

## INTRODUCTION

# Black Awakening in Obama's America

*I am not sad that black Americans are rebelling; this was not only inevitable but eminently desirable. Without this magnificent ferment among Negroes, the old evasions and procrastinations would have continued indefinitely. Black men have slammed the door shut on a past of deadening passivity. Except for the Reconstruction years, they have never in their long history on American soil struggled with such creativity and courage for their freedom. These are our bright years of emergence; though they are painful ones, they cannot be avoided. . . . In these trying circumstances, the black revolution is much more than a struggle for the rights of Negroes. It is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws—racism, poverty, militarism, and materialism. It is exposing the evils that are rooted deeply in the whole structure of our society. It reveals systemic rather than superficial flaws and suggests that radical reconstruction of society itself is the real issue to be faced. . . . Today's dissenters tell the complacent majority that the time has come when further evasion of social responsibility in a turbulent world will court disaster and death. America has not yet changed because so many think it need not change, but this is the illusion of the damned. America must change because twenty-three million black citizens will no longer live supinely in a wretched past. They have left the valley of despair; they have found strength in struggle. Joined by white allies, they will shake the prison walls until they fall. America must change.*

—Martin Luther King Jr., “A Testament of Hope,” 1969

Martin Luther King Jr. wrote these words in the weeks before his assassination, while the “eminently desirable” Black rebellion rose in the streets of the United States, exposing the triumphalist rhetoric of the American dream as meaningless. While the United States may have been considered an “affluent society,” for the vast majority of African Americans, unemployment, underemployment, substandard housing, and police brutality constituted what Malcolm X once described as an “American nightmare.” Indeed, the relentless burden of those conditions would propel more than half a million African Americans—almost the same number of troops sent to fight in Vietnam—to rise up in the “land of the free” over the course of the 1960s.

It is almost never useful to compare eras; it is even less useful to look at the past and say nothing has changed. But in King’s words are painful continuities between the present and the past that remind us that, in some cases, the past is not yet past. Over the course of ten months, spanning from the summer and fall of 2014 into the winter and spring of 2015, the United States was rocked by mass protests, led by African Americans in response to the police murder of a young Black man, Michael Brown. In the summer heat of August, the people of Ferguson, Missouri, rose up and brought the world’s attention to the crisis of racist policing practices in the United States. Eight months later, some forty miles from the nation’s capital, the city of Baltimore exploded in fury at the police killing of young Freddie Gray.

King’s words could easily describe the emergence of this protest movement. What began as a local struggle of ordinary Black people in Ferguson, who for more than one hundred days “slammed the door shut on deadening passivity” in the pursuit of justice for Brown, has grown into a national movement against police brutality and daily police killings of unarmed African Americans. It is no exaggeration to say that the men and women in blue patrolling the streets of the United States have been given a license to kill—and have demonstrated a consistent propensity to use it. More often than not, police violence, including murder and attempted murder, is directed at African Americans. Take Philadelphia: the birthplace of American democracy but also home to one of the most brutal police departments in the country. When the Department of Justice (DOJ) conducted an investigation of the Philadelphia Police Department from 2007 to 2013, it found that

80 percent of the people Philadelphia police officers had shot were African American, even though less than half the city's population is African American.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most important finding, though, is that despite police shootings of unarmed people in violation of the force's own standards and rules, it is virtually impossible to punish—let alone indict, jail, or prosecute—police for this criminal behavior. For example, in Philadelphia, of 382 shootings by police, only 88 officers were found to have violated department policy. In 73 percent of those cases there was no suspension or termination.<sup>2</sup>

It should go without saying that police murder and brutality are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the US criminal justice system. Is it any wonder that a new movement has taken “Black Lives Matter” as its slogan when it is so clear that, for the police, Black lives do not matter at all? In fact, it is impossible to understand the intense policing of Black communities without putting it into the wider context of the decades-old War on Drugs and the effects of mass incarceration. Today, the United States accounts for 5 percent of the world's population but 25 percent of the world's prison population. There are more than a million African Americans in prison because Black people are incarcerated at a rate six times that of whites. The systematic overimprisonment of Black people, and Black men in particular, has conflated race, risk, and criminality to legitimize close scrutiny of Black communities as well as the consequences of such scrutiny. As Michelle Alexander has pointed out in her book *The New Jim Crow*, the imprisonment of Black men has led to social stigma and economic marginalization, leaving many with few options but to engage in criminal activity as a means of survival. When white men with criminal records are as likely to be hired as Black men with *no* criminal records, one can only imagine the slim prospects for legitimate work for Black men returning from jail and prison. The entire criminal justice system operates at the expense of African American communities and society as a whole.

