the "Party of Negro Domination," a reference to the assumption that African-Americans had dominated Reconstruction. Relatively high levels of African-American voting in the 1870s began to decline by the 1880s as an intense wave of racism swept the South. The Federal Elections Bill of 1890 was the GOP's last formal attempt to defend African-American voting rights during this era.

**The Jim Crow Regime.** The Jim Crow era in American history began in the late 1890s, when southern states began systematically to codify (or strengthen) in law and state constitutional provisions the subordinate position of African Americans in society. Most of these legal steps were aimed at separating the races in public spaces (public schools, parks, accommodations, and transportation) and preventing black men from exercising the right to vote. In every state of the former Confederacy, the system of legalized segregation and disfranchisement was fully in place by 1910. Segregation laws gained significant impetus from U. S. Supreme Court rulings in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Notably, the Court overturned the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which had stipulated equal access to all public accommodations. The Court argued that Constitution's equal protection provision did not protect people of color from discrimination by private businesses and individuals. This was followed by the 'separate, but equal' principle established in *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

## Progressive Era: 1904-1924

The Progressive Era was the beginning of the growth in the role of government in the 20th-century. During this era, and its prelude (1887-1901), the American people saw the beginnings of federal regulation of business through regulatory commissions and antitrust laws, the establishment of an income tax system, federal food and drug regulation, the Federal Reserve Board, and environmental conservation. Mostly, these achievements were good and beneficial to all Americans. Many of these advances can be traced back to the efforts of the Populist movement.

Several notable progressive-era leaders shared a vision of activist government that promoted both racial and economic justice. Many of these activists were feminists who fought for women's right to vote. Ida B. Wells-Barnett was a leader of the campaign to end lynching, a suffragist who challenged white feminists to embrace racial justice and link women's suffrage to African American suffrage, a founder of the NAACP and a candidate for Congress. She also was born into slavery during the Civil War.

Wells-Barnett understood that violence against African Americans in the South was motivated by two factors: a desire to preserve the ante-bellum social order of white supremacy and domination, and a lesson to African Americans that it was dangerous to aspire to have economic and political power. Her efforts against lynching shaped a progressive political analysis of race and economics that put her at odds with more conservative black leaders, like Booker T. Washington, and with white progressives who preferred race-neutral economic populism.

## Progressive Era Discourses on Race

While black leaders like Wells-Barnett and W.E.B. Du Bois had relationships with and connections to the Progressive Party and progressives in the Republican Party, they often complained about the lack of attention to civil rights and racial justice among white progressives.

Here's an example. Theodore Roosevelt was elected in 1901 after running as a progressive Republican. He courted black voters and, during his first term, he made some appointments to minor government positions. While many Black leaders had supported Roosevelt in 1901, when he ran as a Progressive in 1912, all the major African American organizations went against him and the Progressive Party.

One reason is that the Progressive Party Platform made no mention of race or civil rights. On the whole, the party's platform was remarkable—pro-labor, pro-farmer—full of proposals that we can scarcely dream of putting forward today. And yet, its inattention to race shows how white progressives of the day failed to rise above the prejudices of their time.

## The New Deal Era

*For almost the first time in the history of the nation, the state has done something substantial in a social way without excluding the Negro. (Myrdal 1944, p. 203)*

It seems ironic that a crisis like the Great Depression would open up political space to challenge the Jim Crow Regime. While politics and social relations were only partly reformed during the 30s and early 40s, the shifting role of government and the progressive coalitions that came together at that time paved the way for the Civil Rights Movement. As the nation debated the role of government in addressing poverty and unemployment, and in stabilizing the economy, African Americans and civil rights activists saw an opportunity to use government to fight economic discrimination and to redress its consequences. The New Deal reforms brought hope that things could change, and faith that the Federal government (as opposed to states) would intervene on behalf of people of color. The mood was summed up in this way:

For the most part, race was a secondary issue for the New Deal. Civil rights activists within the Roosevelt administration tended to push for race-neutral programs that they believed would benefit African Americans. Unfortunately, race-neutral policies often served to strengthen the already existing system of racial discrimination, precisely because they insisted on ignoring the impact of race. The Federal government rarely included non-discrimination clauses or mandates in New Deal program implementation. In many cases, the Administration cut deals with Southern Dixiecrats in order to get bills through the Senate.

