

OUR RADICAL BLACK TRADITION AND THE NEW MILLENIUM:  
*Survival, Struggle, and Victory*

This forum is part of a major political discussion, a discussion taking place all over the globe, in palaces, parliaments, and pool halls. And here we gather at the main library center in the world class city of Chicago.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Chicago Public Library, especially one of its major leaders Alice Scott for her courage and vision in asking us to convene this symposium. Along with my colleague and friend Lou Turner, we have been convening these Community Dialogues since 1991, both here at the Harold Washington Center and at the Vivian Harsh Research Center as part of the Carter G. Woodson Regional Library on the South Side. It is a pleasure to give this keynote address to begin the days deliberations.

In our discussions the word that keeps coming up at this critical moment in our history is chaos. The word chaos means we don't understand what we are facing. We lack a precise definition of our problems. We are faced with an apparent formlessness and pattern-lessness of events. Things are happening and we are without a consensus as to what they mean. We are without a clear consensus about what to do, and who we are or how to fight.

The clarity of the post World War II years has been broken. The clarity so many shared in the fight against Hitler and the disease of fascism. Black people embraced this consensus and fought for democracy abroad to return home to face racism and the lack of democracy for Black people in the US. Everywhere there were Black rebellions because these militant Black soldiers refused to accept the same old Jim Crow system of segregation and poverty after fighting to protect Europe.

After this, many people were guided into a consensus against the red menace. The cold war gripped the country and J Edgar Hoover became the high priest of American patriotism and his witch-hunts became rituals of human sacrifice. We need not call more names than the radical Black activists Paul Robeson, W.E.B. DuBois and Claudia Jones to bear witness to the crimes committed by this false consensus of evil. Many people embraced this evil consensus and helped scar the memory of many heroes in the fight for freedom.

We were betrayed by the US when we united against fascism, then many of us betrayed ourselves when we united against communism.

Today, we lack the consensus the country had against fascism or communism. They were both politics of hypocrisy and exploitation for Black people, and now even that superficial clarity is gone. Everywhere we hear the word chaos. Who can explain the youth? What about killer diseases like AIDS or Ebola or crack cocaine? Who can explain an economy with so many job openings and so many poor people at the same time? Who can explain why gangsters are now running the USSR and China explores a new love affair with capitalism through its so called "market socialism." Few if any of these things could have been easily predicted, but here they are. We need a hard and sober look at what's going on. Furthermore, we are particularly focusing in on the experiences of Black people, especially the dialectic of survival and struggle.

My remarks will focus on three basic questions:

1. What has been the main pattern of survival and struggle in Black history?
2. What theoretical concepts can help us arrive at clarity and understanding about the current chaos we face?
3. How can the radical Black tradition be used as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

At the risk of oversimplification it is essential to summarize the basic structure of Black history. We have opposing theories of light in which we accept the utility of conceptualizing light as waves, as well as light as particles. In this same manner we have to approach history. We conceptualize history in two ways: as narrative with many diverse details and textures, as well as structure with constituent parts and a logical pattern of change.

So, in terms of structure, the last 200 years of Black history can be understood in terms of three modes of social existence: rural farm labor, first as slaves the second as sharecroppers, followed by diverse employment as urban workers in industry or service.

The survival of Black people based on agricultural work can be told in terms of 150 years of King Cotton, from the 1790's to the 1940's. The cotton gin was invented in 1792 and stimulated a great increase in cotton production. When cleaning the cotton by hand it took one slave one day to clean one pound of cotton. The hand-powered cotton gin increased this to 150 pounds a day, and the steam driven

gin increased it to one full bale or 1,000 pounds of cotton. By 1820 cotton was over 50% of all US exports and 80% of the supply on the world market. Cotton had become King, so that from 1830 to 1860 more money was invested in land and slaves for cotton production than the rest of the entire US economy put together. In 1790 there were 700,000 slaves and by 1860 there were 4 million, of whom over 70% were in cotton production.

The Civil War ended the overt political forms of the slave system, but because the fundamental economic structure of Black survival remained, some new forms of political subjugation were easily developed and implemented, namely peonage, lynching, the chain gang, and a Klan culture of fascist terror.

Black people continued to be on their knees in the cotton patch trying to survive even though the Civil War had been fought and supposedly won. The economic end didn't come until 1944 (I was born in 1942!). This came about through the invention of the mechanical cotton picker. In an hour a good field hand could pick 20 pounds of cotton, but the mechanical cotton picker could pick 1,000 pounds per hour. Each machine could do the work of 50 people. In 1949 6% of all cotton was picked by machine, in 1964 it was 78%, and by 1972 all of it was picked by machine. This transition took only 309 years, one generation. A machine led to dragging people into the cotton patch, and a machine kicked Blacks out of the cotton patch. Underneath the social policy and racist movements were these fundamental structural facts.

