Lazima Tushinde Bila Shaka: H. Rap Brown and the Politics of Revolution

John H. (John Henry) Cable
FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

“LAZIMA TUSHINDE BILA SHAKA”:
H. RAP BROWN AND THE POLITICS OF REVOLUTION

By

JOHN H. CABLE

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The members of the supervisory committee were:

Maxine D. Jones  
Professor Directing Thesis

Katherine C. Mooney  
Committee Member

Robinson Herrera  
Committee Member

The Graduate School has verified and approved the above-named committee members, and certifies that the thesis has been approved in accordance with university requirements.
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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the politics of Black Power leader H. Rap Brown through a genealogical materialist lens. I argue that by addressing class and race as inextricably-bound systems of oppression, Brown synthesized competing ideological strains, the existence of which had long divided black radicals. His anti-capitalist, anti-racist vision located the key ingredients of revolutionary ideology in the experiential knowledge of dispossessed people (of whom he considered black Americans to be the vanguard). As chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, he honed his analysis in a heated political environment characterized by factionalism, violence, paranoia, and state repression. Such factors are taken into account as I seek to contextualize and historicize Brown’s views.
INTRODUCTION

BLACK POWER HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE
DIALECTICS OF CLASS AND RACE

Therefore, the struggle of the negro people for freedom can be viewed as a
specialized part of the general class struggle of the jobless and working poor
against the reign of the monopolists – the working class against the capitalist
class.

James E. Jackson¹

The international issue is racism not economics. White people are racists not just
capitalists. Race rules out economics and even if it doesn’t wipe it out completely
it minimizes it. Therefore we conceive of the problem today not as a class struggle
but a global struggle against racism.

Maulana Ron Karenga²

In his 1867 tour de force, Capital, Karl Marx declared that “labour cannot emancipate
itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded.” Writing two short years after the
suppression of the American “slave-holders’ rebellion,” the beleaguered political economist
affirmed the relationship between class and race as one of dialectical tension.³ A century later,
America’s highly charged political climate again cast that contested dialectic in sharp relief.
From the mid-1960s to the 1970s, the primary site of contestation was the Black Power
movement. Since the movement’s peak, scholars have analyzed the individuals, groups, and
cultural and political trends that shaped its roughly fifteen-year career. However, despite
increasing attention paid to Black Power, scholars have yet to fully engage the genealogy of the
class-race dialectic, nor have they thoroughly analyzed the ways in which it shaped movement
politics. This thesis explores the ways in which leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating

³ Karl Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1, ed. Frederick Engels, trans. Samuel Moore and
Committee (SNCC) – an early organizational torch-bearer of Black Power – grappled with class and race.

The scholarly study of Black Power began while the movement was still in its infancy and advanced slowly in the 1970s and 1980s. Many early works examined the movement indirectly as it pertained to the careers of prominent leaders and organizations, while others dealt with Black Power in the context of local and regional studies. The 1990s witnessed the first of an outpouring of full-length studies of the politics and culture of Black Power that has continued to the present. Some prolific members of this most recent wave have approached the field from a posture of defensiveness, lauding the deluge of Black Power scholarship as evidence of an overall trend toward wider acceptance of the movement’s goals and tactics. Yet preoccupation with rejecting a declensionist view of Black Power – while well intentioned – risks papering over the complexities and contradictions of the movement’s politics. Fortunately, most have sought to critically analyze (rather than vindicate) the movement, thus laying the groundwork for sustained scholarly inquiry.

Harold Cruse’s *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, published in the fall of 1967, reflected both the frustration and the determination of the early Black Power era. As a former member of the American Communist Party (CPUSA), Cruse had witnessed the McCarthy-era decline of the Old Left as well as the rise of the postwar civil rights movement and was uniquely

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able to bridge the gap between an older generation of radicals and the New Left militancy of the 1960s. From this perspective, Cruse fiercely indicted generations of black leadership for their ostensible failure to effect a true cultural renaissance capable of sustaining the slow work of resistance and revolution.

Cruse divided twentieth-century black resistance into the two dominant strains of integrationism and nationalism. Integrationism originated in the thought of mainstream abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass and informed the program of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and other such prestigious civil rights organizations up to the present. Cruse maintained, however, that integration “offers no answers to the questions that agitate the collective minds of those Negroes who reject such a philosophy.” Nationalism, or the “rejected strain,” on the other hand, had its roots in the work of Martin Delany, Edward Wilmot Blyden, Alexander Crummell, and Henry McNeal Turner, all of whom were active in the Back-to-Africa movements of the nineteenth century. This strain spoke to the needs and desires of the masses of black Americans who had little to gain from integration and was epitomized in the modern civil rights era by the nationalism of Malcolm X.

The epicenter of black nationalism – and, for Cruse, the capital of the black cultural universe – was Harlem. The neighborhood was the site of what Cruse considered an incomplete cultural renaissance in the 1920s as well as of several important fissures within the black radical community the reverberations of which continued to inhibit the development of effective leadership as late as the 1960s. For Cruse, perhaps the most harmful of these fissures was that which occurred within the Socialist Party in 1919 over whether or not to support Lenin and the Bolsheviks. Such ideological conflicts were innumerable within the early twentieth century civil

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6 Cruse, Crisis, 4-5.
rights and labor movements. Having acquired a keen understanding of their intricacies through direct contact with many major participants in the 1940s and 50s, however, Cruse was uniquely able to identify lines of causality from the volatility of the New Negro Renaissance to the Black Power era.

In *Crisis*, Cruse demanded that black radicals set aside ideological pedantry and organize for a revolution that would necessarily be political, economic, and, most importantly, *cultural*. For such a revolution to succeed in the 1960s, however, the young Black Power firebrands (proponents of what Cruse derisively termed the “new anarchism”) would have to adopt a workable social theory “based on the living ingredients of Afro-American history.” They would also need to rethink their cultural heroes. Dismissing W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington outright for the allure of Marcus Garvey was a blunder born of “passion, emotionalism, and prejudice.” Moreover, Cruse reserved his harshest and most protracted criticism for those who sought to enunciate a politics of Black Power without a rudimentary understanding of economics. The young generation of Black Power theorists, Cruse lamented, possessed very little in the way of an actual program and had thus failed to advance beyond the theorizing of A. Philip Randolph and the *Messenger* writers of the 1910s and 1920s.

Clayborne Carson offered a fresh perspective on the Black Power era in his 1981 work, *In Struggle*, which traced the history of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) from its formation during the sit-in movement to its disintegration in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Written in the decade following the collapse of the organization, this comprehensive study incorporated a wealth of documentary evidence as well as a slew of interviews with

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7 Ibid., 557.
8 Ibid., 558.
movement participants conducted while the events portrayed still constituted recent memory. Carson argued that SNCC’s evolution “mirrored in microcosm” the changes in African-American political thought during the eras of civil rights and Black Power.  

While university students formed SNCC to coordinate sit-in protests across the South, Carson suggested that the early positions of the organization evinced the strong influence of the relative conservatism of the 1950s. At first thoroughly enmeshed in McCarthy-era anticommunism, SNCC workers sought to use peaceful protest tactics to render the American Dream of middle-class status open to the masses of black Americans for whom it had theretofore been mostly unattainable. Between 1963 and 1965, through direct action and voter registration efforts in the deep South, an open-door policy to members of all political persuasions, and a growing awareness of revolutionary fervor in Africa, SNCC transformed itself into a radical amalgam of Christians, pacifists, socialists, anarchists, separatists, and revolutionaries. Carson maintained that this evolution, particularly in the wake of Freedom Summer and the defeat of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), hastened an intra-organizational reevaluation of SNCC’s overall philosophy that would ultimately lead to the 1966 adoption of Black Power as a slogan and amorphous modus operandi.

Carson’s analysis of the Black Power era treated the class-race dialectic within SNCC in greater depth than other historians had yet attempted. While Emily Stoper had explored the influence of Marxism, Maoism, and anti-colonial theorists in her 1968 study, her research took place while the organization still commanded a national following and had yet to complete its political evolution. Carson explored the rifts that occurred within SNCC as a result of James

10 Ibid., 1. 
Forman’s increasingly public embrace of socialism and Stokely Carmichael’s espousal of a form of Pan-Africanism that downplayed class conflict and was often construed as racial chauvinism. Both Marxist and Pan-Africanist camps increasingly directed their attention toward Third World liberation struggles and human (rather than merely civil) rights. Moreover, Carson alleged that the primary upshot of these internal debates and philosophical reorientations was a fundamental shift in focus away from SNCC’s earlier community organizing.

By the late 1960s, Bob Moses’s anarchistic preoccupation with loose structure and weak leadership – which Carson clearly believed to have been SNCC’s defining legacy – gave way to Forman’s desire for tight structure and strong leadership. Carson argued that this change in leadership style, Stokely Carmichael’s egoistic embrace of his role as Black Power spokesman, and the concurrent dissolution of SNCC ties with local movements led directly to the organization’s demise. Perhaps due to limited access to now-declassified documents, Carson underrepresented FBI sabotage and, therefore, downplayed the role of the federal government in the declining effectiveness of Black Power organizations in general. While Black Power may not have directly killed SNCC, Carson contended that it created the conditions most favorable for the organization’s slow death.

While a dearth of Black Power scholarship characterized the remainder of the 1980s, 1992 witnessed the publication of political scientist John T. McCartney’s *Black Power Ideologies* as well as William L. Van Deburg’s *New Day in Babylon*. McCartney’s work was an attempt to convey the long history of the Black Power movement – from the nineteenth century to the 1970s – in a style more fluid and less polemical than Harold Cruse’s *Crisis*. The author took a similar tack to Cruse, however, in approaching the topic of Black Power by

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lamenting the worsening quality of life for black Americans for lack of a workable economic or political program.

In his highly systematic study of black politics, McCartney first isolated five dominant strains that gave rise to the Black Power movement: early Black nationalism, abolitionism, the politics of accommodation, twentieth century Garveyite nationalism, and Martin Luther King’s moralism. Such a subdivision of black political thought was clumsy in that it privileged the conventional trends of the era in question at the expense of less widespread, yet altogether indispensable, political movements. The work suffered further as McCartney woefully neglected the role of the radical left in the national and international resistance struggles of the 1920s-1950s.

McCartney then attempted to take fellow political scientist Charles V. Hamilton to task for his quadripartite categorization of Black Power theorists. Arranged from most conciliatory to most cynical, Hamilton’s four categories consisted of political bargainer, moral crusader, alienated reformer, and alienated revolutionary. McCartney instead combined the first three under the heading of “pluralist,” while he also added “separatist” and “counter-communalist” (loosely defined as non-separatist radical). The remainder of Black Power Ideologies consisted of explorations of each of these three categories as well as political-biographical profiles of a well-known representative of each. While McCartney’s work was important in that it helped usher in a new wave of Black Power scholarship, its rigid formulism left much to be desired. Subsequent, more comprehensive works have since rendered McCartney’s work all but obsolete.

While William L. Van Deburg’s New Day in Babylon (1992) was merely a history of the Black Power era from 1965 to 1975 (absent McCartney’s exhaustive analysis of politics), it covered enough of the same theoretical ground as Black Power Ideologies to render the latter
unnecessary. Moreover, Van Deburg argued that the Black Power movement was essentially a
cultural revolution and that attempts to portray it as only a political phenomenon missed the
point. The first proper history of Black Power, *New Day in Babylon* was thorough and quite
comprehensive, especially given the dearth of similar prior scholarship.

Van Deburg began by foregrounding Malcolm X’s role in emboldening and radicalizing
those who would form the ranks of the Black Power movement. His depiction of Malcolm X as
the “Black Power paradigm” was problematic in that it obscured the role of the CPUSA, the pan-
Africanist and anticolonial diasporic intelligentsia, and others whose incontestable collective
contributions to the black liberation movement were just as vital as any one leader. However,
Van Deburg notably acknowledged Black Power theorists’ tremendous indebtedness to Frantz
Fanon – whose *The Wretched of the Earth* provided a bible of sorts for 1960s revolutionaries of
all stripes – as well as to other Third World liberation advocates such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Mao
Tse-Tung, Kwame Nkrumah, and Amilcar Cabral, to name a few. These activist-intellectuals
produced a body of written work that both guided the revolutionary impulses of young
Americans in the 1960s and 70s and provided a framework for the formulation of the specific
programs and platforms of Black Power organizations.

Although Van Deburg’s primary goal in *A New Day in Babylon* was to examine the
cultural implications of the Black Power movement, he managed to also shed light on the class-
race dialectic as it pertained to the ideological underpinnings of the movement. Most informative
was the juxtaposition of revolutionary nationalists and cultural nationalists – a division whose
ideological fault lines were roughly coterminous with those of the running debate over class- and
race-based oppression. Revolutionary nationalists, in the tradition of Third World Marxists,

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retrofitted Marxist-Leninist ideas in order to fashion what Eldridge Cleaver called “a Yankee-Doodle-Dandy version of socialism,” arguing that theirs was a struggle of both class and race. Cultural nationalists, endlessly derided by the latter group, maintained that the revolution must be for and by black people. They insisted that “black culture was Black Power.” Van Deburg also emphasized the class consciousness of the urban industrial proletariat. The first to highlight the paramount importance of organized labor to Black Power since Georgakas and Surkin’s *Detroit, I Do Mind Dying* (1975), Van Deburg argued that “black labor raised its gloved fist” through wildcat strikes and union actions in cities like Detroit and Hamtramck. For many black workers, whites’ refusal to relinquish their privileged positions within the labor movement had disrupted proletarian unity thereby forcing black workers to adopt a form of vanguardism then espoused by the Black Panther Party, among other organizations.

The author’s overall emphasis on the cultural components of Black Power, from dashikis and Swahili classes to the Last Poets and black cinema, offered something of a one-sided (if still immensely valuable) assessment of the movement. Conversely, such evidence of the widespread embrace of black culture emphasized the movement’s tangible hearts-and-minds victories and signaled a decisive break from any sort of declensionist model. Notwithstanding the weaknesses born of its singular presence in the field in the early 1990s, *New Day in Babylon* would remain the definitive history of Black Power for at least a decade.

Robin D.G. Kelley and Betsy Esch’s “Black Like Mao: Red China and Black Revolution” (1999) initiated a wave of scholarship dealing with Afro-Asian connections that has continued to the present with the work of Robeson Taj Frazier, Rychetta Watkins, Bill V.

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14 Ibid., 162, 171.
15 Ibid., 92.
Mullen, and many others. The authors highlighted a resurgence in the popularity of Communist China in the Black Power era, when *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* was first translated into English and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution seemed to be transforming China into “the land where true freedom might be had.” Witnessing an enormous “colored” nation reject imperialism and imagine new ways of practicing socialism caused many American radicals to look east for a new politics of liberation.

As early as 1936, W.E.B. Du Bois had traveled to China and, with each successive visit, had seen in the Chinese Communist model a template for black diasporic revolution. Following Nikita Khrushchev’s controversial 1956 speech to the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), increasing numbers of American communists abandoned the Soviet model for the antirevisionism of what became known as Maoism. Kelley and Esch traced the growing embrace of this antirevisionism in the 1960s as it informed the rise of the New Communist Movement. While the movement often coincided with the black liberation struggle, by the late 1970s it had succumbed to the same sectarianism that had historically undermined theory-heavy leftist organizations.

As Kelley and Esch argued, however, Red China’s links to the black liberation struggle are impossible to ignore. They afforded Max Stanford, Huey P. Newton, Amiri Baraka, and other pillars of Black Power an alternative, Third-World interpretation of Marx that challenged the European radical’s conceptualization of the road to socialism as a formulaic series of steps characterized by certain objective conditions outside of which revolution could not possibly

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occur. Maoists’ commitment to theory and practice in dialectical relation also rendered their model an appealing – if challenging – route to increased black political and economic power.

Radio Free Dixie (2001), Timothy B. Tyson’s profile of former-NAACP leader and American expatriate Robert F. Williams, provided one of the first monographic historical sketches of a godfather of Black Power not named Malcolm X. Along with the Deacons for Defense and Justice, Williams and his comrades in Monroe, North Carolina, were the deep South’s militant counterparts to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Gandhian, nonviolent wing. Arguing that the civil rights and Black Power struggles “grew out of the same soil,” rather than constituting two separate movements, Tyson’s work suggests the southern movement might well have developed into one of armed struggle were it not for the fateful intervention of pacifist Bayard Rustin during the Montgomery bus boycott. After all, indigenous traditions of resistance bore little resemblance to King’s employment of satyagraha.

Before Williams took up arms in Monroe, he encountered the complexities of the class-race dialectic that would later shape Black Power politics. In the communists and socialists that organized auto workers in Detroit, he had seen the sort of Christian brotherhood that had been a strictly segregated affair in North Carolina. After a brief few years in Detroit, Williams witnessed the city’s massive 1943 race riot and abruptly left for greener pastures in California. However, confusion and frustration with the discriminatory policies of California’s labor unions caused him to return to North Carolina. From his native Monroe in the 1950s and early 1960s, he would become a hero for the cause of civil rights by advocating black pride and armed self-defense – the very tactics that would appeal to Black Power activists years later.

19 Ibid., 308.
Tyson’s analysis of Williams’s politics rightly emphasized his personal disinclination to commit to the party line of any single group. While he associated himself in various capacities with the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), the CPUSA, and SNCC – even being named president-in-exile of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) and the Republic of New Afrika (RNA) – Williams maintained a fierce independence born of a desire to engage in creative forms of resistance uninhibited by party doctrine. However, Tyson largely ignored Williams’s membership in the National Rifle Association and his own Monroe Rifle Club, aspects of Williams’s activism that now seem troubling given the current political bent of the NRA. He also painted Williams’s years in exile in Cuba (during which he hosted his popular *Radio Free Dixie* program) and China as afterthoughts. Notwithstanding such omissions, *Radio Free Dixie* widened the scope of Black Power historiography to include indigenous radicalism that predated the traditional, late 1960s-early 1970s periodization.

While not a history of Black Power per se, Robin D.G. Kelley’s *Freedom Dreams* further expanded the study of the black liberation struggle by exploring various strains of radicalism that often found inspiration in the realm of the surreal.\(^20\) Drawing from Dr. King’s argument in *Strength to Love* that black Americans, in imagining transformative solutions to the nation’s social ills, possessed a unique capacity to resist “bitterness and cynicism,” Kelley examined movements for self-determination, black communism, Afro-Asian solidarity, reparations, and black feminism.\(^21\) This work was critical in that each of the individual movements highlighted were tributaries into the broader political and intellectual discourse that shaped the Black Power era.


\(^{21}\) Ibid., x.
Perhaps the most compelling aspect of Kelley’s work was his total abandonment of the conventional, dichotomous relationship between the civil rights and Black Power movements. By reading King’s optimism in light of the immense capacity for creative resistance exhibited by everyone from the early Maroons to the Alabama Communists of the Great Depression and the Pan-Africanists of the mid twentieth century, Kelley posited the connectivity of such diverse forms of struggle. *Freedom Dreams* necessarily dealt with issues of class, race, and gender, as such categories only existed historically insomuch as they intersected with one another. Moreover, as a former member of the Communist Workers Party and an avowed feminist, Kelley wrote with an instinctive concern for the ways in which intersectionality could lead to a wholesale reimagining of the history of social movements.

Kelley’s work raised the bar for scholars of the Black Power movement. No longer could traditional periodization or short-sighted, narrowly-conceived causality pass muster among scholars. Accordingly, Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar’s *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (2004) provided valuable analysis of several areas of the field that theretofore remained underexplored. Ogbar suggested that the Nation of Islam (NOI) and the Black Panther Party were the archetypal antecedent and exemplar (respectively) of the Black Power movement. Summing up the movement effectively in stating that Black Power was “many things to many people and an enigma to most,” he argued that the central themes that characterized this iteration of the struggle were black pride and self-determination, and its main thrust was a multidimensional “black nationalism.” Finally, he notably rejected as “too simplistic” the

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commonly held notion that the liberation struggle consisted merely of a dialectic of integrationism and black nationalism. 23

Ogbar’s analyses of the NOI and the Panthers provided a valuable glimpse into the nature and origins of Black Power politics. Both groups drew a substantial amount of organizational strength from a commitment (both real and rhetorical) to the lowest underclass of society – the lumpenproletariat. While the NOI garnered a significant portion of its membership from this segment, Ogbar explained that the Panthers lionized the lumpen lifestyle, even as many of its members came from middle-class backgrounds and were well-versed in the finer points of revolutionary theory. He also highlighted both groups’ criticisms of cultural nationalism. While the NOI rejected much of black American culture outright, the Panthers viewed cultural nationalism as anathema to the principal, anti-imperialist struggle, as it obscured the true sources of oppression and offered “a romantic subterfuge of culture and race in place of class.” 24 Indeed, the work’s greatest strength was its nuanced examination of the class-race dialectic as it pertained to Panther politics.

Shoring up several decades worth of Black Power scholarship, Peniel E. Joseph offered the first complete narrative history of the Black Power movement in Waiting ‘til the Midnight Hour (2006). 25 Beginning with Malcolm X’s early work in the 1950s and ending around 1975, Joseph’s was the quintessential “long history” of the Black Power movement. While the intended audience was unclear (given that any respectable long history of the Black Power movement needed to narrate one of the most eventful periods in American history while affording readers at least an elementary understanding of the endlessly complex politics of the era), Joseph’s

23 Ibid., 2-3.
24 Ibid., 195.
narrative was compelling. Moreover, he broadened the scope of his account to accommodate the movement’s transnational dimensions.

