



A NEW PARADIGM FOR JUSTICE AND DEMOCRACY

Moving beyond the Twin Failures of Neoliberalism and Racial Liberalism

A Roosevelt Institute report by Kyle Strickland and Felicia Wong

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ours is a time of racial reckoning. In 2020, we saw the largest uprisings for racial justice in American history. Building on a decades-long foundation of scholarship and organizing against systemic violence and oppression, the movement today has activated millions in a quest for a more anti-racist politics and has pushed into the mainstream new understandings of our nation—our history, our culture, and our institutions.

To fulfill the promise of a multiracial democracy and economy that work for everyone, we now need a new paradigm for racial justice.

As this report shows, the outlines of a new worldview are emergent, fueled by the collapse of two paradigms that dominated the policymaking and popular imagination of the last generation: neoliberalism and racial liberalism.

Neoliberalism held that markets would bring both economic and political freedom, and that our economy and politics should therefore privilege individual private choice and profit-driven private-sector companies.

Racial liberalism developed within that market-based framework. Our nation's approach to racial justice narrowed from a more expansive set of ambitions in the 1960s to focus, by the late 20th century, on a mainstream consensus that saw achieving racial equality as primarily about disavowing personal bigotry and overt discrimination. But this approach largely denied the role of the racialized and unequal structures that perpetuate domination and injustice.

Both neoliberalism and racial liberalism have failed. They upheld a racial capitalism that subjugated people of color with racist rules, and they ignored and revised history—promoting race-neutrality while exacerbating existing inequalities.

Together, these old paradigms excluded and divided. They limited our politics and institutions. And they hindered the policies and narratives that could advance racial equity and justice.



A new paradigm is emerging in racial liberalism's wake. It is not yet our new common sense, shared widely in our politics. But it is coming into view, driven by activists, scholars, and thinkers who share the goal of dismantling white supremacy and structural racism.

This emergent worldview understands that transformation is necessary—that agency, voice, and prosperity for all will require the shifting and sharing of power. As this report explores, the demands of today's racial justice movement stem from several core values:

- **freedom and liberation:** a vision for individual and collective self-determination, free from systemic oppression;
- **repair and redress:** an honest reckoning of America's legacy of white supremacy and violence, followed by concrete, reparative action to redress those harms; and
- **material equity:** an equitable distribution of resources, decision-making power, and material outcomes.

These demands acknowledge what neoliberalism and racial liberalism never did: Race and the economy are inextricably linked. Racism shapes our economic rules and institutions, and those rules and institutions drive racist outcomes.

Building a more just economy and society is far from inevitable. As is often the case, the public today lags behind the movement on issues of racial justice. This is especially so because weaponizing racial backlash has become central to the Republican Party agenda, and our mainstream institutions and political leaders continue to underestimate the very real threats to our democracy. But we know from history that movements can drive new paradigms and shift public opinion. A new normal for what racial justice is and requires could provide a path for the broad American public who desire more equity but do not have a clear sense of how or where to begin.

We will not see transformative policy change, structural reform, or a stable and lasting multiracial democracy without a new paradigm. And at the same time, that paradigm must be rooted in movement values. This will not be easy. It will take political courage.

But the promise of multiracial democracy is worth fighting for, and must be at the heart of the new American story. Building a society that ensures economic and political power for all people is critical to democracy's very survival.



This report is divided into three parts.

- The first traces the twin failures of neoliberalism and racial liberalism, outlining how the flawed worldviews of the late 20th century helped lead us to this moment.
- The second examines three major themes driving today's racial justice movement: freedom and liberation, repair and redress, and material equity.
- The third envisions a new worldview that builds on these themes to shift narratives, policymaking, and power—an endeavor that faces many obstacles but offers hope for a path forward.

METHODOLOGY

To better understand the emergent worldview on racial justice, and how a new paradigm shift may occur, a team at the Roosevelt Institute investigated the latest research, policy ideas, and political movement building on race, economics, and politics. We examined the ideas of more than 200 different thinkers and schools of thought, from scholars and politicians to activists and organizers. We explored the most recent findings of scholars and movement actors, with a focus on some of the newest ideas that are animating this moment of racial reckoning. We then identified three themes that serve as a through line, tying together racial and economic justice movement demands and pointing toward a new vision of what racial justice requires, centered on a race-forward, transformative approach to change.