In massive numbers Black people moved to the cities and got jobs in the factories, in peoples homes, and generally doing the low status, poor paying, dirty, and dangerous jobs. The story of Black survival in the industrial city parallels that of the rural south. Henry Ford initiated the mass production assembly line in 1913 in Detroit. By 1917 when agricultural work paid less than one dollar a day in Mississippi, Ford was paying 5 dollars a day in Detroit. In 1910 there were 6,000 Black people in Detroit and by 1920 there were 41,000. In 1910 about 3 % of the total population had family working for Ford, but by 1920 that was up to 25%. Motown was born and it had a big impact as the Black auto-workers enjoyed a high level of relative economic security. By the 1940's and 1950's auto workers in Detroit including Blacks had the highest degree of per capita home ownership in the US.

But just as Ford happened and absorbed the labor of Black workers, Toyota happened and things were reversed.

In 1980 Detroit built a car in 31 hours, while using robots and new management schemes Toyota in Japan built a car in 16 hours. Auto production in the US had to change. In 1978 there were over 12 million cars produced a number not reached again until 1994, but there were now only 50% of the work force in 1994 as there had been in 1978. Blacks were being kicked out of the factory by computers and robots. The same is true of steel. US Steel had 120,000 production workers in 1980, but 10 years later produced more product with about 20,000 such workers.

The largest employer in the US is now manpower. This coincides with about 25% of the US workforce now being in temp jobs.

This has been the basic logic of Black survival, from the field to the factory to the street. It is in these objective contexts that we can chart the logic of the Black struggle. For the purpose of this brief survey I will focus on major congresses or convention movements that played key roles in the strategic orientation for how to struggle given the objective conditions in which Black people had to survive.

The fight for the end of slavery and for the full realization of democracy has been the main mission of the civil rights movement. This is before and after the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments of the US Constitution. Beginning in 1830 and reaching its high point of mobilization with the massive March on Washington in 1963, the fight for civil rights has been guided by strategic conferences. The National Negro Convention Movement is the beginning of nationally organized political action by Blacks in search of a new path of struggle. These were national meetings that deliberated in the context of changing decades moving from a program of reform to one of militant agitation for freedom from slavery, up to and including the possibility of emigrating to other lands. There were state and local conventions as well.

The heart of these conventions were the rising leadership of a middle class, the publishers of newspapers, ministers, professional men, the first college graduates, etc. They were demanding a revolution. The war led to a political revolution, the freedom of slaves, but not an economic revolution, which as we all know would have been fulfilling the promise of forty acres and a mule for each freed slave.

This same group of people carried forward the struggle for civil rights. In some instances they were the abolitionists, and later they were the descendents of the

abolitionists who gathered in the forming of organizations like the Niagra Movement, the NAACP and the Urban League early in this century. These forces continued to fight for a proper legal context for the survival of Black people. The high point of this historical march has been the March on Washington in 1963. This march was the beginning of a new consensus that the old forms of de jure segregation had to go.

The next series of conferences emerged to find a strategy for struggle under the weight of the great depression. Let me point out one important anniversary for us here today on February 14, 1998, because on this date February 14<sup>th</sup> here in Chicago was the opening of the first National Negro Congress in 1936. This organization lasted from 1935 to 1947 and brought together not only the institutional elites of traditional Black organizations like the church, but added the forces of organized labor and political organizations from the left. This was a time of great economic and social polarization, and people were ready to hear about class struggle.

This period gave birth to many such organizations like The Southern Negro Youth Congress, and the National Sharecroppers Union. These were organizations aimed at deepening the fight for political rights into the economic arena. So, in many ways, the success of the CIO was a high point for this movement because it represented the unity of Black and white workers in the trade unions, and on that basis all other struggle could be more valiantly fought. Thus, the UAW was the basis for the mass mobilization of the 1963 March on Washington.

World War II led to the culmination of another congress type movement started back in 1900, the Pan-African Congress Movement. The fifth Pan African Congress in 1945 held in Manchester England was a decisive action as a transition from half a century of petitioning to organizing for direct action. Organizations were formed for self-determination, the fight for political independence. Independence was won, but like for the slaves of the 19<sup>th</sup> century this was a political change, flag independence as many called it because what people got was a flag but not control of the commanding heights of their economy. Subsequent Congresses in 1974 and 1994 were mainly focused on what Nkrumah called neo-colonialism, the continued economic colonization of the African continent by global capitalists.

The past 30 years have been guided by the strategic orientation that emerged as the last congress initiative,

the Black Power Congress movement that began in 1967. This conference was called after the Watts rebellion in 1965 and the emergence of the slogan in 1966, along with the 1967 rebellions in Detroit and Newark. The demand was for an independent course of action because of the failure fo the civil rights movement. This too was a middle class motion in that it was a call by the Black middle class for power to be in their hands.

This is the context for the current period. The slave period

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