However, *Waiting ’til the Midnight Hour* raised as many questions as it answered. For instance, what was the point in attempting to re-categorize Malcolm X and other 1950s radicals as members – rather than progenitors – of the Black Power movement? Did Joseph’s new periodization (and the requisite impulse to locate a definite beginning and end) serve to enhance scholars’ understanding of the movement in any important way? Finally, did any serious historian of the black liberation struggle still – in 2006 – need to be convinced of the inadequacy of the declensionist model? Nevertheless, Joseph’s foray into narrative history afforded its readers an exhaustive and gripping account of the origins and evolution of a particular strain of black radicalism in the mid-late twentieth century.

Covering the same period much more effectively, Brenda Gayle Plummer offered the transnational history of the black liberation struggle in *In Search of Power* (2013). Plummer explored the intersection of civil rights, human rights, anticolonialism, and radicalism in order to better contextualize the black protest movements of the 1950s-1970s. She argued that Cold War-era national leaders sought to divorce the civil rights movement of the 1950s from its longstanding, radical critique of capitalism, replacing this critique with a mild form of liberalism. This argument was significant in that it explained why many historians had located the beginning of Black Power radicalism in the late-1960s emergence of the Panthers and the militant phase of SNCC. McCarthyist repression obscured lines of connectivity between the Old Left of Harry Haywood and Paul Robeson, Malcolm X’s incendiary presence, and the conventional Black Power activists and intellectuals of the late 1960s.

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Plummer also argued that black Americans in the era of anticolonialism became acutely aware of the ways in which, throughout its history, the state had “predicated national security on the bedrock of racism.” They could then leverage their perceived power to threaten national security in order to compel the government to enforce measures aimed at racial justice. Furthermore (and particularly relevant to any study of latter-day SNCC), she highlighted developments on the African continent that directly impacted the nature and scope of African-American connections across the diaspora. Specifically, Plummer maintained that the era of African independence and self-rule posed important dilemmas for black Americans who had rallied alongside Africans to rid the continent of its former colonial masters. Given new sets of internecine conflicts between and amongst rival African political factions, the fight for freedom and justice on the continent was no longer a simple, black-and-white issue. When Black Power organizations attempted to reach out to African states in the late 1960s, they invariably expressed solidarity with those (e.g. Southern Africa) in which the clear racial dimension of the conflict was still extant.

Finally, Plummer pulled no punches in criticizing recent historians for attempting to ascribe an inordinate degree of “cogency” to the Black Power movement. Quick to dismiss the integrationist tactics of more liberal civil rights leaders, these historians took pains to make Black Power seem more attractive and useful “based on what it is perceived not to be.” Plummer chided Peniel E. Joseph for sweeping all manner of black activists – from sharecroppers and trade unionists to militants and anti-poverty workers – into the net of Black Power. “If Black Power is to mean anything,” she argued, “it cannot mean everything.” Plummer’s work, while

27 Ibid., 10-11.
28 Ibid., 16-17, 344.
not exclusively a history of Black Power, was easily the most important contribution to Black Power historiography since *New Day in Babylon*.

Bloom and Martin’s *Black against Empire* was the first comprehensive history of the Black Panther Party from its origins through its slow and tragic demise.\(^{29}\) The authors attempted to synthesize decades of secondary accounts, participant autobiographies, and Ph.D. dissertations, as well as a wealth of newly archived sources and dozens of new interviews, in order to craft the definitive account of the organization. The results were twofold: a complete narrative of the major events of the Panthers’ tumultuous existence and a deeper look at the organization’s radical politics than others had yet offered.

As a relatively lengthy narrative containing some degree of analysis—on par with Taylor Branch’s *America in the King Years* trilogy—*Black against Empire* could not afford to stray beyond traditional periodization. Focusing mainly on the roughly fifteen-year period following the Watts rebellion, Bloom and Martin argued that the Party’s greatest strength lie in its capacity to keep “the pulse of the streets,” and that “not since the Civil War… [had] so many people taken up arms in revolutionary struggle in the United States.”\(^{30}\) Such limited periodization did, however, allow the authors to address the reasons why Black Power in general, and the Panthers in particular, gained such wide appeal in the late 1960s in ways that historians like Peniel E. Joseph (opting for a longer view of the movement) had been unable to address. From the Panthers’ early policing of local law enforcement to their vanguardism and community service projects, their tactics evinced a sophisticated politics of revolutionary nationalism that evolved out of necessity, arose in a very specific historical moment, and engaged the dispossessed of all


\(^{30}\) Ibid., 3.
races at both the local and national levels. Bloom and Martin maintained that, at their most ambitious, the Panthers incorporated class, race, and gender analyses in order to unite a diverse community of the oppressed that possessed the moral consistency and sheer force to resist the oppressor on multiple fronts.

While the authors’ attention to narrative flow precluded a truly penetrating, in-depth analysis of Panther politics vis-à-vis the class-race dialectic, their evaluation of Third World Marxism supplemented the excellent work of Kelley and Plummer. The Panthers’ loose embrace of Marxism-Leninism, the inspiration culled from Maoist ideas, and the examples of various adaptations of Marxian analysis across the diaspora informed the organization’s anti-imperialism. Highlighting the Panthers’ efforts toward group political education, Bloom and Martin provided a valuable assessment of the evolution of their incorporation of Marxist theory over the course of the group’s existence. What remained constant, however, was the Panthers’ identification with oppressed peoples across the globe, as well as a heady vision of the Party as the vanguard of the anti-imperialist struggle.

Bloom and Martin argued that, by the mid-1970s, there seemed to be no realistic avenue for overthrowing capitalism, and those that attempted to do so through guerilla warfare faced mounting odds. Moreover, milder social democratic politics, while decidedly more practical, left the Panthers with little in the way of organizing power. They argued that, while organizations like the Black Liberation Army carried on the insurrectionary actions that the Panthers had once advocated, the Panthers themselves struggled to find a voice in the changing political atmosphere. By 1982, the remaining cadre devoted to local service to the Oakland community finally folded. A towering effort by any standard, *Black against Empire* will likely remain the authoritative work on the history and politics of the Black Panther Party for years to come.
Finally, Robeson Taj Frazier’s *The East is Black* continued the excellent work being done by Kelley, Mullen, and others on the Afro-Asia connection that so thoroughly influenced Black Power theorists.\(^{31}\) Roughly spanning the period between the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 and Mao’s death in 1976, *The East is Black* argued that media, propaganda, and the travel narratives of cross-cultural ambassadors produced “transnational publics rooted in a collective, transcultural consciousness.”\(^{32}\) Frazier’s use of the transnational approach helped elucidate a very complicated Cold War dialogue between China and black radicals that provided one of the few tangible, largely unbroken links between the Old and New Lefts.

Frazier’s most valuable contribution was his exploration of the race, class, and gender dimensions of this cross-cultural dialogue. Beyond emphasizing black Americans’ appropriation of much of Maoist antirevisionism, Frazier argued that both sides of the Afro-Asian connection engaged in a degree of “radical imagining” that, while endearing the sides to one another, also glossed over some very important contradictions, not the least of which was a fundamentally gendered view of revolutionary struggle.\(^{33}\) First, the popular dichotomy of bad-capitalist-West versus good-communist-East obscured the terror and destructiveness that characterized the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. Also, such American appropriations of Chinese culture as the red armbands of the Chinese Red Guard and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, though seemingly innocuous in the American context, suggested that much had been lost in translation. For historians of SNCC and the Black Power era, Frazier’s work helped explain how radicals like H. Rap Brown could have uncritically embraced the propagandistic cultural and political output of such a troubled revolutionary government.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 9.
\(^{33}\) Ibid., 40.
Since the 1967 publication of *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, historians have honed their analyses of the Black Power era by attempting variously to adjust periodization, explore the nature of an expanding array of apparent cultural and political antecedents, and contextualize the often controversial views of Black Power theorists. The result was an early and decisive shift away from a declensionist model toward a more complete, less provincial view of the movement. However, historians have long since done all of the vindicating that will ever be needed. Any more attempts at such justification of Black Power would entail preaching to the converted (and increasingly redundant scholarship).

The current state of civil rights and Black Power historiography demands that scholars continue to provide a more nuanced view of the political trends that undergirded the radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s.\(^{34}\) The work of W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, and, especially, Cedric Robinson in illuminating the dialectics of class and race should inspire historians to apply similarly rigorous approaches toward the analysis of these politics. More than a quarter of a century removed from Cold War-era Manichaeism, the insights that such approaches will inevitably produce have the capacity to open up new avenues of possibilities for exploring the history of black resistance in America.

This thesis focuses primarily on SNCC, because, unlike groups such as the Black Panther Party and the US organization, it was anti-ideological for most of its existence. SNCC’s reluctance to commit to a formal ideology often rendered it a site of intense intellectual debate

due to the divergent political views of its core members. The record of such uninhibited debate – particularly within an organization that so meticulously documented its own rise and fall – is instructive for scholars attempting to advance Black Power historiography. Moreover, the politics of latter-day SNCC officers like H. Rap Brown (and, to a lesser degree, Stokely Carmichael and James Forman) have not received scholarly attention commensurate with their historical importance. A mysterious historiographical silence has shrouded Brown’s political legacy. Aside from his own 1969 ghostwritten autobiography, very few works have explored his politics, and virtually none has examined Brown’s views on the dialectics of class and race.

Chapter 1 traces the genealogy of the class-race dialectic from the Third International to the 1960s. Activist-intellectuals from all corners of the African diaspora grappled with different ways of understanding the nature of oppression as they devised creative ways of resisting subjugation and effecting more just societies. The conclusions that they reached – and the processes by which they arrived at them – are instructive for those who wish to gain a fuller picture of Black Power politics in the 1960s and 1970s. Chapter 2 explores the ways in which SNCC leaders – having been compelled to formulate an ideology to accompany the sloganeering of Black Power – engaged in intellectual debate over the issue of whether to adopt a race- or class-based analysis of oppression in determining a way forward. Chapter 3 outlines Hubert Geroid Brown’s early development as a member and chairman of the Nonviolent Action Group (NAG) and as a SNCC organizer in the rural Alabama Black Belt. Finally, Chapter 4 is an analysis of H. Rap Brown’s politics of revolution during and after his turbulent tenure as SNCC chairman. While Brown certainly contributed to the carnivalesque atmosphere of the late 1960s,

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this study moves beyond sound bites and pronouncements on the necessity of violence. I argue
that Brown synthesized the analytical approaches of competing factions within the movement in
order to formulate an intersectional, Third-Worldist politics that stressed positive action rather
than armchair theorizing.
CHAPTER 1
CLASS, RACE, AND THE ROOTS OF BLACK POWER POLITICS

Stokely and the advocates of Black Power stand on the shoulders of all that has gone before. To too many people here in England, and unfortunately to many people in the United States too... too many people see Black Power and its advocates as some sort of portent, a sudden apparition, as some racist eruption from the depths of black oppression and black backwardness. It is nothing of the kind. It represents the high peak of thought on the Negro question which has been going on for over half a century. That much we have to know, and that much we have to be certain other people get to know.

C.L.R. James

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The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.

Karl Marx

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The earliest roots of Black Power politics lie not in the heady idealism of the 1960s but rather in much earlier discourses and debates around the nature of black oppression. As Trinidadian intellectual C.L.R. James argued in 1967, the young firebrands of that era engaged the revolutionary political legacies of Marxists and nationalists from decades past. While they gleaned theoretical insights from Old Leftists and New Negroes, leaders of the Black Power movement also grappled with the deep-seated contradictions inherent in black radicalism. Central among such contradictions were the dialectics of class and race.

In the early twentieth century, activist-intellectuals from every corner of the African diaspora worked to usher in a new era of decolonization and racial and economic justice. Most Marxists incorporated anticolonialism and anti-racism – then referred to as the “Negro question” – into a broader class critique. Nationalists, on the other hand, often insisted that the global

struggle for black liberation turned on the axes of race or nationality. Such perspectives were seldom mutually exclusive, and many black radicals made their most enduring theoretical contributions by synthesizing class and race in a “‘tidal wave’ of anticolonial literature.” The same exercise in dialectical thinking confronted radicals in the 1960s and 70s as they sought to provide a theoretical basis for Black Power. Individuals like H. Rap Brown, Stokely Carmichael, and James Forman each found unique multidimensional approaches to challenging racial capitalism. Genealogical inquiry into the ways in which they approached class and race demands a closer look at the work of their activist-intellectual forebears.

At the end of World War I, the growth of a black left and the formation of the Third International (Comintern) first compelled many radicals to grapple with the dialectics of class and race. From the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union of South Africa to the CPUSA, peasants and urban proletariat alike responded to the Bolsheviks’ “superhuman efforts” to “facilitate and hasten the victory of the communist revolution throughout the world.” The particularly acute oppression of black Americans and others in the African diaspora was of concern to V.I. Lenin and the Comintern as early as its First Congress in 1919. Due in large part to the efforts of activist-intellectuals like Caribbean-Harlemites Claude McKay and Otto

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4 Each of the activist-intellectuals discussed in this chapter were quite prolific over the course of their respective careers. Together they generated a body of work whose full breadth and trajectory no single chapter could satisfactorily convey. I merely attempt to provide a brief survey of their intellectual output as it pertained most directly to the enduring dialectic of class and race.
Huiswoud, the Negro Question remained an important policy issue throughout the 1920s and was incorporated into the struggle against capitalism and imperialism. Moreover, the Comintern’s “Resolution on the Negro Question,” sought to extend the class struggle into the Black Belt of the American South, a swath of counties in which blacks constituted the numerical majority and to which the Party granted status as an oppressed nation with the right to self-determination.

Yet in the Black Belt, Harlem, and elsewhere, the CPUSA engaged in organizational rivalry with Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Combining the back-to-Africa rhetoric of early nationalists like Henry M. Turner and the self-help doctrine of Booker T. Washington, Garvey advocated a “race first” philosophy of black pride and uplift from which many cultural nationalists borrowed heavily in the 1960s and 70s. Garvey sympathized with the Communists to an extent but argued that “we belong to the Negro party, first, last and all the time,” and that, rather than white capitalists, white *workers* were largely responsible for the lynching epidemic in the United States. By 1928, the official position of the Comintern was predictably one of hostility toward Garveyism, calling it “Negro Zionism” and accusing it of hampering the class struggle. C.L.R. James characterized Garvey’s ideas as

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9 *Daily Worker*, 23 August 1924.

“pitiable rubbish” and Garvey himself as a demagogue on par with Adolf Hitler. The intellectual debates of the ensuing decades owed much to the clashes (and compromises) between early black radicals and Garveyites.

During the 1930s and 40s, with Garveyism fading and the racial-separatist Nation of Islam still nascent, the roster of key black intellectuals who committed themselves to class struggle, world revolution, and socialist politics included, but was not limited to, both James and W.E.B. Du Bois. Their output from this period found both men searching for a more nuanced framework for dealing with oppression and exploitation than Party stalwarts or strict nationalists had yet produced. Although Du Bois had left the Socialist Party of America in 1912, complaining for over a decade that it had failed to adequately confront American racism, a visit to Russia in 1926 convinced him that socialism of the Soviet variety addressed “the simultaneous challenge of racism… and the prospect of class unity.” The trip was a watershed moment in Du Bois’s political development, permanently broadening the scope of his crusade against Jim Crow. Indeed, moving beyond his notion of “double consciousness,” Du Bois now also immersed himself in the class-race dialectic that would increasingly frame diasporic political discourses.

Decades of intellectual and political vacillation characterized Du Bois’s embrace of Marxism. Amid what Eugene D. Genovese has referred to as Du Bois’s “zigzag ideological

11 Tony Martin, Race First, 243; James, Pan-African Revolt, 92-93.
13 Du Bois underscored the complexity of this dialectic in a 1935 letter to colleague George Streator: “But our economic situation is such that while we are continuing to hammer at the false logic of race prejudice and continuing to bring forward scientific fact, we have got to live and earn a living, and therefore the immediate problem is how to do that?” W.E.B. Du Bois to George Streator, April 24, 1935, in The Correspondence of W.E.B. Du Bois: Volume II, Selections, 1934-1944, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1976), 91.
course,” he began in the prewar years to synthesize race and class analyses in groundbreaking historical and sociological works. In 1935, Du Bois penned what most consider his magnum opus – *Black Reconstruction in America* – a Marxist history of the Civil War and Reconstruction era in which he notably attributed emancipation and Union victory to a “general strike” on the part of “black workers.” Four years later, in *Black Folk: Then and Now*, he declared that the world proletariat overwhelmingly consisted of people of color. Linking their uplift to that of the entire world (as he was wont to do), Du Bois argued that these were the workers “supporting a superstructure of wealth, luxury, and extravagance.” However, acknowledging the racism that had long precluded proletarian unity, he repeated a memorable dictum from his 1903 classic, *The Souls of Black Folk*: “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.”

*Color and Democracy* and *The World and Africa*, published in the immediate aftermath of World War II, found Du Bois exploring the class and race oppression that would continue to plague the postwar world. If organizations like the United Nations were to prove successful, the imperial powers would have to relinquish their colonies, no matter the cost. “To set up now an internation with near half of mankind disfranchised and socially enslaved,” Du Bois argued, “is to court disaster.” He notably described the manner in which these governments had erected massive structures of finance on antiquated conceptions of racial inferiority, thereby aligning the poverty line with the ever-present color line. Lauing the Russian model as “the miracle of our age,” Du Bois wondered whether other nations would follow in its footsteps or merely continue to allow their own fears to drive the coffin nails of democracy. The survival of Western

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civilization was tied to both its embrace of the democratic ideas advanced by Marx – whether or not they arrived in the form of Soviet Communism – and its willingness to free Africa and Asia from the bonds of colonialism.\textsuperscript{18} A pioneer in the diasporic shift toward a less doctrinaire, Third World Marxism, Du Bois envisioned a global democratic revolution brought about, truly, by any means necessary.\textsuperscript{19}

A similarly prolific organic intellectual, C.L.R. James hailed from Tunapuna, Trinidad, where during his formative years, “the division of rich and poor [was] also the division of white and black.” He first embraced radical politics while on an extended sojourn in Nelson, Lancashire, mixing close readings of Trotsky, Lenin, and Marx with a study of Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L’Ouverture. The ensuant works, \textit{The Black Jacobins} and \textit{A History of Negro Revolt} – each of which revealed the enormous influence of Du Bois’s \textit{Black Reconstruction} – found him adroitly confronting the class and race implications of colonialism and black oppression.\textsuperscript{20} In a 1939 article, “Preliminary Notes on the Negro Question,” James (writing as J.R. Johnson) directly addressed the plight of black Americans, reconciling the concerns of Marxists and black nationalists. Anticipating Black Power-era revolutionary nationalism, he expressed his abiding faith in “the Negro masses” by arguing for a black-led movement for total equality that would welcome the support of white workers even as it rejected their paternalism or outright domination. Chiding the CPUSA for its rigid unwillingness to


\textsuperscript{19} “I believe in Karl Marx,” Du Bois wrote to George Streator in 1935, “[b]ut I do not believe in the verbal inspiration of the Marxism scriptures.” Furthermore, “…I am not interested in working out a perfect dogmatic system on the basis of the Marxism brand of Hegelianism. What I want is a realistic and practical approach to a democratic state in which the exploitation of labor is stopped, and the political power is in the hands of the workers.” Du Bois to Streator, \textit{Correspondence}, 91-92.

support such an arrangement, he proposed a more flexible revolutionary Marxism. The article demonstrated the conviction that would become a hallmark of James’s political thought: the notion that “revolutionary socialism is the ultimate road” should never preclude multiple lanes.\(^{21}\)

Many black radicals of the postwar era shared a common history of membership in and alienation from the Communist Party. Aimé Césaire and George Padmore (né Malcolm Ivan Meredith Nurse) were among the diasporic activist-intellectuals whose early espousal of radical politics entailed Party membership. Developments both personal and world-historical, however, precipitated what Césaire termed a “coming to consciousness” in which such radicals interrogated their own unconditional devotion to class struggle.\(^{22}\) Cedric Robinson has shown that many became disaffected with the Party as a result of its inability to adequately address “the crises of world capitalism, the destructive dialectic of imperialism, and the history and ideological revelations of the naivety of Western socialism [particularly with regard to race],” and sought answers elsewhere.\(^{23}\) The political biographies of Césaire and Padmore are particularly illustrative of this critical analytical pivot and its latent insights for future Black Power theorists.

Born in Basse-Pointe, Martinique in 1913, Aimé Césaire attended the Lycée Schoeicher in Fort-de-France, where he studied French language and cultural traditions in accordance with the French Antillean colonial educational curriculum designed to facilitate cultural assimilation. In the 1930s, Césaire attended the Lycée Louis-le-Grand and L’École Normale Superieure in

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Paris, where he, along with other African and Caribbean students, first engaged in radical politics. He became involved with the journal *L'Étudiant Noir* and later, back in Martinique, founded *Tropiques*, a literary journal that drew criticism from Vichy officials whose censorship of such “subversive” publications further radicalized Césaire. While he would join the French Communist Party (PCF), his notion of *négritude* – an early antecedent of Black Power that emphasized cultural pride as anticolonial resistance – would continue to shape his radicalism.

Césaire’s poetic 1955 essay, *Discourse on Colonialism*, found him still a year from his historic break with the Party, yet as devoted to Communism and class struggle as ever. In *Discourse*, Césaire argued that colonialism worked to “decivilize” and “brutalize” the colonizer, thus causing a gangrenous infection to poison Europe until, “slowly but surely, the continent proceeds toward savagery.” By firmly proclaiming that “Europe is indefensible,” he indicted the architects of colonialism for having tolerated Nazism for decades while it was inflicted upon non-Europeans. While denouncing the racial capitalism inherent in the colonial system, Césaire lamented the death of a distinctly African political economy that he characterized as both “ante-capitalist” and “anti-capitalist.”