This landscape analysis builds on Roosevelt's "post-neoliberalism" economic work (Wong 2020) and seeks to center the role of race in our economic policy debates. Since late 2017, the Roosevelt Institute, in partnership with the Hewlett Foundation and Omidyar Network, has led a major effort to map and analyze existing critiques of neoliberalism, and begin to develop a coherent alternative worldview. We have brought together leading organizations in the policy, advocacy, and philanthropy spaces to align around a shared understanding of neoliberalism, why and how to disrupt it, and the urgency of doing so.

Throughout this report, we use the term "race-neutral" to refer to ideologies and policies that do not explicitly account for or mention race. "Race-neutral" approaches thereby ignore historic and present-day realities of racial discrimination.¹

¹ Notably, critical race theorists have argued that race neutrality in the law and elsewhere supports the existing racial hierarchy, that law itself can therefore be a tool of subordination, and that racism is a permanent and systemic feature of American politics and culture. See Derrick Bell (1973), Kimberlé Crenshaw et al. (1996), Mari Matsuda (1996), and Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2001).



SECTION I

THE TWIN FAILURES OF NEOLIBERALISM AND RACIAL LIBERALISM

AN INFLECTION POINT FOR AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

American democracy today is in crisis. The reasons for this fragility are manifold: weaponized partisanship, weak institutions dominated by special interests, and an economy that has not produced shared equality for decades. This report centers the role of racism in democracy's decline. We argue that for more than 50 years, the fight for racial justice has been weakened by an individualistic, "race-neutral" conception of access and opportunity within a society dominated by neoliberal economics.

The "racial liberalism" that emerged as late 20th century common sense in our politics saw market success as a primary goal of racial justice. As such, the kinds of policies it prioritized—building skills and educational attainment for people of color, without any change to the larger economic or democratic system—were ultimately too thin and too brittle to produce equity or agency for people of color.

And so, we are at a crossroads. A key question facing the United States today is how we can build a truly inclusive, multiracial 21st century democracy that reflects a deeper, more real justice for all. We argue that a more equitable democracy will require a new paradigm that moves beyond racial liberalism.

Black liberation must be the backbone of this fight. The reasons for this are clear: The horrific and tragic legacy of the enslavement of Black people endures. Deeply entrenched discrimination remains central to American life. Across almost every indicator—income, wealth, education, health, criminal justice—the material effects of structural inequities are often worse for Black people than for others in the United States. The anti-Black carceral state is rooted in racist structures and beliefs about labor and the economy. Repeated police violence, militarization, and murder perpetrated against Black people have brought a racial justice focused on Black lives to the center of American politics.



Black liberation is also part of a larger, multiracial, multi-identity drive for equity and freedom.² The reality and the promise of today's multiracial America means that our democracy must give voice to Americans of every background.³

STRATIFICATION: ECONOMIC, RELIGIOUS, CULTURAL

The racial justice movement is not monolithic, because people of color are not monolithic. Different rules and immigration laws, from the Chinese Exclusion Act to the Bracero Program, have historically structured the experiences of people of color in the United States, as have different norms and prejudices. But at the same time, those different rules have a common, often economic, root. The economic reality for most people of color in the US has been stark. Labor markets have long excluded people of color, and especially women of color. Opportunities to accumulate wealth have overwhelmingly been afforded to white men—for years, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant men—only.

The Latinx experience in the US has been shaped by a history of geographic colonialism. The proximity of Central and South American countries to what became the territorial United States, especially in the Southwest, has led to drawn-out political fights, often based on skin color or country of origin, over which kinds of immigrants and migrants have legal and economic standing. Asian people in the United States have been subject to exclusion laws, prohibitions on property ownership, the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II, and a history of anti-

Asian violence born of the idea that Asian people are foreign.

Economic stratification is not the only driver of racism. Cultural fear, draped in the language of national interests and national security, is another. Muslim people in America have always been subject to deep religious bias and xenophobia. This has been supercharged over the last 20 years, since 9/11, when mainstream “national security” politics has driven widespread fear of Muslim people, and, more broadly, fear of people of Southwest Asian or North African descent. This fear has been used to justify anti-Muslim exclusion and violence (Ackerman 2021).