This crisis goes beyond high incarceration rates; indeed, the perpetuation of deeply ingrained stereotypes of African Americans as particularly dangerous, impervious to pain and suffering, careless and carefree, and exempt from empathy, solidarity, or basic humanity is what allows the police to kill Black people with no threat of punishment. When Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson gave grand jury testimony about

his engagement with Mike Brown, he sounded as if he were describing an altercation with a monster, not an eighteen-year-old. Even though Wilson and Brown were the same height, Wilson said he felt like he was being tossed around like a rag doll and that if Brown were to punch him in the face it would be fatal. Wilson went on to describe Brown as a “demon” who made “grunting” noises before inexplicably deciding to attack a police officer who had already shot him once and was poised to do so again.<sup>3</sup> Wilson attributed superhuman strength to Brown, whom he described as running through a hail of bullets, leaving Wilson with no alternative but to keep shooting.<sup>4</sup> It is an unbelievable story that hinges on the complete suspension of belief in Brown’s humanity, his literal humanness.

The United States is often referred to these days as a “colorblind” or “postracial” society, where race may once have been an obstacle to a successful life. Today, we are told, race does not matter. Racial discrimination, sanctioned by law in the South and custom and public policy in the North over much of the twentieth century, caused disparities between Blacks and whites in employment, poverty, housing quality, and access to education. But in the aftermath of the Black freedom struggles of the 1960s, removing race from the law and shifting attitudes regarding race were supposed to usher in a new period of unfettered Black success and achievement. That an African American family inhabits the White House, an edifice built by slaves in 1795, is a powerful example of the transformation of racial attitudes and realities in the United States. Beyond the presidency of Barack Obama, thousands of Black elected officials, a layer of Black corporate executives, and many highly visible Black Hollywood socialites and multimillionaire professional athletes animate the “postracial” landscape in the United States. The success of a relative few African Americans is upheld as a vindication of the United States’ colorblind ethos and a testament to the transcendence of its racist past. Where there is bad treatment on the basis of race, it is viewed as the product of lapsed personal behavior and morality, but it is “no longer endemic, or sanctioned by law and custom,” as President Obama suggested in a speech commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Voting Rights Act.<sup>5</sup>

This is precisely why the spectacle of unchecked police brutality and murder has morphed into a political crisis. After all, the United

States does not passively contend that it is a colorblind society; it actively promotes its supposed colorblindness as an example of its democratic traditions and its authority to police the globe. The federal government and politicians in both parties have used this as an excuse to cut social programs and other aspects of the public sector, in denial of the central way that discrimination harms Black life in the United States. In other words, if a central demand of the civil rights movement in the 1960s was federal intervention to act against discrimination and act affirmatively to improve the quality of life for African Americans, promoting the United States as colorblind or postracial has done the opposite as it is used to justify dismantling the state's capacity to challenge discrimination.

The Supreme Court has done precisely this with voting rights, essentially ruling that racism no longer hinders access to voting, as it most clearly and demonstrably did in the era of Jim Crow. Chief Justice John Roberts said, when striking down the Voting Rights Act, "Our country has changed in the last fifty years." He added that Congress needed to "speak to current conditions."<sup>6</sup> Of course the country has changed, but the passage of time alone is not a guarantee that it has changed for the better. Justice is not a natural part of the lifecycle of the United States, nor is it a product of evolution; it is always the outcome of struggle.

Not only do these attacks have consequences for ordinary Black people, but they are also a "Trojan horse" shielding a much broader attack against all working-class people, including whites and Latino/as. African Americans, of course, suffer disproportionately from the dismantling of the social welfare state, but in a country with growing economic inequality between the richest and poorest Americans, austerity budgets and political attacks on social welfare come at the peril of all ordinary people. It is an example of how, counterintuitively, even ordinary white people have an interest in exposing the racist nature of US society, because doing so legitimizes the demand for an expansive and robust regime of social welfare intended to redistribute wealth and resources from the rich back to the working class—Black, Brown, and white. Conversely, it is also why the political and economic elites have such a vested interest in colorblindness and in the perpetuation of the myth that the United States is a meritocracy.