The consummate Communist, Césaire envisioned a dialectic through which pre-colonial Africa and European imperialism (thesis and antithesis, respectively) yielded a synthesis consisting of the finer qualities of each. Such a synthesis would entail “a society rich with all the productive power of modern times,” yet “warm with all the fraternity of olden days.”

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28 Ibid., 32, 36.
29 Ibid., 44.
30 Ibid., 52.
reading *Discourse* after Khrushchev’s 1956 Secret Speech to the 20th Party Congress might have forgiven Césaire for explicitly elevating the Soviet Union of the mid-1950s as a model to which anticolonial activists could aspire.\(^{31}\) In his final lines, he placed the salvation of Europe on the shoulders of the proletariat – by then the only class capable of effecting revolution and, ultimately, classless society – due to its supremely dispossessed status.

The following year, Césaire composed a letter to Maurice Thorez, General Secretary of the PCF, tendering his resignation. While he offered a veritable laundry list of legitimate grievances, including recently revealed details of Stalin’s methods (and the PCF’s exceedingly sluggish de-Stalinization), burgeoning “state capitalism” in purportedly Communist nations, and the unmitigated intransigence of the CPSU, it is apparent that Césaire’s vision for black liberation had outgrown the Party’s capacity to accommodate it. In no uncertain terms, he assured Thorez that the struggles of black workers against racism and colonialism differed from those of the white proletariat against capitalism and “cannot in any way be considered a part, a fragment, of that struggle.”\(^ {32}\) In short, doctrinaire Communism had failed to anesthetize people of color to the stinging effects of racism.

Césaire did not limit his message to a parting shot at Stalinism, but rather he exhibited the sort of creative idealism that he would bequeath to his mentee, Frantz Fanon. Neither did he entirely abandon Marxism. He merely allowed his own unique views as a black radical to color and reshape his materialist outlook, convinced that revolutionary opposition to racial capitalism stemming from the collective efforts of a truly unified proletariat was still the preferable means

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of attaining the end to which all history had theretofore been working. He envisioned an inclusive organization – “as broad and as flexible as possible” – in which Marxists would play the role of “leavening, inspiring, and orienting,” rather than dividing, the anticolonial movement. Césaire deplored the sectarianism that seemed endemic to communist parties, particularly surrounding issues of race and nationhood, but valued the Marxist analysis. Moreover, foreshadowing the concerns of many Black Power theorists wary of unproductive coalition-building, he sought interracial alliances divorced from the sort of paternalism that mirrored the behavior of the oppressor. Césaire’s break with the Party over issues of analytical narrowness and ideological pedantry paralleled the disaffection and evolution of other anticolonial activist-intellectuals, most notably George Padmore.

Padmore was born Malcolm Ivan Meredith Nurse in Arouca District, Tacarigua, Trinidad in 1903. After immigrating to the United States, he attended New York University and Howard University and, by 1928, joined the CPUSA. In his 1931 pamphlet, *The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers*, Padmore notably outlined the dual oppression that diasporic blacks faced – as a class and a nation – and asserted that “national (race) oppression” arose from “the social-economic relation of the Negro under capitalism.” The scourge of racism in America was the primary weapon with which capitalists sought to divide the working class, and the Communist Party (by Padmore’s reckoning) was alone in its full comprehension of and willingness to appropriately confront the issue. Just as Césaire would maintain in *Discourse* that class struggle of the Soviet variety constituted the antidote to racist pathology, Padmore clung to belief that

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33 Ibid., 148.
36 Ibid., 47, 54.
interracial and international workers’ solidarity would eventually undermine the manipulatory designs of depression-era capitalists.

By the time the Communist Party expelled Padmore in 1934 over ideological differences, he had begun to experience Césaire’s “coming to consciousness.” The Padmore that penned *Pan-Africanism or Communism* in 1956 bore little resemblance to the young Communist of decades past. In the intervening years, he had undergone a transformation the result of which was an enduring commitment to follow V.I. Lenin in bending “theory to the facts, not facts to the theory.”

No longer would he allow the concerns of blacks to be subsumed by a party line. Contemplating a course forward for African nations after the colonizers were gone, Padmore suggested that Pan-Africanism or doctrinaire Communism would carry the day, as imperialism had been discredited. Communism, he warned, had proven itself wholly intolerant of “those who do not subscribe to its ever-changing party line” and had even resorted to violent measures against such dissenters (an assertion that the Khrushchev’s secret speech that year would corroborate). Moreover, Communism exploited “misery, poverty, ignorance, and want,” in order to gain a foothold with the masses.

Pan-Africanism sought to address those same concerns without robbing members of the diaspora of intellectual freedom or political agency.

Padmore’s embrace of Pan-Africanism over doctrinaire Communism, however, in no way entailed an abandonment of Marxism. Indeed, Padmore spoke for most other Pan-Africanists when he declared that the philosophy “recognizes much that is true in the Marxist interpretation of history” and that its economic and social vision dovetailed with “the fundamental objectives

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38 Ibid., xvi, xix.
of Democratic Socialism.” While anti-racism had to figure into any Pan-Africanist ideology, most Pan-Africanists saw no reason to abandon the class analysis at the root of socialism, especially those who would later take a pre-colonial, classical African communalist tack. Like Césaire, Padmore knew that black oppression was an issue with both race and class dimensions. Yet a complex array of factors would render such an easy marriage of socialism and diasporic unity elusive for younger theorists only a decade later.

Having acquired political consciousness in the Manichean atmosphere of the Cold War – and mostly cut off from the black radicals of the Old Left – many among the Black Power generation embraced the Third World Marxist tradition and engaged its accompanying class-race dialectic through a slew of books and pamphlets fortuitously published or translated into English in the mid-1960s. Available in English for the first time in 1963 and 1967, respectively, were *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin, White Masks*, written by Martiniquan psychiatrist and Césaire mentee Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth*, particularly its first chapter, “Concerning Violence,” quickly became indispensable in the canon of Black Power literature.

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40 For instance, former SNCC chairman Stokely Carmichael – along with many cultural nationalists in the 1960s – derided socialism and communism, opting instead for “an African ideology which speaks to our blackness – nothing else.” Penny Von Eschen attributes such attitudes to “Cold War repression and historical amnesia” that had by then effectively silenced many older American intellectuals whose Marxist politics and international anticolonialism might otherwise have had a more formative impact on the politics of the Black Power generation. “Consequently,” Eschen argues, “in the 1960s, young activists… were cut off from an older generation and compelled to reinvent the wheel as they developed their own critiques of American capitalism and imperialism.” While such an argument risks papering over Carmichael’s prior familiarity with the works of both European and Third World Marxists, Eschen’s point is worth noting. Brenda Gayle Plummer has also argued that “national leaders in the cold war era unlinked the association commonly made between civil rights struggle and radicalism” and attached the movement, instead, to a considerably milder liberalism. Perhaps it was no accident that SNCC staffer James Forman, twelve years Carmichael’s senior and a former student of socialist Pan-Africanist St. Clair Drake, unapologetically embraced a class analysis of black oppression. Carson, *In Struggle*, 282; “Free Huey Rally in Oakland,” *Pacifica Radio* (Berkeley, CA: KPFA, February 17, 1968); Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism*, 1937-1957 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 187; Plummer, *In Search of Power*, 5.

Reiland Rabaka argues that Fanon “challenged the anti-colonialist… to be also anti-capitalist and anti-racist.” Indeed, Fanon continued (in the tradition of Césaire and Padmore) to foreground the need to adequately address racial oppression without losing one’s class analysis.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon’s 1952 debut, he explored the psychological effects of colonial racism. Borrowing heavily from Césaire, he sought to engage racial oppression in “concrete terms” by asserting that “all forms of exploitation are identical, since they apply to the same ‘object’: man.” By refuting Jean-Paul Sartre’s notion, in *Black Orpheus*, that Négritude merely constituted the antithetical value in an Hegelian dialectic of which the “theoretical and practical affirmation of white supremacy” was the thesis, Fanon reclaimed his own agency and rejected the misuse of European philosophical tools at the service of the destruction of “black impulsiveness.” Fanon anticipated *The Wretched of the Earth* by arguing that appeals to reason were useless in the face of exploitation, and, echoing C.L.R. James, that fighting – out of desperation rather than Marxist or idealist compulsion – would be necessary to achieve liberation. Finally, addressing black Americans directly, Fanon optimistically stated that, at the end of the struggle, “I can already see a white man and a black man *hand in hand*.”

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, the volume most read by Black Power theorists in the 1960s, Fanon anticipated the process of African decolonization. Setting the scene in “Concerning Violence,” Fanon painted colonizer and colonized as absolutely opposed, governed as they were “by a purely Aristotelian logic.” To a greater extent than many other African-diasporic revolutionaries, he challenged economic determinism by pointing to the stark poverty line that,

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in the colonies, was necessarily also the color line: “You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich.” The racial dynamic in the colonies rendered the situation such that, in opposition to orthodox Marxist thought, the colonized peasants and lumpenproletariat, as well as the industrial proletariat, were all potential revolutionaries. Indeed, Fanon’s argument that Marx’s class analysis should be “slightly stretched” when dealing with the colonial issue speaks to his own experiences and observations of the brutally racist colonial regimes that could not satisfactorily be lumped under the simple moniker of capital.

If the Marxian analysis should be stretched, however, it need not be abandoned altogether. Like Pan-Africanists Césaire, Padmore, Nkrumah, and others, Fanon’s race consciousness did not blunt his commitment to socialism. As the system that was devoted entirely to the will of the people and that held humans as the “most precious asset,” socialism had the capacity to reorient the troubled economies of formerly colonized countries and help them stave off neocolonialism. In the tradition of postwar-era Du Bois, Fanon argued that the fate of the world depended on the Third World’s will not only to resist capitalism, but also to insist that resources be poured into investments and aid in the former colonies rather than wasted on a destructive nuclear arms race. While it is not clear that every Black Power theorist engaged in a thorough reading of The Wretched of the Earth, “Concerning Violence” served to

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46 Fanon also highlights the way in which the simple, black-white Manichaeanism of the early phases of anticolonial struggle eventually give way to a more complicated dynamic in which revolutionaries must adopt more nuanced social and economic analyses. Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2005), 4-5, 93-95.
48 While Fanon shared these Pan-Africanists’ commitment to a socialist politics, he remained suspicious of Pan-Africanism itself. Fanon, Wretched, 55-56, 104-07, 126.
49 Ibid., 61.
transmit something of the Third World Marxist worldview along with its more popular themes on the necessity of revolutionary violence.

By the time Fanon’s work had been translated into English – along with Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung, Che Guevara’s Guerilla Warfare, and Régis Debray’s Revolution in the Revolution? – a new crop of African leaders was stretching the Marxian analysis, able to “discern in socialism the outlines of potentially successful societies.” While Guinea-Bissauan and Cape Verdean revolutionary Amilcar Cabral’s speeches circulated in pamphlets and compiled collections, Julius Nyerere, Ahmed Sékou Touré, and Léopold Senghor (leaders of newly independent Tanzania, Guinea, and Senegal, respectively) were able to freely publish various compilations and treatises for diasporic and Western consumption. The written work of these and other theorists and practitioners of Third World Marxism was integral to the indoctrination of Cold War-era activists who were concerned with exploring the intersection of radical politics and black liberation in new ways and whose domestic mentors from the Old Left were limited at best.

Yet the contested nature of Black Power meant that the ghosts of old rivalries between class warriors and race leaders continued to dog the liberation struggle. As Harold Cruse argued

50 Plummer, In Search of Power, 18.
in 1967, the “issues of the 1920s, qualitatively enlarged, are still here.” Marxists of all stripes found in the new black militancy a vehicle to advance the class struggle and, perhaps, reassert the old Comintern vision of a Black Belt Republic. Nationalists coalesced around cultural renewal and in-group politics, foregrounding race and nationhood as the primary axes of identity. As in the early-twentieth-century heyday of anticolonialism, many more theorists incorporated aspects of both class and race analyses in their critiques of racial capitalism. Malcolm X, who in his final year of life “reinvented” himself as the archetypal revolutionary nationalist, was among the first to adopt such a politics in the 1960s. Moreover, in the tradition of black feminist Claudia Jones, many women highlighted a colossal blind spot in the enduring class-race dialectic by addressing the “triple oppression” that rendered “degradation and super-exploitation” the lot of black women. Unfortunately, women encountered only marginal success in proving the legitimacy of their agenda to the (mostly male) leaders of the major Black Power organizations.

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56 Claudia Jones, *An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!* (New York: National Women’s Commission, CPUSA, 1949), 4; Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 13-14; Dawson, *Black Visions*, 173. As Robin D.G. Kelley has argued, “men and even many of the women who lead these movements see the yoke of race and class oppression and accordingly create strategies to liberate the race, or black working people in
The conflicts and contradictions that characterized Black Power politics did not emerge in a vacuum. H. Rap Brown, Stokely Carmichael, James Forman, and other American revolutionaries of the 1960s and 1970s grappled with the dialectics of class and race because they stood “on the shoulders of all that [had] gone before.” Through their surviving work if not their direct presence, black radicals of the previous decades provided inspiration and guidance with regard to theory and practice, while the new generation of Black Power activists formed the front line – the vanguard – of the movement on the ground.

particular. This ostensibly gender-neutral conception of the black community (nothing is really gender neutral), presumes that freedom for black people as a whole will result in freedom for black women.” Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 137.

57 James, *Black Power*. 
CHAPTER 2
SNCC AND BLACK POWER IDEOLOGY

It is true that the mere slogan “Black Power” can lead to an ideological dead-end trap if the Black Powerites fail to mobilize people in pursuit of the institutional substance of what is implied... What is required now, difficult as the task may be, is the kind of constructive organizational planning that only a new school of radical theory and practice can achieve.

Harold Cruse

All speak of revolution. But revolution has become a cheap word in modern America. It is necessary to probe beyond oratory and rhetoric if one wishes to determine the substance and meaning of the black revolt.

Robert L. Allen

Addressing a crowd of over four thousand at Howard University on May 29, 1966, Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. declared that the time for compromise was over. No longer could black Americans afford to reason with their oppressors over questions of civil and human rights. Instead, Powell asserted in the spring baccalaureate address, they should “demand these God-given rights” and “seek black power.” Celebrating such distinguished Howard faculty as Alain Locke, E. Franklin Frazier, and Sterling Brown, he simultaneously lamented what he perceived to be the dearth of black intellectual creativity of late. Finally, Powell’s frustration boiled over into biblical allusion: “Can any good thing come out of Howard today?”

Two and a half weeks later, from the bowels of the Mississippi Delta, Howard graduate and newly-minted SNCC chairman Stokely Carmichael answered. From a flatbed trailer in Greenwood’s Broad Street Park, he and comrade Willie Ricks famously galvanized a crowd of civil rights marchers and local black citizens by leading them in a new chant for “Black Power,”

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thereby ushering SNCC into a new era. As organizer Cleveland Sellers remembered, “Everything that happened afterward was a response to that moment.”4 The call for Black Power sent SNCC leaders scrambling to link the controversial slogan with theory and practice. Suddenly, the organization that had theretofore distinguished itself by maintaining an open-door policy to individuals of all political backgrounds, and by eschewing all but the most nebulous of mission statements, needed to formulate an ideology.5

Internal debates surrounding the development of a revolutionary ideology compelled SNCC leaders to grapple with the dialectics of class and race. A lack of consensus regarding the overlapping systems of oppression had long plagued the organization, but the call for Black Power and the accompanying Leninist task of determining the precise role of the revolutionary vanguard foregrounded such significant internecine conflicts. The question of whether the primary sources of black oppression stemmed most directly from class or race – an age-old dialectical dilemma within diasporic anticolonial movements – divided SNCC leadership into camps.6 While Stokely Carmichael viewed blackness as the central organizing principle, James Forman drew from a potpourri of revolutionary Marxists to argue that the struggle for Black Power was coterminous with the road to socialism. The ubiquitous and protracted nature of this

ideological fissure rendered it the central point of contention in the evolution of an international Black Power politics.

Born in 1941 in Port of Spain, Trinidad, Stokely Carmichael had immigrated to the United States in 1952 and settled with his family in the Van Nest district of the Bronx. Periodic trips to Harlem with his father introduced Carmichael to the colorful world of black nationalism, as aging Garveyites, Black Muslims, and, later, the stepladder speakers on 125th Street served as a “necessary corrective” to his largely Italian Amethyst Street neighborhood. Notwithstanding the influence of schoolmate and close friend Gene Dennis, son of the imprisoned American Communist Eugene Dennis, Carmichael resisted the “intoxicating” allure of the radical student left. Imbibing the work of Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky alongside that of Trinidadians C.L.R. James and George Padmore – and still listening carefully to the Garveyite street preachers – he compartmentalized dialectical materialism and black nationalism separately, as yet unable to synthesize the two competing strains of radicalism.

If Carmichael’s high school years had been spent interacting with members of the Young Communist League and others on the far left, his career as a student activist with the Nonviolent Action Group (NAG) and SNCC would cause his ideological pendulum to swing precipitously toward race consciousness. Experiencing the sheer brutality of southern racism in the mid-1960s transformed the “‘serious student’ of Marxist theory” into a foot soldier in the fight for black liberation. Carmichael learned from militant Alabama sharecroppers – including the grandchildren of slaves and at least a few former Communists – that biracial working-class

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8 Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 92-95, 100-05.
9 Ibid., 139.
alliances were tenuous at best in the face of white supremacist terror and, moreover, that turning the other cheek was as good as suicide. Full-time work in racially polarized Alabama counties like Lowndes, where a small minority of whites had wholly disenfranchised a beleaguered 81% black majority, contributed to a logical evolution in Carmichael’s thought that foregrounded race, rather than class, as the principal source of oppression.\(^\text{10}\) Ironically, similar work in the deep south produced the opposite effect in James Forman.

More than ten years older than most SNCC staffers, Forman was born in Chicago in 1928 and divided his formative years between the city and his grandparents’ small farm in Marshall County, Mississippi. He absorbed works by Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, developed a “sense of protest” by reading issues of the *Chicago Defender* that he hawked for a dime apiece, and even attended mass meetings organized by A. Philip Randolph in preparation for the threatened 1941 March on Washington.\(^\text{11}\) As a student at Roosevelt University in the mid-1950s, Forman fell under the tutelage of Professor St. Clair Drake, who had recently returned from Africa. Years earlier, while pursuing research in Cardiff, Wales, Drake had first encountered Pan-Africanist and ex-Communist-Party-member George Padmore, who told Drake that he should read Marx, Lenin, Engels, Trotsky, and Stalin, because ideas “don’t know no color line, man.” Padmore had stressed that black people “would be stupid not to learn from them because they [*sic*] white.”\(^\text{12}\) Drake would remain an important political influence on Forman – as well as a confidant – for decades.


Forman’s initial forays into the southern civil rights movement led him to the aid of evicted sharecroppers in Fayette County, Tennessee, roughly forty miles from his grandparents’ Mississippi farm. After narrowly escaping death at the business end of a police shotgun while assisting renegade NAACP leader Robert F. Williams in Monroe, North Carolina, Forman decided to channel his energies into a young, painfully disorganized SNCC. As longtime executive secretary, he was actively involved in shaping organizational policy during SNCC’s most prolific years. One movement veteran characterized Forman as “two years ahead of his time,” translating Fanon from the original French while most were still digesting Camus. Indeed, in the years before Carmichael issued the initial call for Black Power, Forman gave voice to a burgeoning impulse within SNCC toward addressing class concerns. His insistence that the organization situate itself resolutely in opposition to capitalism itself, however, would complicate SNCC’s ability to unite behind a cohesive program for implementing Black Power and would expose rifts within the organization that reflected more widespread factionalism to come.

Once Carmichael and others began to make Black Power a rallying cry, efforts to clarify the meaning of the slogan and link it with a set of core principles began in earnest. In the summer and fall of 1966, Carmichael set out on speaking tours to defend and define Black Power and even joined Adam Clayton Powell in planning the first of several conferences intended to draw the nation’s civil rights leaders together around the concept that many felt the mainstream press

13 Forman, Black Revolutionaries, 116, 196-98; Carson, In Struggle, 43.
15 Introduction: Semi-Introspective (Name withheld by request), August 24, 1965, SNCC Papers, reel 3; Forman, Black Revolutionaries, 236-39.
was badly misrepresenting.\textsuperscript{16} Carmichael’s speeches from these early tours provide critical insights into his interpretation of Black Power. Specifically, they suggest that he employed race as the primary analytical lens through which to view black oppression.

On July 28, 1966, escorted by members of the Deacons for Defense and Justice and local SNCC worker Monroe Sharpe, Carmichael made an appearance on Chicago’s \textit{Kup’s Show} television program. Speaking to host Irv Kupcinet, he stated that while SNCC had not embraced outright racial separatism, he had no desire for the organization to join the mainstream of American society because “to join the mainstream is to become white.”\textsuperscript{17} That evening, speaking to an audience of over a thousand at the United Packinghouse Workers union hall, he tailored his Black Power message to a roomful of disgruntled workers. Highlighting the acute economic oppression that blacks faced, he called for the formation of a “movement based on the color of our skin.” Moreover, he downplayed class, stating that the packinghouse workers were oppressed “because we’re black, and we’re going to use our color to get out of the trick bag they put us in.”\textsuperscript{18} While never ignoring economic exploitation and superexploitation, such an analysis rendered black solidarity a necessary prerequisite for dealing with all other forms of oppression.