The Indigenous experience shares much in common with other identity groups but is also distinct in important ways. Indigenous people have been the victims of genocide and government-sponsored theft. Central to Indigenous calls for land rights and reclamation after hundreds of years of violence, exclusion, and broken government promises is an argument for sovereignty, self-governance, and self-determination. Other movements also have strong self-determination strands, but the Indigenous movement is based on governance and tribal authority that predates the US federal structure.

² The various identities one holds are deeply interwoven, influencing one another. This is the concept of intersectionality. As originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality is “a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other.” Crenshaw explains that, “We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality or immigrant status. What’s often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum of its parts” (Steinmetz 2020).

³ The majority of the US population is likely to consist of people of color by the middle of this century (Frey 2018). In five states—Hawaii, California, Arizona, Nevada, and Texas—and the District of Columbia, that reality is already here (US Census Bureau n.d.).



The world has never known a true multiracial democracy based on principles of equity, freedom, and a reckoning with past injustices. But the promise of multiracial democracy must be at the heart of the new American story. Building a society that ensures economic and political power for all people is critical to democracy's very survival.

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Otherwise, America will succumb to a racism, xenophobia, and nationalism that have become even more weaponized and politically mainstreamed. Trump-era white nationalism has made anti-Black, anti-immigrant, anti-Latinx, anti-Asian, anti-Muslim, and anti-Semitic backlash, violence, and a complete denial of basic facts an even more frequent and frightening part of American reality.⁴ The violent insurrection of January 6, 2021; attempts to discredit the 2020 election results and to install right-wing, partisan election oversight; the raft of voter suppression laws that limit ballot access; and the well-funded efforts by state legislatures and school districts nationwide to prevent teaching anything about systemic racism in schools: These are all rooted in a strong-man politics that promises a return to whiteness.

Americans can and must push against violent and systemic racism, and toward a truly inclusive democracy. In fact, the only kind of democracy that we can have going forward is multiracial. Anything less is white ethnic minority rule.

HOW WE GOT HERE: NEOLIBERALISM AND RACIAL LIBERALISM DOMINATED, AND FAILED

We are living through the 21st century collapse of the 20th century's two liberalisms: neoliberalism and racial liberalism.

Considerations and critiques of neoliberalism have become familiar on the left, almost an intellectual cottage industry.⁵ Market fundamentalism was supposed

⁴ Research shows that Trump's election was correlated with an increase in hate crimes across the nation, even after controlling for alternate causes for increases in such crimes (Edwards and Rushin 2018).

⁵ See Angus Burgin (2012), David Harvey (2005), Nancy MacLean (2017), Quinn Slobodian (2018), Democracy Journal's "Beyond Neoliberalism" Symposium (2019), and Dissent Magazine's "Debating Neoliberalism" Forum (2018).



to bring prosperity and growth, but instead it brought radical inequality by any measure.⁶

Racial liberalism is less discussed, and less clearly defined.⁷ But racial liberalism is central to the story. We define it as a way of recognizing and disavowing overt personal bigotry while largely ignoring the racialized structures that perpetuate domination and injustice.

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Racial liberalism has complicated roots in the American liberal tradition of individualism and universal human rights, and even a century ago many racial liberals fought for racial justice.⁸ But at the core of racial liberalism in the 20th century was always an ahistorical understanding of American economic and political institutions—a downplaying or denying of a competing set of arguments about the history of stratification, colonialism, and racial capitalism.⁹ American racial liberalism vigorously denied the idea at the core of racial capitalism—that the modern economic system evolved to be, in Robin D.G. Kelley's words, “dependent on slavery, violence, imperialism, and genocide” (Kelley 2017).

Both racial liberalism and neoliberalism failed by their own empirical economic markers. Left to their own devices, private corporations did not bring growth and shared prosperity, nor did they reduce segregation and racism in labor markets

⁶ Whether one takes at face value those who argued that a system dominated by private markets and private decision-making would have salubrious, anti-discriminatory effects is a topic of considerable debate. But the history of white supremacy's role in neoliberalism's actual rise to power is clear; part of what fueled neoliberalism politically was its appeal as white backlash to the power of the civil rights, labor, and women's rights movements in the 1960s. By that political measure, neoliberalism was not a failure, but a success.