A notorious example of the Administration's compromises on race is the Wagner Act, which established the right to organize unions for industrial workers. To appease southern senators, the Administration agreed to exclude agricultural workers from the Act. This had the effect of excluding the majority of black workers in the South from labor rights and protections. Race and class considerations worked together to determine both the scope and the limitations of the New Deal programs.

Despite widespread discrimination and the Administration's unwillingness to directly confront racist exclusions from the programs, the New Deal did benefit African Americans in a number of ways. Moreover, multiracial coalitions that supported the New Deal became a powerful base within the Democratic Party for the next 30 years. The coalition included the new, radical Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), urban housing and anti-poverty activists, the organized Left, including the American Communist Party, the Progressive Party, the Non-partisan leagues in the Midwest, and rural activists in the Midwest and South. Within the Democratic Party, these forces mobilized to counter the

power of the Dixiecrats, bringing to bear pressure from FDR's left. They insisted that the Party serve the working-class and the poor of all races, not big business and Southern planters. These alliances became the backbone of progressive, pro-civil rights and labor policies in the 1960s.

## The New Deal During World War II

For the Administration, economic security was seen as fundamental to national security. Roosevelt argued that a decent standard of living for all individuals was essential for peace and that 'freedom from fear is eternally linked with freedom from want.' In a bold move, Roosevelt proposed that America needed a second "Bill of Rights." Here is a summary of FDR's proposal:

Certain economic truths have become self-evident. We have accepted, so to speak, a second Bill of Rights.

- The right to a useful and remunerative job in the industries or shops or farms or mines of the nation;
- The right to earn enough to provide adequate food and clothing and recreation;
- The right of every farmer to raise and sell his products at a return which will give him and his family a decent living;
- The right of every businessman, large and small, to trade in an atmosphere of freedom from unfair competition and domination by monopolies at home and abroad;
- The right of every family to a decent home;
- The right to adequate medical care and the opportunity to achieve and enjoy good health;
- The right to adequate protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment;
- The right to a good education.

(Cass Sunstein, *Harper's Magazine*, p. 15)

The spirit of this Second Bill of Rights, and the role of government in guaranteeing these rights, had some influence on the Supreme Court. A number of rulings issued between 1946 and 1974 broadened the government's role and responsibility for guaranteeing social and economic equality. By 1974 the Court had backed off of rulings that included social and economic guarantees. No further legal safeguards were instituted for the poor.

Unfortunately, FDR's proposed Bill of Rights contains no statements about racial equality—another sign of the limits of 'race-neutral' approaches. During WWII, segregation and discrimination in the military became a domestic civil rights battleground. The Undersecretary of War publicly defended segregation, stating that the 'policy of the War Department is not to intermingle colored and enlisted personnel in the same regimental organizations.' (Goldfield, p. 210)

## The Civil Rights Movement and the Great Society

Prior to the Civil Rights Movement of the late 50s and early 60s, many liberal-leaning thinkers had begun to despair that change could happen through either moral suasion or by working the political process, in part because of blacks' numerical minority status and in part because of deeply entrenched prejudices in white society. In the 1930s, a pessimistic W.E.B. Du Bois wrote:

I began to realize that (the demands black people were making) in America ... could only be gained as the majority of Americans were persuaded of the rightness of our cause and joined with us in demanding our recognition as full citizens. This process must deal not only with conscious

rational action, but with the irrational and conscious habit, long buried in folkways and custom. Slowly but surely I came to see that for many years, perhaps many generations, we could not count on any such majority; that the whole set of the white world in America, in Europe, and in the world was too determinedly against racial equality to give power and persuasiveness to our agitation. [Dawson, p 18]

Civil rights leaders had to convince African Americans that it was possible to work within American liberal traditions to bring about racial equality and justice while at the same time convincing white Americans that they had an investment in supporting the expansion of democracy and freedom that were at the heart of African American demands. This was not an easy task, and it underscored the limited understandings and practices of American Democracy, as well as the meaning of freedom and equality.