Following a summer of urban rebellions in cities across the United States, Carmichael reiterated similar themes at engagements from Detroit and Ann Arbor, Michigan to West Oakland, California.\textsuperscript{19} While he remained within the framework of Black Power, he discussed such topics as the growing slate of political prisoners as well as SNCC’s stance on draft

\textsuperscript{17} FBI Investigation File on Communist Infiltration of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, file no. 100-438794, section 60.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., Marcus D. Pohlmann, ed. \textit{African American Political Thought: Volume. 6, Integration vs. Separatism: 1945 to the Present} (New York: Routledge, 2003), 162.
resistance. On WDCR radio at Dartmouth College, he urged black students to say “Hell no” to what he firmly believed was an “illegal, immoral, and… racist” war in Vietnam. At the McClymonds High School auditorium in West Oakland, Carmichael argued that black citizens of that city could not allow “Whitey” to “castrate and destroy” young, black men.20 By October, the combination of the summer’s urban rebellions and Carmichael’s incendiary rhetoric had infuriated President Lyndon Johnson, whose approval ratings had begun to fall precipitously. Johnson complained privately to Supreme Court Justice Abe Fortas that whites were terrified of black looters and that the federal government needed to do something to “shake ‘em up” like “convict that damned Carmichael.”21

While Carmichael would subsequently adjust the tenor of his racial focus when speaking in a slew of Third World countries, his approach continued to emphasize race rather than class struggle. The cosmopolitan (by then ex-)SNCC chairman spoke in London (where he notably gained the admiration of Trotskyite C.L.R. James) and Havana and visited Moscow, Beijing, Hanoi, and Conakry, Guinea.22 In Conakry, he explained Black Power to a Rhodesian reporter, stating that while “the coming together of black people throughout the world” would mean fighting imperialism and exploitation, the fight against racism would take precedence. Unlike proletarian classes outside the United States, for black Americans, “color has been the raison d’etre.”23 After returning to the States, Carmichael took an even stronger line against the class-based analyses of many American and Third-World radicals. Speaking at the Oakland “Free

20 Ibid.
21 Dictabelt of telephone call between LBJ and Abe Fortas, 10/3/1966, 8:16 AM, Mansion, Citation no. 10912, Tape WH6610.02, Program no. 1, 15:12 length. LBJ Presidential Library Online Collection, Miller Center, UVA.
22 Carson, In Struggle, 265; Carmichael’s jet-setting during this period led many within SNCC to jokingly refer to him as “Starmichael.” Bob Zellner, interview by author, 5 March 2016; Carmichael and Thelwell, Ready for Revolution, 572-596; James, Black Power.
In one of his most provocative statements on the topic, Carmichael had amplified concerns previously voiced by anticolonial activist-intellectuals of an earlier generation from whom the burgeoning Black Power movement drew inspiration. However, rather than entertain the notion of a retrofitted class analysis (as had most anticolonials), Carmichael preferred to simplify his message by rejecting socialism and communism outright.

Criticisms of Carmichael’s approach were particularly pronounced in socialist countries and, especially, the Third World. Seven months prior to Carmichael’s visit to Cuba for the first conference of the Organization of Latin American Solidarity (OLAS) in July 1967, Fidel Castro lamented that it was “often forgotten” that the civil rights movement was “basically a matter of a class struggle, since clearly race discrimination goes hand in hand with economic and social exploitation – they can’t be separated.” At the OLAS conference itself, Castro would reiterate the same sentiments. Citing examples of historically oppressed groups from the Roman plebeians to the modern peasantry and proletariat, he stressed that revolution in the United States would arise from within black America “not for racial reasons, but for social reasons, reasons of

24 “Free Huey Rally in Oakland,” Pacifica Radio (Berkeley, CA: KPFA, February 17, 1968): Ethel Minor, Bob Brown, and others have since sought to qualify Carmichael’s statement in light of his later Pan-Africanist views. Minor later explained that Carmichael himself chose to remove the controversial lines from the text of the speech when it was reprinted in a 1971 collection of his speeches and writings. Bob Brown, interview by author, 8 March 2016; Ethel Minor, foreword to Stokely Speaks, by Stokely Carmichael (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 2007), xxi.
25 When Aimé Césaire and George Padmore experienced what Césaire termed a “coming to consciousness” – the realization that party-line Communism needed to be retrofitted to accommodate the effects of colonialism – they both immediately formulated new, patchwork political-economic philosophies that nevertheless maintained the key tenets of Marxism. As Penny M. Von Eschen and Brenda Gayle Plummer have demonstrated, Carmichael’s generation came of age in an era in which Cold War Manichaeism worked against such imaginative new formulations. Eschen, Race Against Empire, 187; Plummer, In Search of Power, 5.
exploitation and oppression,” because black Americans were the most dispossessed. Carmichael later complained to SNCC photographer Julius Lester that Castro “did not understand racism.”

Other Communist parties, however, matched Castro’s assessment. At a November 1967 meeting between officers of the American and Portuguese Communist parties in Moscow, the Americans discussed their qualified support for the new wave of Black Power activists. Party member James Jackson informed Portuguese CP General Secretary Álvaro Cunhal that Carmichael “talks radical” when traveling abroad. Jackson worried, however, that Carmichael did not see oppression in terms of class struggle, but “only a world in relation to color of skin.” While Jackson and the American Communists welcomed solidarity with anticolonial forces in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, they felt compelled to expose the “falseness of relations based only on color.” Secretary Cunhal assured Jackson that his contacts in Algiers, as well as in liberation struggles in Portugal’s African colonies, viewed Carmichael as a “disrupting force.” He promised to expose Carmichael’s true ideological colors to the African liberation movements in order to limit his influence on the continent.

Perhaps the harshest criticisms lodged by an ally of the black liberation struggle, however, came from exiled Ghanaian president, Kwame Nkrumah. After having met Carmichael and studied his Cuban speech, Nkrumah complained that his ideas seemed immature and underdeveloped. “I am trying to make Black Power not a racist issue,” Nkrumah wrote to his assistant, June Milne. Like Castro, he maintained that it was “political and economic,” and that

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27 “Castro on Stokely & Black Revolution,” The Movement, September 1967; Carson, In Struggle, 275; Lester later explained that there was a serious race problem in Cuba that the revolutionary government largely failed to recognize. This explains the extraordinarily enthusiastic response among Afro-Cubans to Carmichael’s speech. Julius Lester, interview by author, 4 March 2016.

28 FBI Operation SOLO, Part 119 of 125, Report from SAC Chicago (134-46 Sub B) to Director, FBI (100-428091), December 22, 1967.
only socialism could bring it to fulfillment.\textsuperscript{29} He would later stress to Carmichael that there
“must be a refusal to see [Black Power] in racial terms.”\textsuperscript{30} Nkrumah felt so strongly about the
issue that he published a pamphlet in 1968, entitled \textit{The Spectre of Black Power}, in which he
made the case for scientific socialism as the end goal of Black Power and for “poor whites” as a
dispossessed group with significant revolutionary potential.\textsuperscript{31} Nkrumah’s stinging rebukes would
sow seeds of Pan-Africanist thought in Carmichael’s mind that would only germinate years later.

Foreign Marxists’ concerns with Carmichael’s interpretation of Black Power and his
diagnosis of the primary source of oppression found a voice within SNCC in the person of James
Forman. As SNCC shifted its focus away from civil rights work, the longtime executive
secretary argued that an understanding of Marxist principles as well as of the nature of
imperialism (as discussed in the work of prominent Third World theorists) would be necessary.
In no uncertain terms, Forman asserted that liberation movements that lacked dedication to
socialist principles would ultimately fail. Forman vehemently opposed what he deemed the
“purely skin analysis” that some within the Black Power movement had adopted, preferring
instead to view the relationship of the oppressed to the oppressor as one of colonizer and
colonized.\textsuperscript{32} Prevailing against angry SNCC staffers who dismissed Marxian class analysis

\textsuperscript{31} Milne later recalled that Nkrumah had made an example of Carmichael in the introduction to the pamphlet’s first
printed edition. For the second edition, he deleted all mention of Carmichael whatsoever. Kwame Nkrumah, \textit{The
1999), 229. For more on Nkrumah’s long-standing embrace of socialism, see: Kwame Nkrumah, \textit{Axioms of Kwame
\textsuperscript{32} Forman, \textit{Black Revolutionaries}, 450; James Forman, Untitled (speech delivered at the Black Writers Conference,
Montreal, Canada, October 11-14, 1968); James Forman, “Liberation Will Come from a Black Thing,” in \textit{The
because, “Motherfucker, Marx was not a black,” Forman instead placed Black Power in an international context, viewing racism in terms of the theory of surplus value.\textsuperscript{33}

In formulating a class basis for Black Power, Forman echoed V.I. Lenin’s 1901 polemic against theorist Eduard Bernstein, the “Economist” trend, and other perceived threats to the Russian social-democratic movement. Reflecting the cosmopolitan flavor of 1960s revolutionary thought, Forman’s rediscovery of Lenin occurred while in a Chinese bookstore in Dar es Salaam during the height of the Black Power movement and on the heels of the Arusha Declaration – the statement in which Julius Nyerere and the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) had sought to lay out a framework for Tanzanian socialism (\textit{ujamaa}).\textsuperscript{34} Lenin’s distress over the fetishization of spontaneity (at the obvious expense of planning and proper ideological development) informed Forman’s own growing frustrations with SNCC’s anarchistic decentralization, its opposition to leadership, and its conscious avoidance of any sort of staff political education program.\textsuperscript{35} Moreover, in a nod to intersectionality, Forman reiterated Lenin’s argument that a purely class-based (or economic-determinist) analysis of oppression would inevitably work at cross purposes with a revolutionary struggle for socialism.\textsuperscript{36}

As Clayborne Carson and others have argued, Forman was far from doctrinaire in his Marxian approach.\textsuperscript{37} Widening his theoretical gaze to include a mixed bag of Third World activist-intellectuals, he especially clung to African socialists whose similar encounters with racism and imperialism had informed their ideological development. Given their own


\textsuperscript{36} Lenin, \textit{What Is to Be Done?}, 70-77; Forman, “Liberation,” 24-25.

\textsuperscript{37} Carson, \textit{In Struggle}, 270; Julius Lester, interview by author, 4 March 2016.
preoccupation with forces of neocolonialism, such theorists spoke to Forman’s concerns regarding reactionary elements within the Black Power movement. “We are not dogmatists,” Forman would later write to Guinean president Ahmed Sékou Touré. Rather, he studied Touré, Nyerere, Nkrumah, and others for their “flexible forms of organization.” Forman also had tremendous admiration for Frantz Fanon, who, he claimed, “fought and died for revolutionary socialism” and “preached against the narrowness and pitfalls of a purely nationalist revolution.” Moreover, as second-wave feminism was gaining traction, members of the Third World Women’s Alliance (TWWA) – a SNCC splinter group – stressed to Forman the importance of a broader intersectionality, thus stretching his anti-capitalist approach still further to account for “the special oppression of women.”

Forman’s embrace of Marx, Lenin, and Third World socialists found him roundly criticizing Stokely Carmichael’s ideology, even as it purportedly shifted toward Pan-Africanism. He had been “stunned” to hear Carmichael’s statements on the irrelevance of communism and socialism for black people at the 1968 “Free Huey!” rally. Carmichael’s ideological position and the friction that it caused with more socialist-minded activists had been a significant force in the undoing of SNCC, Forman wrote, “and I can cite chapter and verse.” Moreover, such organizational infighting had nearly erupted into armed violence. Carmichael’s ideas – born of experiences with uniquely American manifestations of racism – also seemingly ran contrary to

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those of Pan-Africanists like Forman’s mentor, St. Clair Drake. As early as 1967, Forman and Drake had expressed mutual concern over such views particularly in light of a shifting line on race in various African nations, several of which contained populations that were not all-black.43 While the early 1970s saw Carmichael finally embrace Pan-Africanism and African socialism – firmer footing on which to resolve the class-race dialectic – the ideological divide that had made Black Power as controversial within the movement as it had been without had had a profound impact.

The broader implications of this woefully under-evaluated ideological rift within SNCC are most immediately visible in the declassified records of the FBI counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO). In 1968, the Bureau’s counterintelligence operatives spread disinformation alleging that Stokely Carmichael was a paid CIA agent. While they had attempted to buttress their claims by exploiting extant rumors of Carmichael’s increasingly ostentatious lifestyle, their “word of mouth” campaign had the welcome (if unintended) effect of exacerbating hostilities resultant from the growing ideological conflicts between Carmichael and Marxist-leaning factions within SNCC and the Black Panther Party.44 The strategy’s effectiveness in sowing distrust amongst the already-paranoid militants is evident in James Forman’s letter to confidants Len and Faye Holt in March 1969. “If [Carmichael] is going to run down Marx as a hunkey who should not be listened to,” Forman wrote, “what better propaganda against communism could

44 FBI COINTELPRO, Black Extremist, Part 5 of 23, SAC, WFO (157-1292) to Director, FBI (100-448006), July 23, 1968; FBI COINTELPRO, Black Extremist, Part 5 of 23, SAC, New York (100-161140) to Director, FBI (100-448006), September 9, 1968; FBI COINTELPRO, Black Extremist, Part 5 of 23, SAC, Chicago (157-2209) to Director, FBI (100-448006), September 18, 1968.
they find. If he is going to continue to say that communism and socialism are irrelevant, then what better CIA agent is there.”

While SNCC leaders naturally wielded substantial influence as the official spokespersons for an internationally-recognized civil rights organization, the effects of their ideological infighting on the work of rank-and-file staffers and volunteers were mixed. Cliff Vaughs, an organizer in Los Angeles, characterized intellectual debates over class and race as peripheral to the day-to-day concerns of local people. He recalled that such disputes “seemed fatuous” at the time because they were “not connected to what we were actually doing.” Texas organizer Mario Marcel Salas, however, took a different tack entirely. He was quite aware of the intellectual debates that were dividing the organization’s leadership and assembled a patchwork politics of revolutionary nationalism based on elements of both Carmichael’s and Forman’s approaches. He and others in the San Antonio SNCC chapter also attended advanced Marxist studies classes, syphoning what they deemed useful into “liberation school” curricula for members of the community. Moreover, long after most SNCC operations had folded, the San Antonio group inculcated its rank-and-file with their brand of revolutionary ideology by requiring them to complete assigned readings and attend political education classes.

SNCC’s internal debate over race and class also foreshadowed – and in some ways laid the groundwork for – a similar division between cultural nationalists and revolutionary nationalists. Revolutionary nationalists believed that socialist-oriented revolution was the prerequisite for the liberation of oppressed peoples worldwide. Often (though not always)

Marxist-Leninists, they touted what Cleveland Sellers referred to as a “jerry-built” ideology stressing national self-determination, international (multiracial) anti-capitalism, and the vanguard status of the dispossessed. While revolutionary nationalists viewed culture work as important only insofar as it contributed to the revolution, cultural nationalists emphasized black consciousness and cultural rebirth as the primary vehicles for any substantive political-economic change. Often derided as “pork-chop nationalists” or “dashiki revolutionaries,” cultural nationalists embraced arts, clothing, hairstyles, African languages, and black holidays as crucial components in decolonizing the minds of black Americans. Vanguardism – to say nothing of purportedly European forms of radicalism – would have been out of the question. Like earlier Black Power-era ideological debates within SNCC, the nationalism question had the potential to provoke explosive conflicts amongst militants themselves.

As one 1960s radical recently observed, “the complexity of class and race in the history of our country is the central contradiction.” Such was undoubtedly the case in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee as it pivoted toward Black Power. SNCC leadership recognized the volatility inherent in disputes over competing interpretations of Black Power as early as Stokely Carmichael’s chairmanship in 1966-67. At that point, many staffers still believed that such issues could be resolved within the organizational structure of SNCC. By electing the correct leader with the appropriate combination of ideological development and practical field experience, the group hoped to continue pursuing its revolutionary goals on a broader scale. The dialectics of class and race in the development of an effective revolutionary

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ideology, however, remained a central concern as the organization foundered in the repressive political climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s.
When I jumped up and fought the laws, that ruint me with the white people in this country. They gave me just as bad a name as they could give me; talked it around that I was quick-tempered, I was quick-tempered. The devil you better get quick-tempered or get some sort of temper when you know you livin in a bad country.

-Ned Cobb, Alabama Sharecropper

I can’t put out the fires that hypocritical America started. America made Rap Brown.

-Rev. Samuel B. Wells

Stokely Carmichael’s tenure as chairman of SNCC brought to the fore an ideological fissure that was threatening to split both the organization and the movement. Beyond the debate over the merits of nonviolence, the dialectics of class and race caused dissension among those attempting to draw up a theoretical and practical framework for Black Power. While much of Carmichael’s intellectual output gave the impression that he prioritized race over class, longtime SNCC leader James Forman insisted that class analysis and a program based in socialist politics were absolutely necessary. Program Coordinator Cleveland Sellers addressed these opposing camps when he spoke to the need to move beyond a purely racial analysis, insisting that, “if we can agree on color and must go without ideological teachings, then we are in trouble.”

By May 1967, the issue demanded the attention of SNCC’s main policy-making body, the Central Committee.

As SNCC convened for its Spring 1967 staff meeting, the Central Committee shored up what had been an especially turbulent year by engaging in a thorough review of the organization’s personnel, operations, and policies. Between May 1966 and April 1967, SNCC

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1 Rosengarten, *All God’s Dangers*, 545.
2 Watters, *Down to Now*, 268.
had witnessed the resignation of several key staff members from its early years, among them John Lewis, Julian Bond, and Charles Sherrod. On learning of Carmichael’s election as chairman over Lewis, Bond had remarked, “The crazies are taking over.”4 The remainder of 1966 and the first few months of 1967 saw SNCC attempting to define and embrace Black Power while attending to disparate programs and watching its finances slowly wither away. After an aborted attempt to assemble a quorum at the Dorchester Community Center near Midway, Georgia, the SNCC Central Committee and members of the staff gathered in Atlanta during the second week of May.5 By the time a press conference had been called that Friday at Paschal Brothers’ Restaurant, the organization had elected a new slate of officers, including a new chairman: an obscure Alabama field worker named H. Rap Brown. A deft organizer as comfortable on the streets of D.C. as in the cotton fields of the Black Belt, Brown seemed primed to mollify the growing factionalism, shun the limelight, and reorient SNCC toward grassroots political work.

Hubert Geroid Brown was born on October 4, 1943 to Eddie Charles Brown, Sr. and Thelma Warren Brown. The day that Hubert appeared, Eddie Sr. was serving abroad in the United States military. The Louisianan would soon return home to his growing family and settle into a position with Esso Standard Oil in Baton Rouge. Thelma worked for several years as a maid, a teacher, and, later, as a cafeteria manager across town at Alsen Elementary School. The

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5 FBI Report, June 12, 1967, FBI File on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, reel 1.
working-class couple lived in the modest home that Thelma’s father had built on West Grant Street, located just north of the campus of Louisiana State University, and Hubert later remembered that the family had been the first in the neighborhood to purchase a television set.⁶

Hubert Brown’s first experiences in the world beyond West Grant were a few blocks away on West McKinley at Blundon Home, an orphanage and school for the black children of Baton Rouge. The older children of Blundon acted as the caretakers for younger orphans, and it was there that Brown began to cultivate the athletic abilities for which he would become well-known locally.⁷ Additionally, away from adult supervision, neighborhood boys and girls learned to improvise street poetry called “the dozens,” a verbal exercise to which Elijah Wald referred as “rap’s mama.” Brown’s dexterity with the dozens would later inform his public-speaking abilities, leading many within the civil rights movement to call him by a nickname: “Rap.”⁸

In an effort to make the most of the limited educational opportunities Baton Rouge afforded its black citizens in the late 1950s, Thelma Brown paid $12 per year so that Hubert could attend Southern High School, an institution operating under the auspices of historically black Southern University. Hubert was able to overlook what he viewed as the “bourgeois” character of Southern High and, at 6’5”, excelled in basketball, football, and track.⁹ He graduated in Spring 1960 and began attending Southern University that September. Ulysses S. Jones, dean of men at Southern, remembered Brown as a perfectly capable sociology major, a “pretty good citizen” who was never in serious trouble with campus authorities. Porter Troutman, a fellow sociology major, recalled that he and Brown frequently challenged university faculty on their

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⁹ Al-Amin, Revolution, xi; Brown, Die, 21-22; Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin, interview by Gil Noble, Like It Is, n.d.
tacit approval of the lack of racial diversity in class textbooks. Although the growing civil rights movement had certainly spread to Southern by the time Brown began attending college, his early involvement was limited.

Following his sophomore year, Brown spent the summer of 1962 in Washington, D.C. with his older brother, Ed. Since Hubert had begun showing casual interest in movement activities in and around Baton Rouge, Ed had raved about the Nonviolent Action Group (NAG), the D.C.-area SNCC affiliate of which he was then a member. Although the Division of Student Life at Howard University doggedly refused the organization its official sanction, NAG consisted mainly of Howard students. Beyond raising funds for SNCC, demonstrating in D.C. and the adjacent states, and booking such guest speakers as Bayard Rustin, Malcolm X, and C.L.R. James, the organization acquired a reputation for rebelliousness. A female member of NAG – Stokely Carmichael’s sophomore girlfriend – shocked university authorities by wearing her hair natural, a fashion statement entirely new to Howard in the early 1960s. Among the many future SNCC staffers who would become involved in the movement through this organization were Carmichael, Cleveland Sellers, Phil Hutchings, Stanley Wise, and Courtland Cox.