The spotlight now shining on pervasive police abuse, including the ongoing beatings, maimings, and murders of Black people, destabilizes

the idea of the United States as colorblind and thus reestablishes the basis for strengthening regulatory oversight and antidiscrimination measures. In this process, larger questions inevitably arise as to the nature of such a society that would allow police to brazenly attack and kill so many African Americans. This is why the persisting issue of police violence is so explosive, especially in this particular historical moment of supposed colorblindness and the height of Black political power. Indeed, an African American president, attorney general, and Philadelphia police chief have led the national discussion on police reform. Yet, as near-daily reports on police brutality and murder fill the airwaves, this unprecedented display of Black political power appears to mean very little in the lives of ordinary Black people, who wield almost no power at all.

## Two Black Societies, Separate and Unequal

How do we explain the rise of a Black president, along with the exponential growth of the Black political class and the emergence of a small but significant Black economic elite, at the same time as the emergence of a social movement whose most well-known slogan is both a reminder and an exhortation that “Black Lives Matter”? Examples of Black ascendance have been used to laud the greatness of the United States, as Obama echoed when he claimed that “for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible.”<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Black poverty, imprisonment, and premature death are widely seen as the products of Black insolence and lapsed personal responsibility. In reality, these divergent experiences are driven by deep class differences among African Americans that have allowed for the rise of a few while the vast majority languishes in a despair driven by the economic inequality that pervades all of American society. Here, as in the rest of the world, the neoliberal era of free-market reform, the rollback of social spending, and cuts in taxes for corporations and the wealthy have produced social inequality on a scale unseen since at least the 1920s. As the Occupy movement of 2011 pointed out, the wealthiest 1 percent of the population controls 40 percent of the wealth. From 1978 to 2013, CEO compensation, adjusted for inflation, increased 937 percent compared to the anemic 10 percent

growth in a typical worker's compensation over the same period.<sup>8</sup> As always, economic privation and social inequality have a disproportionate impact on Black America.

In fact, the gap between rich and poor is even more pronounced among Blacks than among whites. The richest whites have seventy-four times more wealth than the average white family. But among African Americans, the richest families have a staggering two hundred times more wealth than the average Black family. African Americans make up 1.4 percent—about 16,000 of the 14 million Black families in the United States—of the richest 1 percent of Americans. Each of those families' net worth averages \$1.2 million, in comparison to \$6,000 for the average Black family.<sup>9</sup> These class differences influence the ways in which they experience the world and the political conclusions they draw from those experiences. Class differences have always existed among African Americans, but the pall of legally instituted racism in an earlier era essentially tethered Blacks together into a Black community. Today, the absence of formal barriers to Black economic and political achievement has allowed for more differentiation among African Americans and has frayed notions of "community."

This does not mean that Black elites can transcend racism altogether. The Black elite is much smaller than the white elite; its members have greater debt and less overall net worth compared to rich whites. But it does mean that, in general, they experience racial inequality differently compared to poor and working-class African Americans and draw different conclusions about what these experiences mean. For example, a Pew Research Center poll conducted in 2007 showed that 40 percent of African Americans say that because of the "diversity within their community, blacks can no longer be thought of as a single race."<sup>10</sup> Additionally, 61 percent of Blacks believed that the "values held by middle-class Black people and the values held by poor Black people have become more different." Well-educated Blacks are more likely than Blacks with less formal education to say that the "values gap" within the Black community has widened over the last decade. Finally, low-income African Americans, according to the poll, suggest that the perception of differences over values and identity among Blacks "is felt most strongly by those Blacks at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum."<sup>11</sup>

For Black elites, in particular, their success validates the political and economic underpinnings of US society while reaffirming the apparent personal defects of those who have not succeeded. Blaming Black inequality on Black people is not a new development, but the social movements of the 1960s made powerful structural critiques of Black poverty and deprivation as products of a society that, for much of its existence, thrived on the oppression and exploitation of African Americans. Black revolutionary Stokely Carmichael and social scientist Charles Hamilton coined the phrase “institutional racism” in their book *Black Power*.<sup>12</sup> The term was prescient, anticipating the coming turn toward colorblindness and the idea that racism was only present if the intention was undeniable. Institutional racism, or structural racism, can be defined as the policies, programs, and practices of public and private institutions that result in greater rates of poverty, dispossession, criminalization, illness, and ultimately mortality of African Americans. Most importantly, it is the *outcome* that matters, not the intentions of the individuals involved. Institutional racism remains the best way to understand how Black deprivation continues in a country as rich and resource-filled as the United States. This understanding is critical to countering the charges that African Americans are largely responsible for their own predicament.

