

Beyond ‘White Fragility’

If you want to let freedom ring, hammer on economic injustice.



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Since it emerged [seven years ago](#) in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting of Trayvon Martin, the Black Lives Matter movement has produced a sea change in attitudes, politics and policy.

[In 2016](#), 43 percent of Americans supported Black Lives Matter and its claims about the criminal justice system; [now](#), it's up to 67 percent, with 60 percent support among white Americans, compared with 40 percent four years ago. Whereas Democratic politicians once [stumbled](#) over the issue, now even Republicans are [falling over themselves](#) to say that “black lives matter.” And where the policy conversation was formerly focused on body cameras and chokehold bans, now mainstream outlets are debating and taking seriously calls to demilitarize and [defund](#) police departments or to [abolish](#) them outright.

But the Black Lives Matter platform isn't just about criminal justice. From the start, activists have articulated a [broad, inclusive vision](#) for the entire country. This, in fact, has been true of each of the nation's major movements for racial equality. Among black Americans and their Radical Republican allies, Reconstruction — which was still ongoing as of 150 years ago — was as much a fight to fundamentally reorder Southern economic life as it was a struggle for political inclusion. The struggle against Jim Crow, likewise, was also a struggle for economic equality and the transformation of society.

“The black revolution is much more than a struggle for the rights of Negroes,” the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in “A Testament of Hope”:

It is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws — racism, poverty, militarism and materialism. It is exposing evils that are rooted deeply in the whole structure of our society. It reveals systemic rather than superficial flaws and suggests that radical reconstruction of society itself is the real issue to be faced.

Our society was built on the racial segmentation of personhood. Some people were full humans, guaranteed non-enslavement, secured from expropriation and given the protection of law, and

some people — blacks, Natives and other nonwhites — were not. That unequal distribution of personhood was an economic reality as well. It shaped your access to employment and capital; determined whether you would be doomed to the margins of labor or given access to its elevated ranks; marked who might share in the bounty of capitalist production and who would most likely be cast out as disposable.

In our society, in other words, the fight for equal personhood can't help but also be a struggle for economic justice. And what we see, past and present, is how that fight against the privileges and distinctions of race can also lay the foundations for a broader assault on the privileges and distinctions of class.

As soon as the Civil War came to a close, it was clear there could be no actual freedom for the formerly enslaved without a fundamental transformation of economic relations. "We must see that the freedman are established on the soil, and that they may become proprietors," Charles Sumner, the Radical Republican senator from Massachusetts, [wrote](#) in March 1865. "The great plantations, which have been so many nurseries of the rebellion, must be broken up, and the freedmen must have the pieces." Likewise, [said](#) the Radical Republican congressman Thaddeus Stevens in September 1865, "The whole fabric of Southern society must be changed, and never can it be done if this opportunity is lost." The foundations of their institutions, he continued, "must be broken up and re-laid, or all of our blood and treasure have been spent in vain."

Presidential Reconstruction under Andrew Johnson, a Democrat, would immediately undermine any means to this end, as he restored defeated Confederates to citizenship and gave them free rein to impose laws, like the Black Codes, which sought to reestablish the economic and social conditions of slavery. But Republicans in Congress were eventually able to wrest control of Reconstruction from the administration, and just as importantly, black Americans were actively taking steps to secure their political freedom against white reactionary opposition. Working through the Union Army, postwar Union Leagues and the Republican Party, freed and free blacks worked toward a common goal of political equality. And once they secured something like it, they set out to try as much as possible to affect that economic transformation.

"Public schools, hospitals, penitentiaries, and asylums for orphans and the insane were established for the first time or received increased funding," the historian Eric Foner wrote in "[Reconstruction](#): America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877." "South Carolina funded medical care for poor citizens, and Alabama provided free legal counsel for indigent defendants."

For blacks and Radical Republicans, Reconstruction was an attempt to secure political rights for the sake transforming the entire society. And its end had as much to do with the reaction of property and capital owners as it did with racist violence. "The bargain of 1876," W.E.B. Du Bois [wrote](#) in "Black Reconstruction in America,"

was essentially an understanding by which the Federal Government ceased to sustain the right to vote of half of the laboring population of the South, and left capital as represented by the old planter class, the new Northern capitalist, and the capitalist that began to rise out of the poor whites, with a control of labor greater than in any modern industrial state in civilized lands.

Out of that, he continued, “has arisen in the South an exploitation of labor unparalleled in modern times, with a government in which all pretense at party alignment or regard for universal suffrage is given up.”

Du Bois was writing in the 1930s. A quarter-century later, black Americans in the South would launch a movement to unravel Jim Crow repression and economic exploitation. And as that movement progressed and notched victories against segregation, it became clear that the next step was to build a coalition against the privileges of class, since the two were inextricably tied together. The Memphis sanitation workers who [asked](#) Martin Luther King Jr. to support their strike in 1968 were black, set against a white power structure in the city. Their oppression as black Americans and subjugation as workers were tied together. Unraveling one could not be accomplished without unraveling the other.

All of this relates back to the relationship between race and capitalism. To end segregation — of housing, of schools, of workplaces — is to undo one of the major ways in which labor is exploited, caste established and the ideologies of racial hierarchy sustained. And that, in turn, opens possibilities for new avenues of advancement. The old labor slogan “[Negro and White, Unite and Fight!](#)” contains more than a little truth about the necessary conditions for economic justice. That this unity is fairly rare in American history is a testament to how often these movements have “either advocated, capitulated before, or otherwise failed to oppose racism at one or more critical junctures in their history,” as Robert L. Allen and Pamela P. Allen note in their [1974 study](#) of racism and social reform movements.

Which brings us back to the present. The activists behind the Black Lives Matter movement have always connected its aims to working-class, egalitarian politics. The platform of the Movement for Black Lives, as it is formally known, includes demands for universal health care, affordable housing, living wage employment and access to education and public transportation. Given the extent to which class shapes black exposure to police violence — it is poor and working class black Americans who are most likely to live in neighborhoods marked by constant police surveillance — calls to defund and dismantle existing police departments are a class demand like any other.

But while the movement can’t help but be about practical concerns, the predominating discourse of belief and intention overshadows those stakes: too much concern with “white fragility” and not enough with wealth inequality. The challenge is to bridge the gap; to show new supporters that there’s far more work to do than changing the way we police; to channel their sympathy into a deeper understanding of the problem at hand.

To put a final point of emphasis on the potential of the moment, I’ll leave you with this. In a 1963 pamphlet called “[The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker’s Notebook](#),” the activist and laborer James Boggs argued for the revolutionary potential of the black struggle for civil rights. “The strength of the Negro cause and its power to shake up the social structure of the nation,” Boggs wrote, “comes from the fact that in the Negro struggle all the questions of human rights and human relationships are posed.” That is because it is a struggle for equality “in production, in consumption, in the community, in the courts, in the schools, in the universities, in transportation, in social activity, in government, and indeed in every sphere of American life.”