On his first day in D.C., Brown joined Ed on a NAG picket line in front of the National Shirt Shop, a dealer of men’s sportswear in the downtown district. He soon became enamored

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11 Brown, Die, 58-59.
with this group of Howard militants, even joining them in digesting classics by Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and Richard Wright. Unable to locate such an intellectually stimulating group of activists back at Southern, Brown returned to Washington the next summer to assist with NAG’s organizational efforts in the black community of nearby Cambridge, Maryland.\(^{14}\) The already heated racial dynamic that Brown and fellow-organizer Courtland Cox witnessed in that town would approach a boiling point in the mid 1960s. Meanwhile, Brown’s growing interest in activism left little time for formal academics, and, after three years as a budding sociologist, he decided to withdraw from Southern University.\(^{15}\)

In June and July 1964, Brown spent several weeks in Holmes County, Mississippi, as a part of the Mississippi Summer Project, an effort on behalf of SNCC, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and local activists to register voters and initiate other special projects in notoriously difficult counties. Billed as a “Peace Corps-type operation in Mississippi,” Freedom Summer attracted national attention by recruiting mainly white students from prestigious northern colleges to assist with organizing in all five of the state’s Congressional districts.\(^{16}\) Holmes County itself sat on the eastern edge of the swath of Delta counties containing black majorities, and, in 1960, 65% of the county’s 13,530 eligible voters were black.\(^{17}\) Despite constituting the majority, few black Delta residents were able defy the united front of white


\(^{15}\) John Matthews, “‘I Hate All White People Who Are Anti-Black’ – Rap Brown,” Delaware County Daily Times, August 8, 1967; Brown, Die, 60.

\(^{16}\) “Mississippi Summer Project,” brochure Mississippi Freedom Summer Map, nd

\(^{17}\) Incidentally, Holmes County also claimed the first Mississippi chapter of the White Citizens Council. Hazel Brannon Smith, a local newspaper editor, attributed a “climate of fear, hate and suspicion” to Holmes County in the 1950s and 60s. Representative Green, speaking on the Situation in Holmes County, Miss. 88th Cong., 1st sess., Congressional Record (December 13, 1963): H 24563; Negro Population: Breakdown by County, SNCC map, 1964, box 56, folder 1, Carl and Anne Braden Papers; Sue-Henry Lorenzi, “Freedom Democratic Party Executive Member’s Handbook,” SNCC pamphlet, August 1966.
vigilantism and official intransigence that had largely shut them out of the political process since Reconstruction.

Notwithstanding SNCC’s nominal commitment to nonviolence, many full-time workers had, by 1964, begun to carry firearms to protect themselves. Moreover, older black residents of Holmes County – like those of countless other rural counties in the Deep South – remained steeped in the tradition of armed self-defense. Movement veterans knew that they could not count on Hartman Turnbow, a 59-year-old resident of the town of Tchula (Holmes), to hold his fire before determining if cars approaching his farm contained friendly activists or Klan members. Having endured shootings and Molotov cocktail attacks from hostile whites, Turnbow had no qualms about keeping his .22 caliber rifle nearby to protect his wife, “Sweets,” their daughter, and the land that he had inherited from his formerly enslaved grandfather.18 Hubert Brown’s father had exposed him to guns from a young age, and, given the example of local Holmes County residents like Turnbow, he would have had little incentive to cling to a philosophy of strict nonviolence.19 Indeed, throughout the organization’s tenure in the Deep South, local black residents would render many SNCC workers’ already-halfhearted adherence to nonviolence even more tenuous.

After his brief stint in Holmes County, Brown traveled to Atlantic City, New Jersey and witnessed the crushing defeat of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) at that


19 Brown, Die, 81-89. SNCC worker Elaine Baker recalled a chance encounter with Brown during this period: “I had walked into the [Amite County] house of another farmer, Mr. Steptoe, late at night, only to find SNCC field secretary Rap Brown asleep in a rocking chair, a shotgun across his arms. We didn’t talk much about the guns. Nonviolence was still the credo; in the trenches, however, self-defense was becoming the reality.” Elaine DeLott Baker, “They Sent Us This White Girl,” in Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 275-76.
year’s Democratic National Convention. He then returned to Washington D.C. where, by March 1965, he had obtained a job with the federal anti-poverty initiative and had risen to the position of chairman of NAG. Given his intimate knowledge of both Howard University’s activist intelligentsia and the impoverished communities of D.C., Brown was able to serve as a facilitator between what he viewed as two largely separate cultures. He felt that greater understanding between college students and “block boys” had revolutionary potential. Before having read Fanon, Brown was already attempting to effect what the Martiniquan psychiatrist referred to as the “embryonic political organization of the rebellion,” which necessitated the union of “political pilots” and the masses of the people, especially the *lumpenproletariat* (which Fanon considered the “urban spearhead” of the rebellion).\(^20\) Meanwhile, nearly every major civil rights organization was attempting to apply pressure on President Lyndon B. Johnson to respond to the ongoing unrest in Selma, Alabama, with a substantive voting rights bill.

On the morning of Friday, March 12, Brown, along with SNCC’s Lester McKinney and an informal delegation of fifteen other local civil rights and religious leaders, met with President Johnson, newly-minted Vice President Hubert Humphrey, Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach, special counsel Lee White, and assistants Bill Moyers and Jack Valenti in the Cabinet Room of the White House. The delegation – noticeably “divided in attitude” – addressed the president with varying degrees of brazenness regarding the massacres occurring in Selma.

\(^{20}\) Brown would later dismiss the anti-poverty program with which he had worked in D.C. as a “nickel revolution.” Phil Forsyth-Smith as told to Ian Adams, “The Black Hand on the Big Trigger,” *Maclean’s*, November 1, 1967; Brown, *Die*, 65-67; “For the *lumpenproletariat*, that horde of starving men, uprooted from their tribe and from their clan, constitutes one of the most spontaneous and the most radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people.” Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 128-30, 143-44.
The ensuing dialogue would not only provide fodder for syndicated columnists, but it would also position Brown as a rebel amongst the civil rights establishment.21

In one particularly heated exchange, the president interrupted the Rev. Walter Fauntroy, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s proxy for the meeting, to complain that his “little girls” – who, he maintained, had civil rights, too – had been unable to study or sleep the night before because of the constant picketing across the street in Lafayette Square. Nonplussed, twenty-one-year-old NAG Chairman Hubert Brown interjected, “I’m just real sorry your two little girls were upset, Mr. President… But the thing is that people in Selma, Alabama, have been beaten and murdered and flogged, and here you are concerned about your two little girls.” He went on to compare Johnson’s two daughters to the “20,000,000 people who lose their civil rights every day.”22 Three days later, Johnson demanded that Congress act immediately on what would become the Voting Rights Act. Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, a D.C.-area SNCC worker at the time, cited Brown’s bold remarks as evidence of his courage in juxtaposition with the “fawning subservience” of the other leaders.23 The meeting showcased Brown’s doubts regarding Johnson’s understanding of the gravity of racial unrest – feelings that would only intensify as the years passed.

Having established a reputation as a no-nonsense organizer, Brown soon left Washington, D.C. to join a growing number of former NAG members (including Stokely Carmichael) who were registering voters and experimenting with independent politics in the Alabama black belt.

21 LBJ: President’s Daily Diary, March 12, 1965; Taylor Branch, At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 92-93.
The intrepid young activists, still incensed from the defeat of the MFDP at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, felt that if they could “help crack Lowndes County,” anything was possible. Carmichael remembered that, in 1965-66, the area “became a magnet for some of the best organizers in SNCC.” Lowndes County resident and activist John Hulett – a former foundry worker, union member, and aspiring politician – praised the young SNCC workers as “the best organizers in the country” for empowering local people to make their own political decisions.24

In rural counties like Greene, Marengo, Wilcox, Autauga, and “Bloody” Lowndes, Brown labored alongside older residents for whom earlier forms of resistance to racism and exploitation were still very much a part of local memory.

The long history of African-American resistance in the Alabama black belt has been well-documented. After the Civil War, most freedpeople had remained on the plantations where they had been slaves only to have their hopes for land redistribution and political empowerment dashed by Democratic “redeemers.” By the turn of the century, whites had virtually extinguished black suffrage, and lynch law ruled. Four decades before Brown and the other SNCC workers arrived, followers of Marcus Garvey in Wilcox County established a local division of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). A few years later, Communist organizer Angelo Herndon, addressing black workers from Wilcox and the surrounding counties, preached “complete unity between white and black sharecroppers” until the “gods of capitalist society” (a lynch mob) threatened to intervene. The Communist Party nevertheless gained steam in the region, and members of its Sharecropper’s Union would later occupy the ranks of local NAACP.

chapters as well as groups like the Lowndes County Christian Movement and SNCC’s Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO). All of these individuals carried firearms for self-defense as a matter of course.\(^{25}\)

Despite a proud tradition of militancy, the region’s black residents were hardly better off politically or economically in 1966 than they had been in 1866. Greene County, where Brown spent most of his energies, was situated between the Tombigbee, Black Warrior, and Sipsey Rivers in western Alabama – a 645,000-square-mile cotton kingdom with a population that was 81% black. In 1962, 5001 of the county’s 6650 eligible voters were black, yet only 300 of those were registered. Moreover, by mid-decade, the median family income for blacks was still only 23% of what it was for whites.\(^{26}\) Many in Greene County continued to live in a state of semi-slavery under the heavy yoke of racial capitalism. There, as in colonized nations, the cause was the consequence: they were poor because they were black, and they were black because they were poor. Just as the Comintern had seen “potential allies of the revolutionary proletariat” in the oppressed “Negro masses” of the Black Belt, the organization that Brown represented saw in Greene and the surrounding counties the makings of a people’s movement that could break the back of Jim Crowism once and for all.\(^{27}\)

By the time Hubert Brown arrived in Alabama in summer 1966 to serve as the director of the Greene County Project, SNCC had established an extensive local support network in and around the county seat of Eutaw. SNCC had included Greene County in its plan to establish


Freedom Organizations – independent black political parties with economics, education, welfare, and housing committees as well as a youth wing – throughout the Alabama Black Belt. That year’s statewide elections would be the first since the passage of the Voting Rights Act, and Brown’s team encouraged locals to vote for black candidates on the Greene County Freedom Organization’s (GCFO) third party ticket. However, intimidation, countless irregularities, law suits, and a split between SCLC-affiliated blacks who voted Democratic and others who supported third party candidates led to talks of establishing a “parallel government” through an alternative “freedom election.” In the end, voters elected the Rev. Peter J. Kirksey, a Democrat, to a county school board post, while the county’s other black candidates either failed to advance past the May primaries or became mired in legal wrangling.28

SNCC’s efforts to establish independent black political parties in Alabama represented its most direct attempt to undermine the system of racial capitalism that had, in the Deep South, held millions of disenfranchised black residents in poverty. Organized around the “revolutionary idea that black people are able to do things themselves” – an idea that seemed to render the movement’s prior preoccupation with integrationism irrelevant – such parties evinced a refusal to view black progress solely in relation to the degree of assimilation into white society.29 Furthermore, they demonstrated the appeal of what Harold Cruse termed “Booker T-ism” (or self-help), aspects of which, despite some Black Power theorists’ castigation of Washington,
seemed increasingly to characterize their patchwork political economy.\textsuperscript{30} Brown would play a part in imbuing such ideas in the Greene County movement when he and his team encouraged locals to help themselves by establishing “local self-government” rather than placing their hopes in the federal government’s unlikely intervention.\textsuperscript{31}

Despite his reputation as a skilled organizer, Brown’s tendency to play fast and loose with local mores that had long circumscribed the public behavior of black residents led to a litany of confrontations with hostile whites. Brown and fellow organizer George Greene often traversed the county’s highways and backroads at breakneck speeds in the blue 1964 Plymouth leased to the team by SNCC’s Sojourner Motor Fleet, thus infuriating local whites and, on at least one occasion, precipitating an armed standoff. Later, a team of sheriff’s deputies in the tiny hamlet of Grove Hill, Alabama, raided the hotel room where Brown, a female acquaintance from Selma, and her white girlfriend were having drinks. Brown later learned that law enforcement officials, alerted to the presence of the integrated pair and Brown’s slated arrival, had known his whereabouts since his departure from Selma and had brought a camera along in order to capture evidence of “fornication.” He recalled that he “was always having confrontations with honkies” but “knew that it was my job and my responsibility to work for the liberation of my people and anybody who tried to stop me might get killed.”\textsuperscript{32}

In other instances, Brown’s mere presence as an armed organizer in rural Alabama seemed to constitute enough of a threat to warrant his arrest. On August 18, 1966, Brown and two other organizers were passing through Marengo County on their way to Selma when their


\textsuperscript{31} Brown, \textit{Die}, 91-92.

Plymouth broke down and they were forced to stop. Two policemen from the small town of Demopolis pulled over to see what was wrong and, in short order, arrested and jailed the trio on charges of carrying concealed weapons and transporting unlicensed pistols. While SNCC officers in Atlanta relitigated the issue of carrying firearms while on assignment, Brown’s older brother, Ed, posted his bond. Other arrests between late 1966 and early 1967 brought charges of grand larceny, burglary, uttering a forged document, and violating prohibition laws and possessing a short-barreled “riot gun” in violation of the National Firearms Act (both charges stemming from the Grove Hill incident). These Alabama arrests were a minor prelude to the federal government’s vendetta against Brown that would begin the following summer.

Despite frequent skirmishes with law enforcement and local whites, Brown impressed SNCC’s leadership and Central Committee. Throughout late summer and fall of 1966, he had demonstrated a determination to effect black political empowerment in one of the most difficult and dangerous regions in the South. In the wake of the November 1966 elections, Stokely Carmichael promoted him to the position of Alabama State Project Director. Now headquartered in Birmingham, Brown attempted to reinvigorate operations in Macon, Dallas, and Greene Counties and established a well-organized fund-raising operation that allowed the Alabama staff to continue receiving paychecks even as every other state project struggled to do so.

He also recognized the importance of building on SNCC’s extant support network and befriended local people like Matthew Jackson, a resident of Lowndes County’s White Hall community to whom Brown later referred as “a complete individual.” One of the many elders that veterans of the

33 On November 3, 1966, in the wake of the GCFO’s threats to establish a parallel government – “a sovereign black community of America” – Brown and George Greene were arrested for grand larceny. Brown maintained that, while the pair was attempting to purchase an ax handle, authorities accused them of attempting to steal a rifle. H. Rap Brown arrest record, September 28, 1967, FBI File: H. Rap Brown, 100-168197, 5; “Two Get Fines for Remarks to Policemen,” Southern Courier, August 27-28, 1966; FBI Memo, J. Edgar Hoover to Marvin Watson, August 26, 1966; “More To Come in Greene,” Southern Courier, November 12-13, 1966; Brown, Die, 84-89.

34 Minutes of SNCC Central Committee meeting, March 4-6, 1967, SNCC Papers, reel 3.
southern movement would come to admire, Jackson donated a “freedom house” to SNCC workers and allowed several of his ten children (including Johnny, who would later be elected mayor of White Hall) to participate in the movement.³⁵

Brown’s new position also involved the unfortunate task of addressing incidents of racially-motivated violence that continued to plague the state’s Black Belt region. In February 1967, Brown responded to the police shooting of Charles “Buttercup” Rasberry, a 43-year-old black man from Prattville, by helping the black citizens of Autauga County organize for self-defense. “Alabama is second only to Viet Nam in the death rate of black men,” he told about 70 locals at a mass meeting on Saturday night, February 18. While some in the community considered Brown an “outside agitator,” Dan Houser, president of the moderate Autauga Improvement Association, stood behind Brown’s statements and charged the United States with “genocide” against black people.³⁶ A few weeks later, Brown addressed an anxious congregation in Lowndes County about the recent spate of church fires in the area. The crowd chuckled as he also made light of the fire that had destroyed all-white Good Hope Presbyterian: “Lightning hit over here at Good Hope Presbyterian. Lightning can hit a lot of things… I hope Good Hope Presbyterian straightened things out in white folks’ minds.”³⁷

Aside from responding to acts of terrorism that had long been commonplace in the Black Belt, Hubert Brown - typically addressed as “Rap” by spring 1967 – had had an uneventful six-month tenure as Alabama State Project Director. Yet combined with his earlier reputation as a mediator between intellectuals and “block boys,” Brown’s single-minded determination in

³⁵ Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 213; Brown, *Die*, 93-95.
Alabama had rendered him one of SNCC’s more dependable staff members. Furthermore, that he had discharged his duties satisfactorily while managing to avoid any mainstream press coverage endeared him to SNCC officers who, after a year of attempting to rein in Chairman Stokely Carmichael’s incendiary rhetoric, hoped to shift the organization’s focus back to developing “freedom organizations with the black panther as a symbol.”

By the time he took leave from field work in late April to accompany Carmichael to court in Selma (where the latter faced charges of incitement to riot), rumors abounded that Carmichael would not be seeking reelection in May. On their way out of the hearing, the soon-to-be-ex-chairman reportedly brushed past white news reporters to introduce Brown to an elderly black woman: “This is H. Rap Brown, and if you think I’m mean, you ought to hear him talk.”

SNCC workers deliberated over a wide range of issues during their May 1967 staff and Central Committee meetings. From routine matters such as new staff hires to more sensitive ones like the imminent departure of longtime organizer Bob Zellner and the tightening of regulations on the chairman’s travel allowances, SNCC attempted to regroup and reorient itself away from the national limelight that had accompanied Stokely Carmichael’s divisive, whirlwind chairmanship and the attendant rise of Black Power. Further evidence of the group’s desire to lower its national profile and accomplish more in the way of substantive political organizing was the election of its Alabama State Project Director, H. Rap Brown, to replace Carmichael as chairman.

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Some staffers viewed Brown, who had not campaigned for the position, as “[James] Forman’s candidate” who might oppose some of the ideas that Carmichael had advanced over the previous year. Others knew him simply as Ed Brown’s younger brother. Aside from reporters affiliated with the Southern Courier, a movement periodical that had covered some of Brown’s activities in Alabama, few in the press were familiar with the 23-year-old incoming chairman and focused mostly on Carmichael’s future plans. The FBI’s Atlanta office could furnish no prior record of Brown in its report on the change in leadership, instead providing details on Stanley Wise and Ralph Featherstone (the new executive secretary and program director, respectively) gleaned from passport files, newspaper articles, and the mailing lists of other allegedly subversive organizations.

At a press conference on May 12, SNCC announced the results of elections for the positions of chairman, executive secretary, communications director, and program director. Brown also addressed the press for the very first time, laying out details of the organization’s new orientation. He elaborated on SNCC’s shift in focus from civil rights to human rights (in a nod to the slain leader, Malcolm X). They were now “interested not only in human rights in the United States, but throughout the world,” and – reflecting the rise of Third-Worldism – identified their struggle as “an integral part of the world-wide movement of all oppressed people” throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Moreover, they sought to build a broad-based anti-draft movement within the nation’s black communities that would prevent the federal

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42 Sellers, River, 191-92; Carson, In Struggle, 252; Brown, Die, 99.
44 FBI Report, June 12, 1967, FBI File on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, reel 1.
government from compelling young men to kill Vietnamese people who were “victims of the same oppression.”

Finally, Brown highlighted his political, economic, and cultural objectives for the group’s “major thrust” – the Freedom Organizations for which he had labored for the past year in the deep south. The new, national vision for the Freedom Organizations would address both the race and class oppression that had long circumscribed the political progress of black Americans (not merely southerners). Economically, the Freedom Organizations would expel parasitic elements from already-impoverished black communities, gain economic control of those communities, and establish an alternative to the current capitalist system that would benefit the masses of people, rather than the few. Cultural objectives included recovering the true story of African and African-American people from the dustbin of history and developing “awareness and appreciation of the beauty of our thick lips, broad noses, kinky hair and soul.”

Over the next few months, the new SNCC chairman would continue to stress the duality of black oppression and advance a revolutionary politics of the dispossessed. A rebellion in Cambridge, Maryland, and a single soundbite from a July press conference, however, would, for many Americans, obscure the nuances of Brown’s political message. Nevertheless, even as the FBI began to specifically tailor its disruptive, extralegal counterintelligence operations to charismatic individuals like Brown, activists and observers both nationally and internationally began to discern in the young firebrand an attractive alternative to conventional approaches to

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45 “We Are Going To Build” and “Staff Meeting Report: New SNCC Directions,” _The Movement_, June 1967; FBI Report, June 12, 1967, FBI File on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, reel 1; SNCC’s solidarity with liberation movements abroad – which was made official at the May 1967 meeting and prompted the establishment of an International Affairs Commission – reflected a sense of shared struggle that extended back to the group’s founding. Forman, _Black Revolutionaries_, 480. See also Fanon Che Wilkins, “The Making of Black Internationalists: SNCC and Africa before the Launching of Black Power, 1960-1965,” _Journal of African American History_ 92, no. 4 (Fall 2007).
black liberation as well as a way out of the false dichotomy of racial chauvinism and class reductionism.
CHAPTER 4

A POLITICS OF THE DISPOSSESSED:
H. RAP BROWN, 1967-71

This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it. Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing government, they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it, or their revolutionary right to dismember or overthrow it.