The debate over the nature of Black inequality is not benign; it has deep political implications for the nature of American society more generally. The focus on Black culture as the source of Black inequality was never born out of hatred of Black people. Its function is to explain the Black experience as something that exists outside of the American narrative of unimpeded social mobility, the pursuit of happiness and equality for all: a way to exonerate the American system while simultaneously implicating African Americans in their own hardships. However, any serious interrogation of the history of Black life in the United States upends all notions of American exceptionalism.

After slavery, the popular explanations for Black poverty and marginalization drifted between biology and culture, but the ideas of free enterprise and American democracy “with contradictions” have never seriously been interrogated. The civil rights movement and the Black Power rebellion unfolding over the course of the 1960s pushed institutional racism, as opposed to Black cultural and familial practices, to

the forefront as the central explanation for Black inequality. This was amplified by a commission's report based on the findings of a federal investigation into the causes of "civil disorder" throughout the 1960s. The Kerner Commission report plainly stated that "white racism" was responsible for Black poverty—"white society created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it."<sup>13</sup> The complicity of the state itself in the subjugation of Black life legitimized the right of Blacks to demand that the state intervene and undo what it had played a clear role in creating. But this demand was only enforceable when the movement was on the streets. As the movement receded in the 1970s and as a bipartisan political attack on the welfare state gained traction, the mantras of the "culture of poverty" and "personal responsibility" reemerged as popular explanations for Black deprivation.

Today, the various problems that pervade Black communities are largely believed to be of Black people's own making. Indeed, President Obama, addressing an audience of Black graduating college students, exhorted, "We've got no time for excuses," as if the greater rates of unemployment and poverty experienced by African Americans were the products of "excuses." These are not just the admonishments by the Black elite: 53 percent of African Americans say that Blacks who do not get ahead are mainly responsible for their situation, while only 30 percent say that discrimination is to blame.<sup>14</sup> The premise that Black inequality is a product of the slackening of Black communities' work ethic and self-sufficiency has been bolstered by the visibility of the Black elite. In this context, the election of Barack Obama has been heralded as the pinnacle of Black achievement and, presumably, the end of racial grievances.

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There are, however, periodic ruptures in the US narrative of its triumph over racism as a defining feature of its society. The murder of Emmett Till in 1955 exploded the rhetoric of the moral and democratic superiority of American society when the United States was in the throes of the Cold War. The Black freedom struggle of the 1960s, while the United States was simultaneously waging a war in Vietnam (supposedly in the name of freedom), exposed the country as a whole as deeply

racist and resistant to Black equality or liberation. More recently, the Los Angeles Rebellion in 1992 reignited a national discussion about the persistence of racial inequality. In 2005, the Bush administration's shameful response to Hurricane Katrina momentarily submerged the glowing self-appraisals of American society at a time when the country was, once again, locked in war and occupation, this time in Iraq and Afghanistan, respectively, in the name of freedom and democracy.

Today, the birth of a new movement against racism and policing is shattering the illusion of a colorblind, postracial United States. Cries of "Hands up, don't shoot," "I can't breathe," and "Black lives matter" have been heard around the country as tens of thousands of ordinary people mobilize to demand an end to rampant police brutality and murder against African Americans. It is almost always impossible to say when and where a movement will arise, but its eventual emergence is almost always predictable. On a weekly basis, social media brims with stories of police brutalizing ordinary citizens or killing the young, the Black, and—almost always—the unarmed. The advent of social media has almost erased the lag between when an incident happens and when the public becomes aware of it. Where the mainstream media have typically downplayed or even ignored public claims of police corruption and abuse, the proliferation of smartphones fitted with voice and video recorders has given the general public the ability to record these incidents and share them far and wide on a variety of social media platforms.