### **Contours of the African-American Debate about Civil Rights**

*The American Negro has the great advantage of never having believed that collection of myths to which white America clings.* James Baldwin (Goldfield, p. 341)

Throughout US history, African American leaders have debated, sometimes hotly, whether blacks should put great efforts into voter participation and involvement in civic life. More integrationist-oriented leaders were inclined to seek support of progressive whites.

Bedrock themes of American society were tapped as a way to illustrate the rightness of the civil rights demands. Martin Luther King, Jr. put it this way:

When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir... It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note in so far as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given Negro people a bad check; a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.'" (quoted in Dawson, p 16)

Black nationalist ideas also held sway among many African Americans. The most famous variations of black nationalist thought took shape in the 1920s with Marcus Garvey as its articulate spokesman. This thread of debate was picked up by the Nation of Islam, most famously proclaimed by the young Malcolm X. Later in the mid-60s, the Black Panther Party would embrace a form of nationalism. As the more liberal-oriented, egalitarian leaders of the Civil Rights movement began to embrace economic justice demands in the mid to late 60s, both segments of the movement began to intersect. King's speech against the Vietnam War in 1967 signaled a radical turn: "Now, when I say question the whole society, it means ultimately coming to see that the problem of racism, the problem of exploitation, and the problem of war are all tied together. These are the triple evils that are interrelated." (quoted in Dawson, p 33)

### **The Role of Government during the Civil Rights Movement**

The relationship between civil rights leaders like Dr. King and government leaders, like Kennedy and Johnson, was complex. The movement employed an insider-outsider strategy. This did yield some stunning victories for the movement in the early 1960s.

**The Great Society.** Those who acted on the 'inside' of government were able to impact the direction of bold new government programs. Like the New Deal Era, this was a period in which the Federal government assumed responsibility for eradicating poverty and improving the quality of life for all

Americans. Thanks in large part to the Civil Rights movement, Great Society programs were decidedly race-conscious. 'Ending racism' was one of the explicitly stated goals of the Great Society.

In his first State of the Union address on June 8, 1964, Johnson announced: "This Administration declares unconditional war on poverty in America." The first major offensive in this new war was the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, which established new agencies and myriad programs. The Economic Opportunity Act was bold legislation, but it received only about \$1 billion to divide among the various programs and remained critically under funded. By 1966, Congress appropriated \$4 billion for the programs.

Many of the programs growing out of the Act were focused on the problems of urban America. These included Head Start, Job Corps, Neighborhood Youth Corps and VISTA. These were implemented in race-conscious ways—to develop wider opportunities for African Americans. To help empower urban poor communities suffering under twin evils of racism and poverty, the Administration supported community action programs, called CAPs. These programs emphasized local leadership development and organization, with the understanding that local community leaders could design and implement anti-poverty initiatives such as job training and advocacy for better housing, health care and so on. CAPs ran afoul of local politicians, who did not take kindly to a federal program that bypassed them, sending federal money directly to poor urban and rural communities. The principle of 'maximum participation' on the part of the poor bumped up against local power elites. In most cases, racism was a factor in resistance to Model Cities programs.

**Retreating from the War on Poverty.** After 1965, intensified involvement in Vietnam pushed domestic social policies of the Great Society aside. Had the United States not become involved in Vietnam, historians today would likely remember President Johnson for his leadership in passing civil rights legislation and for his declaration of a "War on Poverty." The Vietnam War, however, proved to be Johnson's downfall. The history and domestic impact of this war are fascinating and extraordinarily important.