Abraham Lincoln

Spring 1967 witnessed the Biafran secession in eastern Nigeria, the Six-Day War in the Middle East, and the detonation of China’s first hydrogen bomb over Xinjiang. In the United States, Americans prepared for what many predicted would be another summer of racial unrest. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. warned journalists in Chicago’s Headline Club that deteriorating conditions in urban slums virtually ensured rioting in the nation’s cities. Claiming that he planned “to stir up trouble this summer,” King vowed to defy the government’s “conspiracy against dissent” by urging the nation to drastically reorder its priorities. Meanwhile, columnist William S. White bemoaned the “political and interest-bloc leaders” who laced their demands for racial justice with concerns over the growing inevitability of a “long, hot summer,” a turn of phrase that White believed to be a “threat-term… that has no place in civilized political discussion.” Competing prognostications notwithstanding, fear of an anarchic breakdown of basic order frayed the nation’s collective nerves. Such was the political environment in which 23-year-old H. Rap Brown attempted to guide SNCC toward a vision of Black Power that built on the organization’s prior grassroots success, the ideological formulations of competing internal factions, and an increasingly transnational impulse toward a revolution of the dispossessed.

Brown’s politics fused a pragmatism gleaned from years of community organizing with the romantic idealism commonly embraced by young radicals in the late-1960s. Confident that nothing short of revolution could effect the economic and racial justice for which SNCC had long fought, he also imagined ways in which post-revolutionary black America might live out its ideals without succumbing to reactionary or neo-colonial designs. Moreover, his notion of a revolution led by “dispossessed” people allowed him to effectively grapple with the class-race dialectic without becoming mired in ideological gymnastics over its theoretical resolution. The framework of dispossession addressed multiple systems of oppression without allowing a single axis of identity to predominate. Unfortunately for Brown, his tenure as a spokesperson for black American radicals coincided with a period of unprecedented repression, and he became a target of one of the most destructive campaigns of surveillance and sabotage in the nation’s history.

“People begin to forge an ideology through revolutionary struggle,” H. Rap Brown told Guardian staff writer Robert L. Allen in an exit interview in June 1968. “Ideologies develop, not before, but as a result of revolutionary struggle.” While Brown was referring to the need for black Americans to devise a political ideology rooted in experiential knowledge, he might just as easily have been speaking of his own political development over the past year. His term as chairman of SNCC – a period of intense “revolutionary struggle” – had informed the ways in which he conceptualized class, race, violence, nationalism, socialism, and a host of other issues. Indeed, the contours of his ideological evolution were inseparable from the events that had, as early as July 1967, rendered H. Rap Brown a household name.

Long before Brown assumed the SNCC chairmanship in May 1967, the group’s organizational strength had begun to weaken. While the ideas and rhetoric of Black Power had certainly helped black Americans at the local level to “strike at the cultural and economic heart of white racism,” the question of whether or not SNCC would remain the primary facilitator of such grassroots change was uncertain.\(^4\) Pledging to move SNCC “from rhetoric to program,” Brown had spoken optimistically about plans to expand Freedom Organizations beyond the model projects in rural Alabama. In his very first *National Guardian* interview, he acknowledged that the conversion of those organizations into local political parties (made possible in Alabama by a Reconstruction-era state statute) would not be as feasible in large, northern cities. Yet he insisted that SNCC would not shy away from community organizing, regardless of the challenges involved in tailoring its approach to different environments.\(^5\)

The organization would focus its energies on redirecting prospective draftees into community development work, thus providing a third career path for blacks who believed that their only options were “hustling” or joining the military. SNCC would also send black college students from its campus programs back into black communities where they might contribute their newly-acquired technical skills. “Until we can bring black people with those skills back to the black community,” Brown declared, SNCC’s viability in those communities would be severely limited. The June 1, 1967, interview notably contained Brown’s first recorded mention of revolution: Black Power was raising “the level of black consciousness which is essential to

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mounting a movement or guiding people toward a revolution – *if it be necessary*” (emphasis added).6

Despite his eagerness to implement new programs, Brown spent his first few weeks as chairman addressing the steady stream of arrests, shootings, and near-riots involving SNCC officers and rank-and-file members. In late May, he attended the funeral of a civil rights worker in Jackson, Mississippi, and appeared with Stokely Carmichael in Nashville for news conferences and court dates in connection with April demonstrations that had turned violent.7

Weeks later, on Monday, June 12, he addressed reporters outside SNCC’s Atlanta office in response to rumors that police in Prattville, Alabama, had actually killed Carmichael. Still uncertain as to the former chairman’s whereabouts or condition, Brown read from a prepared statement: “It appears as if Alabama has been chosen as the starting battleground for America’s race war.” Referring to the beating and wanton arrests of Brown’s comrade Dan Houser and other civil rights workers in Prattville, he declared that SNCC was “calling for full retaliation from the black community across America. We blame Lyndon Johnson.”8

After reconnecting with Carmichael on Tuesday for a march on Montgomery in protest of the Prattville violence, Brown flew to Ohio, where fires had been raging in and around Cincinnati’s Avondale district since Monday night. Arson and looting had begun when police arrested Peter Frakes, a black man picketing in protest of the murder conviction and death

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6 “New SNCC Chief Speaks His Mind,” *National Guardian*, June 10, 1967. Brown and outgoing SNCC program coordinator Cleveland Sellers had each also stressed that the organization as a whole lacked a certain “economic astuteness” that would be necessary in order to continue to work effectively. They declared that cultivating a more nuanced understanding of such issues should be an integral component of SNCC’s future programs. Report from the Program Coordinator, May 5, 1967, SNCC Papers, reel 3.


sentence meted out to his cousin, Posteal Laskey. Locals maintained that Frakes’s arrest was merely the “straw that broke the camel’s back,” and Cincinnati SNCC leader Thomas Porter chalked the insurrection up to “constant police harassment… and complete ignorance of our problems by the power structure.”9 The Ohio National Guard, called into action by Governor James Rhodes late Tuesday night, patrolled the city streets on Wednesday in attempts to contain rioting that had enveloped at least ten additional neighborhoods and had spread north to suburban Lockland. In Dayton, 45 miles further north from Lockland, tensions remained high from racially motivated riots earlier in the month and in September of the previous year.10

On Wednesday evening, June 14, Brown delivered a speech at a job rally at Dayton’s Wesley Community Center on the invitation of W. Sumpter McIntosh, local civil rights veteran and head of the Ohio Freedom Movement. He urged the audience to “take the pressure off Cincinnati,” and declared that nonviolence would no longer be of much use in the “most violent country in the world.” Brown’s comrade, Willie Ricks, who had flanked Stokely Carmichael as he introduced the Black Power slogan in Greenwood, Mississippi, almost a year earlier to the day, informed reporters that he and Brown had traveled to Dayton “to make white men get on their knees.” In response to Brown’s calls for civil disobedience, Ricks quipped, “…damn the United States – we issue a call for blood.”11 Following the rally, a contingent of young, black citizens began to throw rocks, break windows, and loot and burn businesses in the predominantly black West End district. After nearly 48 hours, other local youths formed unarmed peace-keeping patrols, which New York Times correspondent Earl Caldwell credited with quelling

further disturbances. Meanwhile, Brown made brief appearances in nearby Cincinnati before traveling south for engagements at Tougaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi, and True Light Missionary Baptist Church in Houston, Texas.

While minor in comparison to subsequent insurrections in Newark and Detroit, the Dayton incident set forth a pattern whereby Brown would issue jeremiads against American racism and exploitation after which varying degrees of civil unrest would ensue. Some came to the conclusion that rioting was the direct result of such provocative speeches and viewed the new SNCC chairman’s rhetoric as a dangerous aberration. However, in tone if not entirely in substance, Brown’s increasingly incendiary statements merely echoed critiques voiced by other activists of the period, particularly Martin Luther King, Jr. Months before the Ohio insurrections, King had begun to preach in vehement opposition to America’s role in the Vietnam War. At Ebenezer Baptist Church on April 30, King had declared that he could “hear God saying to America, ‘You’re too arrogant!’ And if you don’t change your ways, I will rise up and break the backbone of your power, and I’ll place it in the hands of a nation that doesn’t even know my name.”

Even Trappist monk Thomas Merton joined the chorus, arguing that a government that

ordered the destruction of non-combatants with napalm could not then condemn black rioters for setting fire to slums. “Indeed, if there is a difference,” Merton asserted, “it is that the second case is more justifiable than the first: it is a protest against real injustice.”

To be sure, Brown’s rhetoric was anything but benign. Given the context, the frequency with which he called for listeners to loot gun shops and arm themselves in subsequent months struck many Americans as irresponsible. Yet he was not alone in arguing that the primary cause of the Dayton and Cincinnati insurrections – to say nothing of a later incident in Cambridge, Maryland – was not the content of his speeches. Civil rights leaders in Dayton maintained that, had Brown not delivered a speech on June 14, something else might just as easily have triggered rioting. Black Americans’ economic insecurity, when combined with longstanding governmental apathy toward squalid urban conditions, afforded the insurrections a sense of inevitability. Highlighting the duality of black oppression, Brown declared that in open rebellion, “[black people] recognize – and poor people recognize first – what it takes to get the man off your back, what it takes to get freedom in America.”

Older civil rights veterans like the Rev. Samuel B. Wells also knew that the root causes of the long, hot summers were neither the Black Power activists nor their fiery speeches. “We told [Congress] to do something about the problems facing America,” Wells remembered, “and look what they did.” He went on:

I’m an old crazy black Baptist preacher with faith and patience to stick with Jesus. But a lot of these little Negroes – their patience has run out. I see a beautiful message in the riots. They throw devilish bricks at buildings, but not at men… I see love for mankind

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even in a riot – the patience of black people, respect for life. They let out steam by destroying buildings, taking televisions, liquor, clothes from devilish stores.  

Even as deteriorating circumstances in America’s cities made a long, hot year of urban unrest seem unavoidable, reverberations from the Third World impacted the ways in which leaders like Brown interpreted and responded to such conditions. Marxist revolutionaries and anticolonial leaders from Africa, Asia, and Latin America (many far-removed from the tradition of nonviolent resistance) replaced Gandhi and Camus as the tactical and intellectual heroes of the black freedom movement. New York Times correspondent Gene Roberts correctly attributed young activists’ acceptance of rioting as “a legitimate form of protest” to a growing adherence to the ideas of individuals like Frantz Fanon. Declaring black Americans a colonized people, many young militants agreed with Fanon that “decolonization [was] always a violent phenomenon.” Indeed, Brown’s Dayton speech indicated that he had begun to adopt Fanon’s notion that colonizers only understood “the language of pure force.” Over the course of his chairmanship, he would continue to argue that, as a “colony within America’s confines,” blacks had been forced to employ violence because it was the only language to which the American government would respond. Citing the government’s militarism abroad and its callous brutality toward black

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21 Fanon, Wretched, 38. Brown’s public advocacy of Fanonian revolutionary violence, beginning in June 1967, represented a departure from the caution he had exercised upon first assuming the office of chairman. For instance, in a late-May press conference in California, Brown had calmly assured reporters that SNCC’s “position toward violence [was] still to be nonviolent.” Violence should be used only in exercising the “God-given right” to self-defense – a right “protected within the framework of the law.” “H. Rap Brown on Non-violence, Self Defense & Freedom,” KTVU News (Oakland: KTVU, 1967); “Negro Says Whites Can Stir Strife,” Long Beach Independent, May 26, 1967.
citizens at home, he maintained that violence was woven into the very fabric of American culture, making resistance by any other means futile.22

The work of other revolutionaries like Ernesto “Che” Guevara and Mao Tse-Tung also buttressed Brown’s calls for revolutionary violence.23 In Summer 1967, Brown began to pepper his speeches with dicta from the ubiquitous Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung, most famously variations on Mao’s declaration that “power grows out of the barrel of a gun.”24 His affinity for Mao was, predictably, based on a selective reading of the Chinese leader’s best-known work. Like many other radicals who drew inspiration from the “Little Red Book” and other such manuals, Brown clung to the teachings of Mao and Che on violence and guerilla warfare, respectively, while giving short shrift to those on the role of women.25 Nevertheless, Third World leaders’ advocacy of revolutionary violence was formative for Brown in that it lent an international character to lessons in survival and tit-for-tat self-defense that he had gleaned a decade earlier from the street toughs of Baton Rouge and, later, from armed sharecroppers in Alabama and Mississippi.


23 Reflecting decades of Afro-Asian solidarity, Mao had issued statements in support of the black freedom movement over the course of the 1960s and had even endeared himself to SNCC members by sending a personal telegram of encouragement in the early months of the organization’s Black Power phase. Frazier, East is Black, 131-58; New York staff meeting minutes, September 1966, SNCC Papers, reel 3. For more on Brown’s views on revolutionary violence, see Sol Stern, “America’s Black Guerrillas,” Ramparts, September 1967, 26-27.


In addition to the notion that violence was a necessary – even therapeutic – component of decolonization, Brown derived from Third World Marxists the conviction that people of color across the globe were being oppressed as a race and exploited as an underclass. Brown agreed with Fanon that while “what parcels out the [colonized] world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race” (hence the necessity of stretching the Marxian analysis), decolonization exposed “divergent and antagonistic” truths. The “primitive Manicheism of… Blacks and Whites” broke down, and class lines became more visible. But Brown, also an admirer of Régis Debray, might have similarly drawn the conclusion that, like history itself, oppression “advances in disguise” and “appears on stage wearing the mask of the preceding scene.” Thus even as some black radicals were beginning to discern in Marxism-Leninism and other such approaches more favorable analytical frameworks, Brown engaged their singular class focus with a keen sense of the historical legacy and lived reality of racism in the American context. Such a view of the dual oppression of black Americans would eventually lead him to a belief in their vanguard role as “the most dispossessed.”

Yet writer and SNCC photographer Julius Lester later remarked that, despite Brown’s voracious reading and careful attention to shifting theoretical and philosophical currents, the chairman was never much of an armchair theoretician. Rather, Lester remembered, Brown “was much more interested in how to get things done than in political theory… [and] much more practical.” Brown’s notion of dispossession as a function of both race and class oppression therefore mingled dialectically with his fierce advocacy of revolutionary violence. His public

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26 Fanon, Wretched, 40, 144.
statements on black Americans’ particularly acute economic insecurity were interlaced with calls for them to take over (or, otherwise, burn down) white businesses, thus striking a blow to what he viewed as a racial-capitalist system under which many were robbed of their labor-power and trapped in penury. His increasingly militant statements to such ends would soon endear him to radicals while casting him as a dangerous firebrand in the eyes of moderates and conservatives.

In July, Brown attended a highly publicized conference in riot-torn Newark, New Jersey, at which a diverse group of activists debated the meaning and goals of Black Power. Following the conference, he filled a last-minute speaking engagement in Cambridge, Maryland, at the urging of former resident and civil rights leader Gloria Richardson. The town and its predominantly black Second Ward were familiar territory for Brown. A few years earlier, he and other members of the D.C.-area Nonviolent Action Group (NAG) had assisted Richardson and the Cambridge Nonviolent Action Committee (CNAC) in organizing local black citizens to press for equal public accommodations, school desegregation, jobs, and housing. By 1967, the CNAC had become the Black Action Federation (BAF), and Richardson had relocated to New York City. In the wake of a slew of racially motivated incidents that summer – including several arson attacks – the BAF requested that Richardson arrange for somebody from SNCC to give a


talk in Cambridge. On Monday July 24, just after sunset, Brown delivered the speech that would set the course for the rest of his life.  

   Addressing a crowd of approximately 400 from the hood of a parked car, Brown spoke once more of the combination of racism and class exploitation that had long dogged black Americans. The “honkey peckerwood cracker owns all the stores,” he declared, “and he takes our money from us.” Brown argued that dribbling away hard-earned paychecks at white-owned businesses made whites wealthy while leaving blacks poor and powerless in their own neighborhoods. He implored local residents to take control over the businesses in the Second Ward: “I don’t care if you have to burn them down and run them out. You got to take over them stores.” If the “peckerwood’s” money and property was his god, tearing down white-owned stores in the neighborhood would be tantamount to “hitting his religion.” Lest his listeners forget that lines of class cut across race, Brown reminded them that “all [their] enemies ain’t white. [They] got some black enemies, too.”

   Broadening his focus significantly, Brown later spoke of oppressed people in China, Vietnam, and India, insisting that black Americans needed to begin to think of such people “like brothers.” Moreover, these were the “colored people of the world… the black people of the world.” He invoked the Third World in order to convey the notion that global racism and imperialism – of which predatory business practices in the humble Maryland town were certainly a part – were in fact doomed. Echoing a point that W.E.B. Du Bois, Aimé Césaire, and others had made years earlier, he insisted that people of color far outnumbered whites, presumably rendering a world revolution of the dispossessed imminent. In Brown’s words, “…the honkey is

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33 Antiriot Bill Hearings, 32-34.
surrounded.”34 After repeating familiar refrains on the Americanness of violence, he concluded by declaring that, “if this town don’t come around, this town should be burned down.”35 While standard rhetorical fare for Brown, it was a phrase that officials across the country would soon highlight as proof of his intent to incite Cambridge’s black citizens to riot.

Accounts of what happened next vary widely.36 Most agree that, after having delivered the speech, Brown retired to the headquarters of the BAF. On learning that Pamela Waters, a local teenager, needed an escort home, Brown and a detachment of others obliged. As the group approached Race Street (the thoroughfare that divided the town into white and black sections), Deputy Sheriff Wesley Brown discharged two rounds from his shotgun ostensibly as warning shots intended to enforce the police blockade of the city’s white business district. Buckshot hit the SNCC chairman in the left forehead, and locals soon rushed him to a nearby hospital. Almost immediately after doctors released Brown, his associates whisked him away to Washington, D.C.37

Meanwhile, as police sequestered blacks in the Second Ward, white nightriders raced back and forth through the neighborhood (unimpeded by five powerless black police officers) and eventually met defensive gunfire from frustrated black residents. In the early morning hours,

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35 *Antiriot Bill Hearings*, 36.
fire broke out at Pine Street Elementary School, a ramshackle testament to the squalid conditions in which Cambridge’s black children attended school and the site of several recent arson attempts. As the flames spread, the city’s all-white volunteer fire company parked its equipment at the outer edges of the business district and watched idly for two hours while the Second Ward burned. Firemen murmured, “Let ‘em burn,” as Maryland’s Attorney General, Francis B. Burch, frantically pleaded for them to extinguish the blaze. Nearby, Police Chief Bruce Kinnamon snapped, “You goddamn niggers started the fire, now you goddamn niggers watch it burn.” Finally, around 3:30 AM, the fire company acquiesced to Burch’s entreaties and moved into position on Pine Street. Brown, who had long since returned to Washington, would not learn of the fire or of the superficial gunshot wounds of city patrolman Russell Wroten until the next morning.38

The Cambridge incident served as Brown’s entrée into the collective fears of white America. The morning after the fires, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover informed President Johnson that Maryland Governor Spiro Agnew had ordered the arrest of “this man Brown, who is one of the worst in the country,” on charges of incitement to riot. Agnew publicly denounced the chairman as “a professional agitator whose inflammatory statements deliberately provoked this outbreak of violence” – charges that Brown and his attorney, William Kunstler, categorically denied.39 Following a brief stint in the Alexandria, Virginia, city jail, Brown spoke at a press

39 Dictabelt of telephone call between LBJ and J. Edgar Hoover, 7/25/1967, 10:33 AM, Mansion, Citation no. 12005, Tape WH6707.01, Program no. 4, 6:45 length. LBJ Presidential Library Online Collection, Miller Center, UVA. In a bizarre effort to make it seem as though Brown had attempted to elude capture, the FBI apprehended the SNCC chairman as he was boarding a plane to New York to surrender to them. Brown, Die, 102; SNCC Staff Memo, July 27, 1967, SNCC papers, reel 3; “FBI Puts Collar on Rap Brown at Washington National Airport,” Hagerstown Daily Mail, July 26, 1967; Statement by H. Rap Brown, July 26, 1967, SNCC Papers, reel 20; William
conference on Thursday, July 27, at SNCC’s U Street, NW, headquarters in Washington. Delivering a marginally more aggressive version of his typical stump speech, he again called for blacks to respond in-kind to American violence: “I say violence is necessary. Violence is a part of American culture. It is as American as cherry pie.”