Historically, incidents of police brutality have typically sparked Black uprisings, but they are the tip of the iceberg, not the entirety of the problem. Today is no different. While it may be surprising that a Black protest movement has emerged during the Obama presidency, the reluctance of his administration to address any of the substantive issues facing Black communities has meant that suffering has worsened in those communities over the course of Obama's term of office. African Americans mobilized historic levels of support for Obama in the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections based on his promises of hope and change and his declaration that "yes, we can" end the war in Iraq. Perhaps most compelling to African Americans was their own hope of breaking free from the Bush administration's breathtaking indifference to Black suffering, as exemplified by the Hurricane Katrina catastrophe.

By any measure, however, African Americans under Obama are experiencing the same indifference and active discrimination; in some cases, these have become worse. Black unemployment has remained in the double digits throughout the Obama presidency. Even Black college graduates are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as white college graduates. Twelve percent of Black college graduates, compared to 4.9 percent of white college graduates, were out of work in 2014.<sup>15</sup> Even those African American college graduates who made “no excuses,” went to college, and—as President Bill Clinton liked to say—“played by the rules” still fared significantly worse than their white peers.

Pundits and politicians alike have been celebrating what they describe as an economic recovery from the Great Recession of 2008, but for African Americans, the long winter of the downturn keeps churning on—demonstrated most sharply by the 27 percent of African Americans who live in poverty.<sup>16</sup> The national poverty rate for African Americans can obscure the even greater depths of Black economic deprivation concentrated in some parts of the country, especially across the southern United States. Across the Midwest, too, there is also intense Black poverty, including 46 percent in Minnesota, 39 percent in Wisconsin, and 34 percent in Michigan. Since Obama came into office, Black median income has fallen by 10.9 percent to \$33,500, compared to a 3.6 percent drop for whites, leaving their median income at \$58,000.<sup>17</sup> Poverty contributes to a host of other social ills: 26 percent of Black households are “food insecure,” the government’s euphemistic description of hunger; 30 percent of Black children are hungry; 25 percent of Black women are without health insurance; 65 percent of all new AIDS diagnoses are among Black women. In larger cities, Black women are as likely to be evicted as Black men are to be imprisoned: in Milwaukee, though Black women are 9 percent of the population, they account for 30 percent of all evictions.<sup>18</sup> The cascading effects of racism and poverty are unrelenting in the lives of working-class and poor African Americans.

Poverty is but a single factor in making sense of the ever-widening wealth gap between African Americans and whites. Over the last twenty-five years, the disparity in household wealth has tripled; today, white median wealth (as opposed to income) is \$91,405, compared to \$6,446 for African American households.<sup>19</sup>

If there were a single indicator to measure the status of Black women in the United States, it would be the difference in median wealth for single Black women compared to single white women. A 2010 study found that the median wealth of single white women was \$42,600 compared to the surreal median of \$5 for single Black women.<sup>20</sup> The historic crash of the American housing market in 2008 destroyed much of African Americans' wealth holdings. At the height of the mortgage lending boom in the mid-2000s, almost half of the loans given to African Americans were subprime. Today, according to the Center for Responsible Lending, almost 25 percent of Black families who purchased homes during this period are at risk of losing their homes as a result.<sup>21</sup> As has been widely reported, the crisis effectively destroyed tens of billions of dollars of Black wealth invested in real estate, as more than 240,000 African Americans lost their homes.<sup>22</sup> In Detroit, for example, a city that once boasted one of the highest Black homeownership rates in the country, more than one-third of Black families who borrowed between 2004 and 2008 have lost their homes to foreclosure.<sup>23</sup> The loans were "ticking time bombs" that eventually detonated, causing Black homeowners' already meager accumulated wealth to evaporate into thin air.<sup>24</sup>

Barack Obama became president right at a time when Black people needed help the most, yet he has done precious little. In fact, when he ran again in 2012, he reassured the nation (or at least white voters), "I'm not the president of Black America. I'm the president of the United States of America."<sup>25</sup> It's not only that Obama is reluctant to offer or support a Black agenda: he has also played a destructive role in legitimizing the "culture of poverty" discourse discussed above. At a time when the entire Western world was pointing to corrupt practices on Wall Street and illicit gambling in global financial markets as the causes of the global slump, there was Obama blaming Black fathers, "Cousin Pookie," families' eating habits, ESPN's *SportsCenter*, and Black parents not reading to their children at night for the absence of secure work and stable home lives in Black communities.<sup>26</sup>