### **From Hope to Despair: African American Disillusionment**

Ralph Bunche summed up the feelings of many black Americans at the end of the 1960s when he said:

Now, after a long-enduring faith and patience, without parallel, I think, in human history, the black citizen has lost his patience—and his fear—and is, I am afraid, also losing his faith in the American establishment and system insofar as their promises to him are concerned. He is demanding, not appealing, nowadays, and his demands begin to take unexpected courses—courses which could only be born out of profound frustration and complete disillusionment. [Dawson, p 273]

While there were a couple of notable efforts to promote racial and economic justice in the early 1970s, the political will was weak. Movements were too fragmented to bring consistent pressure to bear from the left. While the Democratic Party was in disarray, the Republicans were beginning to reap the benefits of their new 'Southern Strategy,' which consisted of dipping into the Democrat's white southern base by tapping the racist vein. Loss of faith in government intensified throughout the 70s as Watergate, stagnant wages, and continuing decline in urban areas combined to convince many Americans—white and black—that government was not the best way to address poverty.

## Reagan and Beyond 1980s-90s

In 1980, the Republicans were ready to reap the benefits of racial polarization and widespread loss of faith in government. Reagan began his campaign in a segregationist stronghold in Mississippi, a very calculated move. He succeeded in shifting the party loyalties of many in the white working class and among white southerners who, like their predecessors during Reconstruction, saw the Democratic Party as 'the party of Negro domination.' (During Reconstruction, the Republicans were taunted with this label; now it was the Democrats' turn).

Meanwhile, the more moderate and conservative forces within the Democratic Party sought to distance themselves from their associations with Big Government and Civil Rights. In 1984, long-time Democratic Party activist Harry McPherson told the *Washington Post*: "Blacks own the Democratic Party. White Protestant male Democrats are an endangered species." As these voices gained ground within the Party, the multi-racial New Deal coalition began to fray, as did the Party's traditional support for a New Deal-type role for government. This further strengthened the Republicans' ideological campaign to stigmatize all government programs by using race. Another contributing factor was the material reality facing the working class: government, indeed, did not seem to be on their side. Since 1974, workers faced stagnating wages, the upheavals of deindustrialization, weakening union density and an unfriendly National Labor Relations Board. All of these factors, combined, left white workers feeling that no one was on their side anymore. They were susceptible to arguments that blame big government, bloated bureaucracy and an unfair tax burden, with subtle as well as explicit appeals to racism. This diverted workers' attention away from corporate domination of both parties.

The Republican's overwhelming success in the 80s is very much in evidence today. There is hardly a contemporary political issue that is not imbued with racial overtones: welfare reform, drugs, crime, the death penalty, urban crises, immigration, Affirmative Action, etc. These racialized debates dominated the political scene throughout the late 80s and 90s.

Unfortunately, the Republicans had help from some Democrats and liberals who thought the path to power lay in renouncing many New Deal and Great Society principles about the role of government. They began to embrace programs like 'empowerment zones' that claimed to set up private-public partnerships to reinvest in urban communities and encourage local entrepreneurship. That these programs mostly turned out to be corporate boondoggles should be no surprise. Without a stronger role for government, corporations were free to take the money and run.

**The Rise of Black Conservatism.** A black conservative strain in American politics first developed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, embodied by the self-help teachings of Booker T. Washington. It re-emerged in the 80s. The black conservatism of today blames government for many of the problems confronting black communities. This argument is summed up best and most simply by political scientist Walter Williams: "Blacks are disadvantaged because of government intervention." (Dawson, p 281).

Today's black conservatives borrow Booker T. Washington's theme of uplift as well as his disdain for 'racial agitation.' The basic prescription for advancement is summed up by Glenn Loury: " (Booker T.) Washington's strategy of a century ago is still relevant as he advocated a conservative philosophy for advancement based on direct empowerment of the poor, relying significantly on self-help, and dubious about the ability of government programs to resolve the deepest problems afflicting black society." (Dawson, p 288).