Coverage of the Washington press conference and of Brown’s subsequent speaking engagements by all of the major media outlets afforded most Americans their first glimpse of the SNCC chairman. Chicago organizer Bob Brown remembered that a generation of journalists “made their careers off of interviewing and covering… Rap.” Already well-known in movement circles for his verbal dexterity, he now seemed to feed off of the spike in press coverage. Quips to what he termed the “WPP” (white people’s press) grew increasingly provocative as he strayed from the texts of prepared statements. While SNCC’s controversial anti-Zionist position on the Arab-Israeli conflict had alienated many of the organization’s former supporters in previous months, widespread dissemination of Brown’s oratorical flourishes further ensured the loss of

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Kunstler, “In Defense of Rap Brown,” n.d., SNCC Papers, reel 3. An analysis of the Cambridge incident conducted by Robert Shellow, Assistant Deputy Director for Research of the Kerner Commission, concluded that lines of causality between Brown’s speech and the events that followed were “far from clear,” and that even “the seemingly obvious connection between the speech and the fire at the Pine Street School becomes more tenuous upon examination.” The ensuing report found “little evidence that Brown’s speech stirred the crowd to action.” “Analysis of Cambridge, Maryland, Disturbance,” Office of the Assistant Deputy Director for Research, National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, October 29, 1967, Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration: 1963-1969, Part V, reel 27.


both financial contributions and political sympathy.\footnote{Former allies like Rabbi Harold Saperstein wrote tortured letters terminating their financial ties to SNCC. Saperstein, a veteran of the Selma and Lowndes County movements, informed Brown that he could not “support an organization which attacks a cause so precious to me” and that he would “have to divert [his] support to other organizations in the field [of civil rights] whose leadership is better informed and more responsible.” Harold I. Saperstein to H. Rap Brown, January 5, 1967, SNCC Papers, reel 3. Elizabeth Sutherland, a SNCC worker in her forties at the time, assumed the difficult job of “trying to maintain SNCC’s largely Jewish funding base (even after SNCC took a pro-Palestinian position).” Elizabeth (Betita) Sutherland Martinez, “Neither Black nor White in a Black-White World,” in Faith S. Holsen et al., ed. \textit{Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 354.} It also led to an escalation in governmental surveillance, as the FBI and other state and local investigative units followed the chairman’s whereabouts more closely than ever.\footnote{Days after the Cambridge incident, SNCC Program Secretary Ralph Featherstone correctly predicted that heightened pressure from the FBI was the “kickoff” to an insidious plot to “have SNCC all cleaned up” in short order. The Bureau had been observing SNCC since its inception and had intensified its surveillance concomitantly with the elections of Stokely Carmichael and, later, H. Rap Brown. An offhand remark by Brown on July 27 that agents interpreted as a threat to the life of Ladybird Johnson drew even closer attention to the chairman. “FBI Targets SNCC,” newsreel footage of unknown origin (August 1967); FBI Memo, SA Baber to Acting Assistant Director Towns, July 28, 1967; Carson, \textit{In Struggle}, 261-62. The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, a component of the executive branch of the Mississippi state government created in March 1956, also began to collect hundreds of files on Brown documenting his visits to the state, communications with local SNCC workers, and any perceived threats that he might have posed. See “Sovereignty Commission Online,” Mississippi Department of Archives and History, accessed July 16, 2016, http://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/; Yashuhiro Katagiri, \textit{The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission: Civil Rights and States’ Rights} (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 3-9.} As Summer 1967 wore on, Brown seemed to grow more aware that without political direction, the rage that had boiled over in the previous months’ urban insurrections would reach nightmarish proportions. “We just can’t wantonly go out and rebel,” he began to tell anxious audiences. Rather, there would have to be some discussion of “what happens when the whites move out of their communities,” after the fires and looting had subsided.\footnote{Transcript of H. Rap Brown speech, September 10, 1967, FBI Report on H. Rap Brown, File no. 100-168197.} While Brown had mused about a new, socialist society since assuming the chairmanship, the development of a political ideology that simultaneously rejected capitalism and valued black people’s humanity gained renewed currency in the wake of disturbances in Dayton, Cincinnati, Newark, Detroit, and Cambridge. Over the course of several months, he began to outline the contours of a politics
of the dispossessed that engaged the class and race dimensions of black oppression with an eye toward the post-revolutionary future.

A few days after the Cambridge incident, sipping lemonade and feasting on chopped tenderloin at the Washington, D.C. Beef ‘n’ Bird, Brown discussed revolutionary politics with columnist John Mathews. Asked if he was a communist, Brown replied that a retrofitted socialism could potentially address itself to the problems of America’s dysfunctional democracy and “oppressive capitalism.” His support for socialism “when it addresses itself to the problems” reflected a growing acceptance of Fanon’s contention that the Marxist analysis should be “slightly stretched” when dealing with colonialism.45 “When you look at the emerging countries,” Brown continued, “it’s socialism that’s working. Every country that has gained independence has moved to socialism and that can’t be an accident.” Pressed for a working example, he proffered Cuba, arguing that while the island nation was not wealthy, it kept its people from starving “like the kids are… in Mississippi.”46 Weeks later, Brown conveyed similar sentiments in a telephone interview with the Institute Cubano de Radiodifusión (Cuban Radio Institute), stating that when black Americans – a “colony” of the “dispossessed” – began to imagine a new society, its basis “must be a Socialist system.”47

45 John Mathews, “Rap Brown Has Mild Moments, Sees Socialism as the Solution,” Janesville Daily Gazette, August 7, 1967. Further evidence of his attraction to Fanon’s ideas appeared when he suggested that capitalist countries like the United States should make more productive use of its wealth rather than “building up its police and military force.” Fanon, Wretched, 40, 61.
46 John Mathews, “Rap Brown Has Mild Moments, Sees Socialism as the Solution,” Janesville Daily Gazette, August 7, 1967. Brown’s comments here reflect a very close reading of Malcolm X who, in May 1964, had pointed out that “all of the countries that are emerging today from under the shackles of colonialism are turning toward socialism. I don’t think it’s an accident. Most of the countries that were colonial powers were capitalist countries, and the last bulwark of capitalism today is America. It’s impossible for a white person to believe in capitalism and not believe in racism. You can’t have capitalism without racism. And if you find one and you happen to get that person into a conversation and they have a philosophy that makes you sure they don’t have this racism in their outlook, usually they’re socialists or their political philosophy is socialism.” Breitman, Malcolm X Speaks, 69.
Beyond paying occasional lip service to the Cuban model, however, Brown had yet to commit to a specific variety of socialism for black America. Yet Brown, like many other radicals in the late 1960s, would soon find inspiration in an unlikely East African nation. The product of a 1964 merger between the Republic of Tanganyika and the newly-independent People’s Republic of Zanzibar, Tanzania epitomized the European underdevelopment of Africa. Given few natural resources, an economy consisting mostly of small-scale agriculture, and a miniscule petit bourgeoisie, Tanzania’s president, Julius K. Nyerere, attempted to develop a socialist system that would build on the nation’s greatest strength: its people. In February 1967, Nyerere (affectionately called Mwalimu) issued his Arusha Declaration outlining an Africanized socialism to which he referred as ujamaa – Swahili for “familyhood.” Like Léopold Senghor of Senegal, Sékou Touré of Guinea, and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, Nyerere viewed precolonial African society as essentially classless. Accordingly, ujamaa would allow Tanzanians to return to such a socialist society as members of a close-knit, agrarian community.48

Named for the northern city in which Nyerere’s Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) party gathered to outline the first steps along the Tanzanian road to socialism, the Arusha Declaration was the young government’s most important ideological statement to date.49 It described a state in which “all people are workers and… neither capitalism nor feudalism exists.” Peasants would control all of the means of production through their cooperatives and through their peasant and worker allies in the TANU government. Addressing the dangers of neocolonialism, the declaration also emphasized self-reliance, warned against dependence on

foreign aid in the form of gifts, loans, and private investment, and reminded Tanzanians that large-scale industrialization (virtually impossible without substantial outside investment) was not the only first step toward development. In the latter point, Nyerere broke markedly with the common Marxist assumption that countries must first build capitalism before proceeding to socialism. In lieu of industry, agriculture would constitute the basis of Tanzanian development, and the peasants would voluntarily join together in *ujamaa* villages to make the new socialist society a reality.\(^{50}\)

Across the African diaspora – and particularly in the Anglophone West – radicals and liberals experienced a wave of “Tanzaphilia,” as *ujamaa* rekindled the optimism that so many had felt during the early years of African independence.\(^{51}\) Activist-intellectual CLR James heralded Tanzania as one of the “foremost political phenomena of the twentieth century,” arguing that socialists had not seen anyone as innovative as Nyerere since Lenin’s death in 1924. *Ujamaa*’s emphasis on peasant control of the means of production dovetailed with James’s notion of the revolutionary significance of the peasantry (and not merely the industrial proletariat), particularly his belief that revolutions could succeed or fail depending on the degree of peasant control. While some SNCC veterans like Bob Moses and Monroe Sharp actually relocated to Tanzania during this period, Washington, D.C.’s Drum and Spear Press and bookstore (run by SNCC’s Charlie Cobb, Courtland Cox, Ralph Featherstone, Judy Richardson, and others) embraced *ujamaa* as its official ideology and developed a working partnership with the Tanzania Publishing House. Former SNCC worker Joyce Ladner extolled the tireless work ethic of Tanzanian women and commended Nyerere for acknowledging the ways in which the utopian benefits of precolonial African socialism had never trickled down to these “true


proletarians.” Despite ujamaa’s ultimate failure in the 1970s and 80s, its intoxicating blend of pragmatism and romanticism had a seismic impact on black radicals and nationalists looking for an alternative to Western Marxism in the 1960s.

A close observer of revolutionary and progressive movements abroad, H. Rap Brown would almost certainly have been aware of Tanzania’s bold socialist experiment even before he shared the stage with Chief Michael Lukumbuzya (the country’s ambassador to the United States) at the 1967 national convention of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). However, he clearly became more attracted to ujamaa after a rendezvous with Tanzania’s ambassador to the United Nations, John W.S. Malecela. Recently elected chairman of the UN Special Committee on Decolonization, Malecela invited Brown to meet with him at the sprawling headquarters of the UN in Manhattan on the afternoon of August 25. When Brown and two other SNCC workers were refused admittance, Malecela himself appeared to welcome them and “loudly denounced one of the guards.” Nearly an hour later, New York Post photographer Arty Pomerantz snapped photos of Brown and Malecela as they left the UN for SNCC’s New York office at 100 Fifth Avenue. Although Malecela later claimed that there was “no political implication in the visit,” Los Angeles Times correspondent Louis B. Fleming wondered whether the meeting was part of a

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growing alliance, “part social and part professional,” between militant Africans and Black Power leaders.54

While both men remained tight-lipped about the details of their conversation, Brown soon began to invoke *ujamaa* in speeches across the United States. Addressing the Camden, New Jersey, Civil Rights Coalition at the city’s Convention Hall on August 30, Brown broached the familiar topic of post-revolutionary society. Black Americans “have to understand where they’re moving to,” Brown declared. They should develop a “political ideology to go along with the rebellion.” As in previous speeches, he advised his 3,500 listeners to rebuild using socialist principles; but this time, he touted *ujamaa* as the line that they should follow. While America’s current political and economic system relied on exploitation and war-for-profit, *ujamaa* would be more humanistic. The response to Brown’s speech – in which he also made sure to quote Chairman Mao (“power comes from the barrel of a gun”) – was ecstatic.55

The next month, Brown spoke to a crowd of 1,000 at a CORE rally at Lincoln Senior High School in East St. Louis, Illinois. He stated that, while insurrections were simply “going to happen,” East St. Louis residents who “understand what is going on… have to begin to talk to other people” about developing a proper ideological framework. In a nod to the Arusha Declaration, Brown argued that they would also “have to start talking about cooperatives.” Finally, after acknowledging the rise of African socialism then being promoted by leaders like Nyerere, Touré, Kaunda, and Uganda’s Milton Obote, Brown touted the effectiveness of the Tanzanian model: “They got a thing called [*ujamaa*]” that is “very successful.” He stressed that


black Americans would have to join Africans in rejecting capitalism because of that system’s reliance on exploitation and war profiteering. Unfortunately (if predictably), the days of civil unrest that followed Brown’s East St. Louis speech were not succeeded by a community-wide turn to cooperative-based African socialism.

Brown’s espousal of *ujamaa* reflected a burgeoning solidarity with oppressed people in the Third World. Beyond merely imbibing the political ideas of African, Asian, and Latin American revolutionaries, the SNCC chairman now sought tangible links with the decolonizing world and attempted to extend his organization’s operational reach outside the boundaries of the capitalist West. He was particularly concerned with the plight of Southern Africans and, on August 27, 1967, mailed a letter to Oliver Tambo, president of the African National Congress (ANC), then in exile in Dar es Salaam. Brown informed Tambo that SNCC would be calling on black Americans to boycott General Motors in 1968 due to the company’s “heavy” investments in South Africa and “the profits from exploited labor of our brothers” in the settler-colonial nation. He hoped that by boycotting GM, blacks might compel “United States capitalists to withdraw their investments,” thereby exerting pressure on the apartheid regime. Brown distributed copies of the Tambo letter and offered additional advice for American “Overseas Africans” and others interested in joining SNCC in opposing white minority rule in South Africa.

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56 FBI transcripts of Brown’s speeches during this time period afford researchers invaluable insight into his ideological development. The transcribers, however, were often unfamiliar with the terms that he used. The raw transcript reads: “They got a thing call “used your mark” (?) in Tangier.” Transcript of H. Rap Brown speech, September 10, 1967, FBI Report on H. Rap Brown, File no. 100-168197; Mao, *Quotations*, 33.


58 H. Rap Brown and James Forman to Oliver Tambo, August 27, 1967, SNCC Papers, reel 20. On the same day, Brown (along with eight others) co-signed a letter to President Houphouet Boigny of Ivory Coast demanding the release of Guinean officials Lansana Beavogui and Achkar Marof. “We want you to know,” the letter stated, “that many of us – we the Overseas Africans – are becoming more and more conscious of our responsibilities to our African brothers as they are becoming more aware of their responsibilities to us.” SNCC International Affairs Commission to Houphouet Boigny, August 27, 1967, SNCC Papers, reel 51.
and Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia). He instructed them to stay in school and learn technical skills that would be useful once those countries had achieved true independence. They should educate themselves and their neighbors about African colonialism, send money and medical supplies to Tambo in Tanzania, and don “African dress” while attending UN discussions on decolonization.\footnote{59}

Days later, following the National Conference for New Politics in Chicago, a dashiki-clad Brown told reporters that blacks should prepare themselves for “the day when we may all have to go fight in South Africa,” and that black veterans “may very soon have to form a Black International and return to Africa to fight or die for the liberation of the mother country.”\footnote{60} The warning was in reference to entreaties from the ANC as well as a bid by John W.S. Malecela at that summer’s UN Seminar on Apartheid, Racial Discrimination, and Colonialism in Southern Africa for international support for oppressed people in South Africa, South West Africa, Southern Rhodesia, Angola and Mozambique.\footnote{61} To that end, Brown also assisted the American student branch of the Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU) in its fund-raising efforts for freedom fighters in that country’s second chimurenga. Having developed a working relationship with the ZAPU branch, Brown participated in the group’s New York teach-ins and delivered a well-received address at its annual conference that winter.\footnote{62} Finally, in December 1967, he penned a letter to UN Secretary General U Thant offering to establish an “African-American International Military Brigade for South West Africa.” While he publicly predicted that the


\footnote{60} “Rap Brown Talks of ‘Black International’ to Fight in South Africa,” \textit{NBC} (Chicago: Reuters TV, August 6, 1967).


“U.S.-dominated” UN would suppress any such effort, Brown suggested that “black guerillas from America would probably go to South-West Africa anyway.”63

The SNCC chairman also sought to maintain the friendly relationship that his organization had cultivated with the Cuban revolutionary government. He considered Fidel Castro “one of the few patriots and revolutionaries existing in the world” and had praised the Cuban people for “their fight for liberation from Yankee imperialism.”64 Yet on the afternoon of Wednesday, January 10, 1968, a minor melee ensued after Brown and New York SNCC office staffer Bob Smith held a private meeting with José Raul Viera, first secretary of the Cuban Mission to the UN. The extent to which the meeting bespoke a possible working alliance between the two parties is difficult to determine, although the team of reporters that would soon converge on the scene were aware of its political significance. As the pair attempted to exit the vestibule of the East 67th Street mission (legally Cuban territory) with handfuls of Christmas presents that had been left for Brown, city police brusquely and extrajurisdictionally interrogated them about the contents of the packages. In short order, the situation turned physical, and Viera quickly ushered the two SNCC workers back inside.

The first secretary and other sympathetic Cuban officials provided Brown and Smith sanctuary for six hours, fed them dinner, and, in coordination with Cuban foreign minister Raúl Roa García, dispatched a formal letter of protest to U Thant regarding the behavior of the police. Brown and Smith – along with recent arrivals James Forman and SNCC worker Elizabeth Sutherland – finally exited safely at 10:45 PM. The following day, Ambassador Arthur Goldberg complained to U Thant that in offering Brown sanctuary, the Cubans had “interfere[d] in the

domestic affairs of the United States.” Cuban representatives replied by defending the SNCC workers, arguing that the police officers had violated “the territorial integrity of the mission” and decrying “the extremely offensive manner… of one policeman” toward Viera.65 One of the two officers obtained a summons charging Brown with harassment and adding to an already formidable array of legal troubles for the 24-year-old chairman. While further complicating Brown’s ability to organize effectively, the debacle temporarily strengthened real and symbolic ties between SNCC and the young Communist republic.

For Brown – as for many activists of the era – such tangible links with liberation movements both at home and abroad transcended bounds of color and nationality. From South Africa to South Carolina, the “battle for liberation” was not solely the “battle for the black man,” but rather it concerned all who counted themselves among the ranks of “the dispossessed.”66 In the United States, the notion that the fates of all dispossessed people were linked coincided with the rise of a host of ethnic nationalisms. Pan-Indianism and Red Power, along with Chicano, Puerto Rican, and Asian-American nationalist movements, gained currency in the new political space carved out by Black Power.67 Brown argued in speeches and interviews that each of these respective groups constituted “dispossessed classes,” and that “all of these people are going to

join in a fight… to end this oppression.” Even poor white Americans had fallen victim to capitalist exploitation and could become revolutionaries. Yet the pragmatist in Brown maintained a circumspection toward poor whites born of an upbringing in the Deep South. He also knew that white racism had historically precluded class solidarity and harbored few illusions that a world-revolutionary upheaval would alter that fact.68

In February 1968, Brown’s politics positioned him squarely in the crossfire of competing ideological factions within SNCC. Amidst mounting legal troubles stemming from the Cuban incident and the previous summer’s arrests, Brown traveled to California to consult with attorney William Kunstler. While on the West Coast, he joined SNCC international affairs director James Forman, former chairman Stokely Carmichael, Chicano activist Reies Tijerina, and a contingent of Black Panther leaders onstage at consecutive “Free Huey!” rallies in Oakland and Los Angeles. A working alliance between SNCC and the Panthers was announced, and the three SNCC leaders received honorary positions within the Panther leadership.69 While Carmichael “stunned” an increasingly Marxist-Leninist-leaning Forman by declaring to audiences that communism and socialism were not ideologies “fitted for black people,” Brown attempted to cultivate a political middle ground. “I believe the revolution will be a revolution of the dispossessed people in this country,” he declared, “…that’s the Mexican-American, the Puerto-Rican American, the American Indian, and black people.” Following a rush of applause, Brown

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68 Ibid. At the nineteenth anniversary celebration of the National Guardian newspaper, Brown declared that sympathetic whites should either take up arms like John Brown or “bring me the guns.” A few days later, at Columbia University’s McMillin Theater, he told an overflow crowd that whites must also “organize among whites and awaken those who don’t know what is happening. We don’t need missionaries,” Brown argued, “we need revolutionaries.” “Brown Sees U.S. Blacks in Key Role,” National Guardian, November 4, 1967; Michael Stern, “Brown Says White Students Have Role in Black Struggle,” Columbia Daily Spectator, November 16, 1967.
explained that black Americans must be the “vanguard” of such a revolutionary rainbow
coalition “because we are the most dispossessed.”

The metric by which Brown distinguished friend from foe was, therefore, the degree to
which individuals and groups – regardless of color – transmuted their respective dispossession
into revolutionary commitment and action. Although he would never drift as far to the political
left as Forman, such an outlook left him plenty of room to embrace socialism as an economic
system that could be retrofitted to accommodate the “40 to 50,000,000 black people” upon which
capitalism had historically depended as its mudsill. As radical journalist Robert L. Allen wrote
months after the rallies, Carmichael rarely had any such use for class analysis: “To Carmichael
all blacks form one class: the hunted. All whites form another class: the hunters and their
accomplices.” He viewed white reaction as a foregone conclusion and, thus, could not place faith
in what he considered a white, European system. Thousands of miles away in Conakry, Guinea,
Kwame Nkrumah agreed with Allen’s assessment, writing that “Brown is right and Stokely
wrong.” The exiled Ghanaian leader added that “Black Power is anti-racism. Whoever is with us
is a friend, regardless of colour.” Nor did such growing rifts escape the notice of the FBI,
whose agents were encouraged to “exploit… the organizational and personal conflicts” of Black Power leaders.\(^{73}\)

Although he would continue for several years to promote a post-revolutionary society based on socialist principles, by Spring 1968, Brown no longer publicly championed the Cuban, Tanzanian, or any other preexisting model. A socialist political ideology that could adequately address the persistence of American racism had yet to be developed, and it would be up to “the masses of people” to do so. “I don’t think that we can sit down and write it out,” Brown remarked in a May exit interview with the *Guardian*. Rather, dispossessed people would need to develop and refine their own political ideology “through revolutionary struggle,” as he had begun to do during his year as SNCC chairman. Steadfast in his devotion to “the socialist principle that the wealth of the world belongs to the people,” he insisted on an entirely new system rather than mere reforms to the old. “The need for revolution,” Brown later assured journalist Lee Winfrey, “is non-negotiable.”\(^{74}\)

For much of 1968 and 1969, Brown emphasized the critical importance of dispossessed people’s direct role in shaping the necessary revolutionary political ideology. “It’s no longer adequate for us to say that we’re going to have revolution ‘by any means necessary,’” Brown told students at Columbia University. The people would “have to begin to define the means that are necessary.” College students should function merely as facilitators, working at first within the community-level programs with which dispossessed people were already familiar (be they legitimate or illegitimate) and helping them to develop an ideology “that makes those programs

\(^{73}\) FBI COINTELPRO, Black Extremist, Part 1 of 23, Director, FBI to SAC Albany, August 25, 1967. See also FBI COINTELPRO, Black Extremist, Part 5 of 23, Director, FBI (100-448006) to SAC, Atlanta (100-7182), July 29, 1968.

work for the struggle.” While the people themselves would draw on experiential knowledge to effect revolutionary political and economic change in their own communities, students would be on hand “so that they don’t get fooled every time [President] Nixon touts Black Capitalism, which is… you know… a myth.”