## "Hands Up, Don't Shoot"

The killing of Mike Brown, along with an ever-growing list of other unarmed Black people, drove holes in the logic that Black people simply doing the "right things," whatever those things might be, could overcome the perennial crises within Black America. After all, Mike Brown was only walking down the street. Eric Garner was standing on the corner. Rekia Boyd was in a park with friends. Trayvon Martin was walking with a bag of Skittles and a can of iced tea. Sean Bell was leaving a bachelor party, anticipating his marriage the following day. Amadou Diallo was getting off from work. Their deaths, and the killings of so many others like them, prove that sometimes simply being Black can make you a suspect—or get you killed. Especially when the police are involved, looking Black is more likely to get you killed than any other factor. In Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014, people's exhaustion, sadness, frustration, and anger at the dehumanizing trauma inflicted by racism finally boiled over. But the outpouring of support and solidarity that followed was not only about Ferguson. The tens of thousands of people who poured into the streets over the summer, into the fall, and during the deep chill of winter were drawing from the deep wells of exhaustion among African Americans who have grown weary of the endless eulogizing of Black people—young and old, men and women, transgender, queer, and straight—killed by the police.

The explosion in Ferguson and the nationwide protests have deepened the political crisis, shattered the "postracial" proclamations, and inspired others to rise up against a worsening epidemic of police harassment, brutality, corruption, and murder that threatens to snatch the lives and personhood of untold numbers of African Americans in every city and suburb. But the sense of political crisis can be measured by the degree of attention it garners from elected officials scrambling to try and rescue the legitimacy of law-enforcement agencies and the rule of law itself. While many predicted the intervention of the Reverend Al Sharpton, Attorney General Eric Holder's appearance was unexpected. Holder traveled to Ferguson to announce that federal officials would ensure a fair investigation. Elected officials tweeted that they were attending Brown's funeral; President Obama was forced to make public statements acknowledging what he described as "mistrust" between "the community" and the police.<sup>27</sup>

The specter of crisis was also bolstered by cops' simple inability to stop killing Black people. Just prior to Brown's murder, forty-six-year-old Eric Garner of Staten Island, New York, unarmed and minding his own business, was approached by police and then choked to death as he gasped eleven times, "I can't breathe." Two days after Brown was killed, Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers shot and killed another young Black man, Ezell Ford. Months later, autopsy reports would confirm that Ford was shot multiple times, including once in the back, while he lay on the ground.<sup>28</sup> In a suburb of Dayton, Ohio, police shot to death John Crawford III, twenty-two years old and African American, while he was talking on his cell phone and holding an air gun on sale in the aisle of a Walmart. And as the nation waited to hear whether a grand jury would indict officer Darren Wilson for Brown's death, Cleveland police killed thirty-seven-year-old, African American Tanisha Anderson when they slammed her to the ground, remaining on top of her until her body went limp.<sup>29</sup> The following week, police in Cleveland struck again, murdering a twelve-year-old boy, Tamir Rice, less than two seconds after arriving at the playground where Rice was playing alone. Making matters worse, the two Cleveland police stood by idly, refusing aid, while Tamir bled to death. When his fourteen-year-old sister attempted to help him, police wrestled her to the ground.<sup>30</sup> An earlier audit of the Cleveland Police Department (CPD) described the department as essentially lawless. It found that officers routinely "use unnecessary and unreasonable force in violation of the Constitution" and that "supervisors tolerate this behavior and, in some cases, endorse it." The report showed a "pattern or practice of using unreasonable force in violation of the Fourth Amendment," including the "unnecessary and excessive use of deadly force" and "excessive force against persons who are mentally ill or in crisis."<sup>31</sup>

We know the names of these people because of the nascent movement now insisting that Black lives matter. In the short span of a year, the impact of the movement is undeniable. It can be measured by some localities forcing police to wear body cameras or the firing of a handful of police for violence and brutality that was previously considered unremarkable. It can be measured by the arrest for murder of small numbers of police officers who would previously have gone unpunished. Perhaps most telling, it can be measured in the shifting discourse about crime, policing, and race.