## The Rainbow Insurgency

The presidential campaigns of Jesse Jackson in 1984 and 88 represented significant opportunities for a multi-racial coalition to reclaim and reconstitute the civil-rights/New Deal roots of the Democratic Party. While no one expected Jackson to win the Party nomination in either race, many progressives saw in his campaigns an opportunity to build an electoral movement that would last far beyond the elections, one that would put progressives back into the fight for power. In 1984, many white leftists and progressives were slow to understand the importance of the Jackson campaign. By 1988, there was far more involvement by the left, including white progressives in labor, anti-poverty movements, Central America solidarity and peace movements, and among women's groups. White progressives were joined by Asians, Latinos and Native Americans, and a strong base in African American communities. To capture the momentum from 1988, these forces came together in the Rainbow Coalition.

A combination of factors led to the demise of this unfortunately short-lived rainbow; time and space do not permit us to do justice to this part of recent history. We mention the Rainbow Coalition here because it contained many positive and hopeful lessons that are quite relevant for us today. One such lesson is the importance of combining race with economic justice. Jackson tapped into growing anger and frustration in the U.S. political scene among both historically and newly disenfranchised sectors. He spoke to economic justice without abandoning the question of race. Jackson, and many other political leaders of the late 80s and early 90s, avoided the classic error of so many white progressives who have attempted to build unity by only addressing economic issues. His appeal to white labor and farmers surprised white progressives and raised alarm bells for many moderate Democrats.

## The Nineties: New Democrats, Race and Government

Throughout the 90s, Democratic Party consultants and pollsters offered their analysis of Democratic losses in the 80s. One popular argument emphasized the public perception that the Democrats were the party of big government programs for the undeserving poor (we can read 'people of color' into this phrase).

**Stigmatizing taxes using race.** Many New Democrats, represented well by the Democratic Leadership Council, would argue that, by the late 1960s the Party had fallen victim to an ideological liberalism that carried it beyond programs taxing the few for the benefit of the many to programs taxing the many on behalf of the few.

When Clinton declared "the era of big government is over," and pledged to "end welfare as we know it," his words signaled the ultimate success of the Republicans' attacks on government. Democratic centrists saw Clinton's electoral success as vindication of their argument that the party must move away from its support of big government programs. According to the DLC, "Bill Clinton would not have been able to win the election if he had not run as a New Democrat, addressing the problems of cultural breakdown, the perceived practical failures of government, and public doubts about the welfare state." (Perlstein, p. 8)

## The New Millennium

*Class is lived through race and gender. Social movements based on race, gender or sexuality are essential to the emancipation of the whole. (Kelley, p. 11)*

The deep fissure of race continues to undermine efforts to build a broad multiracial coalition. As we look back over the history of struggles for progressive policies and for activist, democratic government, we can see great moments when multi-racial efforts brought about significant reforms. We also see how these and other efforts sometimes fall short, either because their opponents successfully used race to divide

constituencies, or because white progressives did not recognize the need to join economic justice with racial justice. This combination is essential for building progressive power today.

Race is not an add-on in U.S. politics. Too many white liberals and progressives fail to grasp this lesson. Any progressive movement infrastructure that hopes to contend for power needs a base in communities of color. Only such a movement will have the moral authority to challenge the collective injustices of U.S. society.

In 2000, the importance of race in elections slapped us in the face. We are hopeful that 2004 will be different. In reflecting on the 2000 experience and the challenges and opportunities that progressives face today, Michael Dawson poses the following question:

How do progressives avoid alienating white voters, skeptical at best of a political party too closely identified with blacks, without further alienating a black electorate that is increasingly disillusioned, and which could either withdraw from the electoral process or turn to a more nationalistic agenda? (Dawson in the *Boston Review*, p 14)

A great deal is riding on our struggles to answer this question, for the upcoming election and well beyond.

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