His insistence that revolutionary political ideology be devised *for* and *by* dispossessed people reflected the influence of Régis Debray, the former student of French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser and a comrade of Che Guevara in Bolivia. In the tradition of Césaire, Padmore, and Fanon, Debray had argued that “revolutionary struggle encounters specific conditions on each continent, in each country.” A reverential reading of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Mao, then, could lead revolutionaries to paper over the “highly special and profoundly distinct conditions” in which their respective movements developed. From Debray’s 1967 treatise, *Revolution in the Revolution?*, Brown derived the notion that “revolutions cannot be imported or exported,” and he encouraged dispossessed people to assemble their own patchwork politics by drawing “from all ideologies those principles which benefit the majority of mankind.” The homespun ideology upon which Brown eventually settled was revolutionary nationalism.

Black radicals who espoused revolutionary nationalism often defined their politics in opposition to cultural nationalism. A response to the centuries-long denigration of black culture and the ensuing assimilationist impulse, cultural nationalism was concerned with “the reclaiming of the self” and a thoroughgoing decolonization of the mind. It found its staunchest defender in

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77 Brown, *Die*, 128.
Maulana Ron Karenga, who asserted that the “fact that we are Black is our ultimate reality.” Most affirmed Eldridge Cleaver’s observation that, at some point, all “went through a cultural nationalist phase.” Some measure of cultural nationalist sentiment had been inevitable in the early years of the civil rights movement in America and decolonization abroad. By 1968, however, revolutionary nationalists derided cultural nationalism as narrow and passé, citing the need to overturn the political and economic system that had cast blackness as an index of inferiority in the first place.

Brown even began to argue that cultural nationalism had become a tool of white capitalists: “If they get black people thinking culturally, they don’t have to worry about them moving politically.” He worried that such seemingly superficial nationalism – to which he referred as “militant blackism” – would be easy for the existing power structure to co-opt, as it posed no direct threat to the capitalist system. An infamous example of cultural appropriation at the service of capitalistic interests was Vince Cullers’s advertising campaign for the Lorillard Tobacco Company (the makers of Newport cigarettes) in which a bearded, beaded, and dashiki-clad black man promoted a “whole new bag of menthol smoking.” Brown detested such profit-driven sleights of hand. Employing a domestic colonial framework, he echoed Fanon in arguing that leaving the old economic system in place meant inviting neocolonialism. Indeed, the sting of class exploitation would be no less intense under Black Capitalism. Accordingly, revolutionaries

“must go beyond our dashikis, our beards, and our beads” in order to understand that “you cannot talk about creating something until this thing has been destroyed.”

Revolutionary nationalists sought to move beyond consciousness-raising and cultural awareness and wage an all-out assault on capitalism, racism, colonialism, and imperialism. Reminiscent of latter-day Malcolm X in both tone and substance, Brown explained the special, world-historic role of dispossessed Americans in terms of slaying an octopus:

We hold the key to liberation around the world. The freedom of people around the world depends upon what we do. This is true, because this country is the chief oppressor around the world. If we view this country as an octopus, then we see that her tentacles stretch around the globe. Like in Vietnam, Africa, Latin America… If these countries cut off a tentacle, it can be replaced. But we got his eye; we live in the belly of the monster. So it’s up to us to destroy its brain. When we do this not only will Africa be free but all people oppressed by “the man.” It is because of america’s racism and greed that Black people and people of color around the world are oppressed.

As its name suggests, revolutionary nationalism was *nationalistic* in its acknowledgement of historicized notions of racial difference as the basis of nationhood in America as well as in its calls for self-determination. Yet it was *revolutionary* in its insistence that racially- and ethnically-diverse groups with similar class interests – and who labored under similar forms of exploitation – should form a united front to destroy the aforementioned “octopus.” In a series of taped interviews that would form the basis of his ghostwritten autobiography, *Die Nigger Die!*, Brown reminded cultural nationalists that “black people are not the only revolutionary force in this country,” and that a chauvinistic reluctance to embrace the notion of a rainbow coalition would be disadvantageous for all involved. By his reckoning, the capitalist elite would attempt to

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turn oppressed groups against one another in order to foment disunity and maintain their own positions of power. Black Americans could only prevent such an outcome by making common cause with Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, American Indians, and “the developing revolutionary white movement.”

Brown’s determination to overthrow capitalism and usher in a new socialist society only deepened over time as he encountered the full force of local, state, and federal governments’ collective war against political radicals.

Brown often argued that repression bred revolutionaries. “White folks will create more revolutionary blacks than I ever could,” he once told an interviewer. For the SNCC chairman, that repression took two primary forms: a litany of arrests and court appearances on one hand and the more insidious machinations of the FBI COINTELPRO on the other. Such official efforts to decapitate the increasingly radical black liberation movement – rather than address its major political and economic concerns – convinced many young Americans of the inadequacy of reform-based approaches. Hence a revolution that would topple the status quo seemed the only conduit for substantive change.

The Cambridge incident in July 1967 had resulted in Brown’s first arrest since becoming chairman and served as implicit pretext for all subsequent arrests. While an investigation conducted by Robert Shellow, Assistant Deputy Director for Research of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission), would later find little to no connection between Brown’s speech and the disturbance that followed, authorities eager to apprehend a

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87 Brown and Thomas, *SNCC’s Rap*. 
high-profile troublemaker nonetheless leveled charges. The day after the incident, Dorchester County (Maryland) State’s Attorney William B. Yates obtained warrants charging Brown with “inciting to riot” and “counseling to burn” as well as a federal fugitive warrant stemming from the wounded SNCC chairman’s 85-mile trip across Maryland’s state line back to Washington. The FBI intercepted him on his way to the prearranged location at which he was to have surrendered to them. They then delivered him to Alexandria, Virginia, whereupon he was freed and promptly re-arrested by Virginia authorities to be held for extradition back to Maryland.

Days after Brown was freed again on $10,000 bail, Major Grover O’Connor, acting head of detectives in Dayton, Ohio, filed a charge of “advocating criminal syndicalism” in reference to Brown’s June speech in that city.88

Weeks later, agents of the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax Division of the Internal Revenue Service arrested Brown at the West 19th Street apartment of his friend, Allen Bailey. This time the charge involved his violation of US Code Title 15, Chapter 18, Section 902E, which prohibited the interstate transport of firearms while under indictment. A grand jury in Maryland had indicted Brown on August 14, and he had flown from New York to New Orleans and back between August 16 and 18. That he had made no attempt to conceal the red plastic bag containing his M1 carbine, checking it with a stewardess on each leg of the trip, made little difference. SNCC workers were able to raise the $15,000 bond (lowered from $25,000), after which Brown was flown back to New Orleans for arraignment and, subsequently, confined by court order to the counties of the southern district of New York.89


Following the SNCC chairman’s February 1968 trip to California to confer with attorney William Kunstler – and, as it turned out, to attend the “Free Huey” rallies – Judge Lansing Mitchell of the federal district court in New Orleans revoked the $15,000 bond from the previous August and signed a warrant for Brown’s arrest. After days of legal wrangling and a heated confrontation with an FBI agent, Brown began a hunger strike that would last the nearly seven weeks of his captivity in Orleans Parish Prison. The firearm case finally went to trial in mid-May amidst a climate of fearful uncertainty following the King assassination the previous month. Bernardine Dohrn, later known for her involvement with Students for a Democratic Society and the Weather Underground, had been acquainted with Kunstler through work with the National Lawyers Guild and happened to be in New Orleans for the trial. She remembered the inordinately heavy security presence in the city: “Authorities thought New Orleans was going to go up in flames.” The jury found Brown guilty on only one count, as it could not be proven that he had even known of the Maryland indictment upon boarding the plane from New York.

Kunstler promised an immediate appeal.91


91 “Rap Brown Trial On In Louisiana,” New York Times, May 14, 1968. It was during this trial that the Department of Justice revealed that it had “accidently” bugged Brown’s telephone conversations, the transcripts of which were then privately examined by the court. The court denied Brown’s defense access to the transcripts. “Brown Bugged Accidentally, Court Is Told,” Chicago Tribune, May 9, 1968; Bernardine Dohrn, interview by author, March 9, 2016; “Rap Brown Guilty in Armes Case,” New York Times, May 23, 1968. Although Brown was successfully convicted for having violated a section of the Federal Firearms Act (passed in the 1930s to address mob violence), members of Congress felt the need to address black militants more directly. They attached a rider to the Civil Rights Act of 1968...
Meanwhile, a sinister plot to extinguish the entire black liberation movement was afoot. The FBI had been monitoring SNCC since its inception in 1960. By 1964, agents were filing regular field reports on the organization’s activities from offices in Atlanta, Portland (Oregon), and Washington, D.C. In later years, agents as far afield as Los Angeles, Cleveland, San Francisco, Houston, Boston, Chicago, Buffalo, Cincinnati, Detroit, New York, Baltimore, Dallas, Indianapolis, and Seattle filed regular or semi-regular reports on SNCC, as well. With militants’ cries for Black Power came regular briefings from FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to White House Appointments Secretary W. Marvin Watson on the activities of SNCC and then-chairman, Stokely Carmichael. After Brown assumed the chairmanship in May 1967, Hoover began to include his activities in the briefings (which, by then, arrived at the president’s desk via longtime-aide Mildred Stegall).92

The Bureau’s surveillance of Brown intensified in Summer 1967, particularly in light of a now-infamous August 25 memo from Hoover to twenty-three field offices across the country highlighting the basic goals of its COINTELPRO against the black liberation movement. Offices were to designate a special agent willing to “take an enthusiastic and imaginative approach” to the “new counterintelligence endeavor… to expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize” the activities of movement leaders and organizations. Hoover specifically singled out Brown and SNCC, as well as Stokely Carmichael, Elijah Muhammad, Max Stanford of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), CORE, SCLC, and the Deacons for Defense and Justice. All counterintelligence actions initiated by FBI field offices required prior authorization making it a crime to travel across state lines – or use “any facility of interstate or foreign commerce, including but not limited to, the mail, telegraph, telephone, radio, or television” – with intent to incite or in any way seem to condone a riot (broadly defined). Civil Rights Act, 1968, Pub. L. No. 90-284, 90th Cong., 2nd Sess. (April 11, 1968).

92 See FBI File on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Bureau File No. 100-439190, 2 reels; Hoover’s regular intelligence briefings to the White House that explicitly singled out SNCC and its chairman began with FBI Memo, J. Edgar Hoover to Marvin Watson, August 19, 1966. The first briefing to feature Brown was FBI Memo, J. Edgar Hoover to Mildred Stegall, June 19, 1967.
(typically given by Hoover himself), and agents were encouraged to submit any and all ideas for such actions.\textsuperscript{93} A later memo advised offices to strengthen their counterintelligence efforts by focusing on preventing “the coalition of militant black nationalist groups” as well as the “rise of a ‘messiah’ who could unify, and electrify” the movement. Moreover, offices were to create a “Rabble-Rouser Index” with information on leaders they considered particularly dangerous.\textsuperscript{94}

Agents sent Hoover all manner of suggestions. In April 1968, as Brown languished in Orleans Parish Prison, a special agent at the New York FBI office wrote Hoover for permission to draft a letter “designed to plant seeds of distrust between BROWN, CARMICHAEL, and [James] FORMAN.” The letter read as follows:

\begin{verbatim}
Dear Rap:

Dig this man. I got it from inside. STOKELY and FORMAN sent you to the West Coast so that the man would get you. They are a little too cool for you RAP Baby. With you out of the way they can have the whole pie.

SOUL BROTHER
\end{verbatim}

Hoover rejected the idea for reasons that remain classified (perhaps stemming from the agent’s apparent obliviousness to Brown’s New Orleans incarceration), but he recommended that the New York office wait until Brown had been released from jail to send a similar anonymous letter suggesting that Carmichael had been pleased at Brown’s most recent arrest and wanted to “regain control” of SNCC. It is especially significant that the action involved capitalizing on extant intra-organizational, ideologically-based factions, the existence of which SNCC officers themselves openly attested. Given the FBI’s extensive surveillance of the organization and its

\textsuperscript{93} FBI COINTELPRO, Black Extremist, Part 1 of 23, Director, FBI to SAC, Albany, August 25, 1967.

\textsuperscript{94} FBI COINTELPRO, Black Extremist, Part 1 of 23, Director, FBI to SAC, Albany, March 4, 1968.
leaders – not to mention its paid informants – it had little difficulty identifying fault lines and exploiting them to “promote discord between… factions.”

In other cases, the Bureau attempted to use “light and simple ridicule of leaders” in the form of short-run pamphlets meant to discredit and curtail the growth of organizations like SNCC. In publications designed to appeal to younger readers, “cartoons and simple ghetto language” were the rule. Those intended for older, more sophisticated audiences employed “poetry and jingles,” among other tactics. One such proposal outlined plans for an adult coloring book, entitled *Culla Me (H. Rap Brown)*, containing details “that show [Brown] to be other than a sincere black nationalist.” As the New York office emphasized, the ends typically justified whatever means were deemed appropriate: “Factual data is not necessary; the only goal is effect.” When they were together, Brown and his wife, Lynn, snickered at such half-baked attempts to sow disunity even as they sensed the very real threat that the program actually posed. While they could not have known the full scope of COINTELPRO operations, 24-hour surveillance by agents lamely claiming to be a protective detail served as a constant reminder of the gravity of the situation.

The FBI had its informants in place when, in July 1969, an annual staff meeting saw Brown reemerge as chairman of SNCC. While the acronym remained the same, the organization

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95 FBI COINTELPRO, Black Extremist, Part 2 of 23, SAC, New York to Director, FBI, April 1, 1968; FBI COINTELPRO, Black Extremist, Part 2 of 23, Director, FBI to SAC, New York, April 11, 1968; C. Gerald Fraser, “S.N.C.C. in Decline After 8 Years in Lead,” *New York Times*, October 7, 1968; Bob Zellner, interview by author, March 5, 2016. See especially FBI COINTELPRO, Black Extremist, Part 6 of 23, SAC, WFO to Director FBI, October 15, 1968, in which the special agent in Washington, D.C., comments on the closing of the SNCC office in that city: “Much of the dissention between the [redacted] and CARMICHAEL forces was brought about through the constant efforts [redacted] to promote discord between SNCC factions. [Redacted] was instrumental in causing dissent by [redacted] administration of SNCC. *This action by source contributed in large measure in bringing about the dispute that erupted and the subsequent closing of SNCC* [emphasis added].

96 FBI COINTELPRO, Black Extremist, Part 2 of 23, SAC, New York, to Director, FBI, April 4, 1968.

had changed its name to the Student National Coordinating Committee in a move indicative of its complete disavowal of the philosophy of nonviolence. Phil Hutchins, who had taken over as de facto leader in the wake of Brown’s Summer 1968 abdication, replaced James Forman as International Affairs Director, as Forman was busy attempting to extract reparations payments from white churches. Informants advised their handlers that SNCC was also shaking up its leadership structure, replacing the Central Committee with a “Revolutionary Political Council,” adding a “Propaganda Network,” and building an “all-Black Political Party.” At a press conference, Brown announced ambitious plans for a People’s Medical Center and a People’s Sewing Center “to build the concept of black people controlling their own productive forces.” Other initiatives like the H. Rap Brown Education and Recreation Center in Atlanta contributed to the façade of organizational vitality, but SNCC was clearly struggling to remain a vehicle for the sort of revolutionary change its core members hoped to effect.98

The climate of paranoia and repression finally overwhelmed Brown in March 1970. The venue for his trial on charges stemming from the Cambridge incident had been moved to predominantly white Bel Air, Maryland. Ralph Featherstone and William Herman “Che” Payne were driving fellow-SNCC worker Jean Wiley’s 1964 Dodge Dart away from the small town when the car exploded. The blast killed both men, hurling Featherstone fifty feet from the car and ripping Payne’s body to such shreds that police were initially unable to make a positive identification. (Early reports reflected fears that the second body had actually been that of H. Rap Brown.) Despite the fact that the two were headed south along US Route 1, investigators seemed

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certain that Featherstone and Payne had been transporting an explosive device meant for the
Harford County courthouse in Bel Air.99

The apparent rush to judgement unnerved activists of all stripes. Many had known
Featherstone as one of the more peaceful, level-headed veterans of early civil rights campaigns
in the Deep South. While acknowledging the desperation of such conflict-ridden times, John
Lewis remembered that “Featherstone would be the last person to ever consider doing something
like that.” Nor did Cleveland Sellers believe the official explanation, yet he had learned not to be
shocked at such senseless violence: “Friend after friend after friend. Destroyed and obliterated.
For what?” Black leaders including Julian Bond, Charles Evers, and Richard Hatcher issued a
statement demanding a “full-scale, impartial investigation,” adding that almost “before the
wreckage of [the] borrowed automobile was cool, the Maryland authorities were certain that they
had the answer.” Suspecting that the explosive device had been intended for him and unwilling
to wait for the results of such an investigation, Brown abruptly disappeared.100

His whereabouts between March 1970 and October 1971 remain a topic of some
uncertainty. Rumors circulated that he had escaped to Algeria or was hiding in Canada or,
perhaps, the United States. The December 1970 issue of a new SNCC organ, National SNCC
Monthly, featured as its cover story an article claiming that Brown “is alive and carrying on
struggle.” While the article explained with religious fervor the organization’s latest ideological
line – allegedly formulated by Brown and others prior to his disappearance and including,

allegedly found near Featherstone’s body, addressed to “Amerika,” stating that “…when the deal goes down I’m
gon be standing on your chest screaming like Tarzan…” In light of declassified COINTELPRO files documenting
the sorts of letters the FBI was in the practice of fabricating, such evidence now ironically suggests the two men’s
100 John Lewis with Michael D’Orso, Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement (New York: Simon &
Schuster, 1998), 427-28; Sellers with Terrell, River, 263-64; “Seek ‘Full’ Probe Of Bomb Deaths Of Rap’s Friends,”
Jet, April 2, 1970.
finally, an explicit commitment to organizing “Black & Third World Women” and “Welfare mothers” – details regarding his specific location were not forthcoming. Individuals close to Brown have since characterized an interview purportedly conducted in Fall 1971 in Canada by an anonymous reporter for the Toronto-based alternative paper, *Guerilla*, as a complete fabrication. Credible sources have reported that he made his way to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, which, given the remarkably similar case of Kansas City Black Panther leader Pete O’Neal, seems most likely. Authorities finally apprehended Brown on October 16, 1971, in a shootout at the Red Carpet Lounge in New York, thus ending his tenure as the mouthpiece of black radicalism.\(^{101}\)

CONCLUSION

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other).

Quran 49:13

H. Rap Brown left Attica Correctional Facility in 1976 with a new name: Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin. Having converted to Sunni Islam while in prison, the former militant soon became the spiritual leader of a West Atlanta Muslim community. He granted interviews on occasion but spent most of his time running a small grocery store, studying the Quran, and raising a family. Then on March 20, 2000, US Marshalls captured Al-Amin near White Hall (Lowndes County), Alabama, where he had once helped organize local sharecroppers. Al-Amin was accused of having fired at two Fulton County sheriff’s deputies, killing one. He has since been convicted and is making the rounds of the nation’s maximum-security prisons on a life sentence.¹

H. Rap Brown was, for many Americans, a symbol of hatred and violence – the face of the so-called bad sixties. Scholars have more or less preserved this image for half a century. This thesis did not purport to overturn such an interpretation a priori. Rather it represents a humble attempt to engage in genealogical inquiry – a method inherited from Nietzsche and Foucault through C.L.R. James and Cornel West – in order to contextualize and historicize Brown’s politics of revolution.² If, in the process, it cast Brown as less than the sum of America’s collective racial fears, perhaps that is for the best.

² James, Black Power; Cornel West, “Race and Social Theory,” in Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America (New York: Routledge, 1993), 251-70.
As a young activist, Brown cut his teeth on the work of Frederick Douglass, Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, and countless others. In their own ways, such activist-intellectuals addressed the peculiar dialectics of class and race in America – forces with which Brown grappled on a daily basis as he organized college students and “block boys,” whites and people of color. Later, as chairman of SNCC, he exhibited the strong influence of Frantz Fanon, Julius Nyerere, and Malcolm X, each of whom spoke to the problems of exploitation and oppression without succumbing to the seductive appeal of ready-made, doctrinaire Marxism or hyper-nationalistic racial chauvinism. The result was a political vision deeply rooted in the black radical tradition and – in its rejection of rigid formulism – responsive to the ever-changing forces of American racial capitalism. His was a vision that captivated black Americans and other dispossessed people because it placed enormous value on their own experiential knowledge as a key to liberation.

For all of his theoretical acumen, Brown was a doer. And like the Alabama sharecroppers with whom he mobilized against the injustices of Jim Crow-era electoral politics, he approached activism locked and loaded. The impatient enthusiasm born of such an approach contributed to Brown’s political demise in the turbulent early-1970s.

Frantz Fanon concluded his 1952 study, *Black Skin, White Masks*, with a prayer: “O my body, make of me always a man who questions!” In a political climate beset with renewed conflict over issues of class, race, gender, and a host of other axes of identity – and in which police practices in communities of color seem to reveal more continuity than change since the 1960s – scholars must ask difficult questions about the legacies of controversial figures like H.

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Rap Brown. Chief among them: will America be able to realize a truly just society without destroying itself in the process?
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Daily Worker
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<th>Newspaper/Magazine</th>
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<td>Delaware County Daily Times</td>
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

John H. Cable was born and raised in Thomasville, Georgia. He received the Bachelor of Arts degree in History from Georgia College and State University in May, 2013 and the Master of Arts degree in Teaching from the same institution in May, 2014. Having taught public school in various capacities between 2013 and 2015, he entered graduate school at the Florida State University in August, 2015. Cable received the Master of Arts degree in History in December, 2016.