After spending the better part of his presidency chastising African Americans for their own hardships, post-Ferguson, Obama has shifted gears to focus on what he termed the “criminal injustice system” in a speech on crime and punishment. In the summer of 2015, President Obama appeared at the national convention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to deliver a sweeping speech on reforming the criminal justice system. The president highlighted the racial disparities that lead to vastly different punishments for Blacks, whites, and Latino/as, called for restoring voting rights to the formerly incarcerated, and argued that the \$80 billion spent annually to maintain the nation’s prisons could cover the cost of college tuition in every public college and university in the country. This transformation in Obama’s rhetoric is welcome, but none of it would be possible without the rebellions in Ferguson and Baltimore or the dogged movement building that has happened in between. In other words, the radical movement of ordinary Black people has forced the federal government and its leader, the most powerful political figure in the world, to account for the war against Black life. The challenge, of course, will be going from recognizing Black humanity to changing the institutions responsible for its degradation.

## The Future of Black Politics

The most significant transformation in all of Black life over the last fifty years has been the emergence of a Black elite, bolstered by the Black political class, that has been responsible for administering cuts and managing meager budgets on the backs of Black constituents. Today, a layer of Black “civil rights entrepreneurs” have become prominent boosters and overseers of the forces of privatization, claiming that the private sector is better suited to distribute public services than the public sector. This juncture between public and private is where Black incompetence fades to the background and government malfeasance comes to the fore as an excuse for privatization. Today there are many African American administrators who advocate for greater privatization of public resources in education, housing, and healthcare. Redevelopment programs often promise to include ordinary Blacks instead of pushing them out of urban communities—but when those promises

fall through, Black officials are just as eager as white officials to invoke racist stereotypes to cover their own incompetence, from claims about cultural inferiority to broken families to Black criminality. There is growing polarization between the Black political and economic elite and those whom historian Martha Biondi and others have referred to as experiencing a social condition of “disposability.” Biondi describes this condition as “encompass[ing] not only structural unemployment and the school-to-prison pipeline, but also high rates of shooting deaths as weaponry meets hopelessness in the day-to-day struggle for manhood and survival. Disposability also manifests in our larger society’s apparent acceptance of high rates of premature death of young African Americans and Latinos.”<sup>32</sup>

These relatively new tensions between the Black working class and the Black political elite raise new questions about the current movement to stop police abuse and, more fundamentally, about the future of the Black freedom struggle, which side various actors will be on, and what actual Black liberation would look like. More importantly, what is the relationship between the movement as it exists today and the ongoing and historic struggle?

Today’s movement has similarities with the struggles of the 1960s but does not replicate them. The questions raised by the civil rights movement seemed to have been answered—but under closer inspection, those rights many thought had been won have come under withering attack. Audits of the nation’s police departments reveal that police largely operate outside of the Constitution when dealing with African Americans. The right wing mobilizes stridently conservative candidates who seem to want to travel back to a time before the rights revolution of the 1960s, while the “colorblind” assault on voting rights—a very basic emblem of a supposedly free society—undermines Black voters’ access to the voting booth. An estimated 5.8 million Americans are prevented from voting because of a prior felony conviction, including more than 2 million formerly incarcerated African Americans.<sup>33</sup> These and other violations of the basic rights of citizenship of Black people have not been resolved.

Black Lives Matter is not simply a replay of the civil rights movement. Typically, when more than six Black people assemble in one place to make a demand, the media instantly identifies a “new civil rights

movement.” But this elides the new and significantly different challenges facing the movement today—and obscures the unresolved questions of the last period. In many ways, the Black Lives Matter movement, now in its infancy, is already encountering some of the same questions that confronted the Black Power movement in the 1960s and 1970s. For example: Can the conditions created by institutional racism be transformed within the existing capitalist order? Housing, wages, and access to better jobs and education can certainly be improved, but can that be achieved on a mass level and not just for a few? Various sections of the movement believed these things could be achieved in different ways: some put their faith in electoral politics, others in Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) litigation. Still others believed the movement should fight for those reforms within the context of a larger struggle against capitalism *and* fight for a socialist redistribution of wealth and resources. The intense debate over how to achieve Black liberation was interrupted by vicious government repression combined with cooptation and accommodation from within. The resulting decline muffled these questions but did not resolve them. Deepening inequality in Black communities—even as a Black man has ascended to the highest level of elected office in the country—is reviving these questions for a new generation of Black radicals who have come of age in a time of economic austerity and political bankruptcy.

This book explores why the movement marching under the banner of Black Lives Matter has emerged under the nation's first Black president. Police brutality is not a new phenomenon; it has existed, in some form or other, since the abolition of slavery. Why has abusive policing created a breaking point in the age of Obama? How does this fit into a larger historical pattern of explosive Black politics and the consistent denial of Black oppression in US society?

Chapter 1 looks at the ideas of “American exceptionalism” and the “culture of poverty,” mutually reinforcing concepts used to explain the persistence of Black poverty while deflecting attention away from systemic factors rooted in the United States' history as a settler-colonial state that came to rely on slavery as its dominant mode of production.

Chapter 2 examines the origins of “colorblindness” as an ideological tool, initially wielded by conservatives in the Nixon era to resist the growing acceptance of “institutional racism” as the central explanation

for Black inequality. An important contribution of the civil rights and Black Power explosions of the era was locating the roots of Black oppression in the institutional and material history of the United States. The high point of this recognition came with the publication of the Kerner Commission report, which blamed “white racism” for segregation and Black poverty. The threat of violence and rebellion curbed conservatives’ efforts to roll back the welfare state—at least initially. Instead of mounting a frontal attack on the Black insurgency, they deployed the language and logic of colorblindness in such a way as to distinguish between intentional racism and the effects of racism wherever race was not specifically mentioned. This helped to narrow the scope of the meaning of “race” at the onset of the post-civil rights period. It also became a pretext for rolling back the gains of the 1960s: If the attainment of those rights was rooted in the acknowledgement that racism in both public and private sectors had harmed African Americans, then there was a claim for that harm to be cured. Instead, the absence of racial language in the law became a pretext for further diminishing the regulatory capacity of the state. Downplaying race meant, once again, emphasizing culture and morality as important to understanding Black progress.

Chapter 3 examines the rise of the Black political elite and the divergence of Black political interests in the post-civil rights era. I look at this development as a product of pressure from below and above—and thus one that is rife with contradictions. Black urbanites were demanding “home rule” and an end to political domination by corrupt white political machines; at the same time there was a general recognition that Black control of Black living spaces could help cool off the hot cities. Black politicians took over bankrupt cities with weak tax bases and were put in the position of having to manage urban economic crises on the backs of their Black constituents. The unmanageability of these conditions and the absence of real solutions meant that Black elected officials were also quick to blame Black residents as a way of absolving themselves. They became reliable mouthpieces for rhetoric that blamed Black people for the conditions in Black communities. The further the movement drifted into the background, the more conservative formal Black politics became—and the more disillusioned ordinary African Americans became with “Black faces in high places.”

Chapter 4 examines the “double standard of justice” in the United States historically. Policing has always been racist and abusive, even after massive efforts to professionalize the police in the aftermath of the 1960s rebellions. These same racist practices inform policing today, but pressure to keep crime rates down in order to facilitate urban redevelopment has intensified them. Cities are increasingly two-tiered, with one tier for young, mostly white professionals and another for Black and Brown people who find their standards of living and quality of life in peril and are harassed by police along the racially segregated boundaries that outline the contours of gentrification. There are any number of conditions to protest in Black communities, but police violence has consistently sparked Black rage because it exemplifies the compromised citizenship of African Americans.

In chapter 5, I locate the roots of the current movement against police brutality in the raised expectations of the Obama campaigns, as well as Obama's ensuing silence on the critical issues facing African Americans even as he has parroted the worst stereotypes about Black culture and irresponsibility. The political action of young Blacks is not happening in a vacuum; it is a part of the same radicalization that gave rise to the Occupy movement and coalesced around the murder of Trayvon Martin.

Chapter 6 looks at the current movement, from the protests in Ferguson to the rise of Black Lives Matter, and its role in distilling class conflict among African Americans while providing a political alternative based in protest and rearticulating Black oppression as systemic phenomenon. It then looks at the issues involved in moving from the protests that have brought about more general awareness of the crisis of police terrorism in Black communities to a deeply rooted movement capable of transforming those conditions.

Finally, in chapter 7, I examine the relationship between the movement against police violence and the potential for a much broader anticapitalist movement that looks to transform not only the police but the entire United States.