⁷ Scholar Charles W. Mills views “racial liberalism” as parallel to class and gender conceptions of liberalism, both of which are well-established in the political theory literature. Class-based critiques of liberalism—“bourgeois liberalism”—focus on the shaping of liberalism by capitalist power. Feminist critiques of liberalism—“patriarchal liberalism”—view liberalism as shaped by male power. These two critiques aim “to develop an emancipatory liberalism sensitized to, and restructured to overcome, the exclusions of these dominant forms of liberalism.” Mills argues that a focus on “racial liberalism”—liberalism shaped by white power—is lacking in the literature (Mills 2020).

⁸ In the 1920s and 30s, racial liberals—mostly northern white Americans and Black Americans—supported anti-lynching laws, military integration, and employment nondiscrimination (Schickler 2013).

⁹ While various definitions of racial capitalism exist, this report draws on political theorist Cedric Robinson's understanding of the term. Robinson defines racial capitalism as the understanding that economic division between haves and have-nots, between laborers and those who hold wealth, has been racialized since Western feudalism (Kelley 2017). We use Robinson's definition of racial capitalism to highlight the deeply intertwined nature of racism and capitalism, and its close relation to racial liberalism and neoliberalism. See also Charles W. Mills' critiques of racial liberalism and his argument for deracialized liberalism (Mills 2008).



and in American life (Konczal, Milani, and Evans 2020). Racial liberalism's focus on antidiscrimination and access to existing systems has been insufficient to overcome centuries of racial oppression.

Racial liberalism and neoliberalism are twin failures, but the stories are too often told separately. Here, we tell them together, making connections that show how these once-hegemonic belief systems worked in tandem to erode the possibilities of greater equality in our economy and our democracy.

THE LEGACY OF THE 19TH CENTURY

Both 20th century liberalisms developed out of an earlier era of significant racial and economic change. This was a shift in the middle of the 19th century from an agricultural and mercantile economy into an industrial one. But despite this massive transformation, the US failed to build a more just and lasting racial order in the years after 1865. Reconstruction-era politics that took seriously the legal rights and enfranchisement of newly freed formerly enslaved people and the promise of economic redistribution were fleeting. In 1877, federal troops left the Southern states and Black Republicans lost power. A white terror regime was established in the region as the Ku Klux Klan recruited millions of members and Black voters were denied the ability to vote by state legislatures across the South (McAndrew 2017).

This was also the period of “westward expansion.” White Americans were drawn by the promise of the Homestead Act and the expansion of the frontier—

but they also developed, in Greg Grandin's words, a “Caucasian democracy” built on the removal, subjugation, and slaughter of Indigenous people. “Jacksonian settlers,” Grandin writes, “moved across the frontier, continuing to win a greater liberty by putting down people of color, and then continuing to define their liberty in opposition to the people of color they put down” (Grandin 2019). By the late 19th century, the rise of industrialism and the need to tame robber baron capitalism became central political fights. But the fight against capital did not translate into a more racially equitable liberalism. As the 20th century industrial economy developed, the liberalism that emerged both encouraged and benefitted from the suppression of Black laborers—through sharecropping and “convict leasing” in the South—and Latinx and Asian laborers, who were subject to exclusion laws and “contract labor” throughout the west.



THE INTERTWINING OF NEOLIBERALISM AND RACIAL LIBERALISM

This section examines the intertwining of neoliberalism and racial liberalism—how they came to define and constrain race politics, and how they failed—across two distinct eras.

The first is the era from 1954 to 1980, from *Brown v. Board of Education* to the election of Ronald Reagan: a period in which market-based, free-enterprise economic arguments gained ground even in a New Deal—shaped world of wage growth for many American workers. Many racial justice groups, dissuaded from more radical strategies by this more individualist liberal belief system and by mainstream powerbrokers, focused on access to this system for Black Americans. Their primary tool was the active dismantling of de jure segregation.

The second era is 1980 to 2016, from Reagan’s election to the end of Barack Obama’s second term. In this later period, neoliberalism—a thin, brittle form of markets-only thinking—became politically hegemonic. In this context, racial liberalism focused on a weaker form of access for people of color, based on nondiscrimination within an economy dominated by the private sector and ultimately limited to race neutrality by neoliberal politics and jurisprudence.

1954-1980: EARLY LIBERALISM, ECONOMIC INDIVIDUALISM, AND MARKET ACCESS FOR PEOPLE OF COLOR

Beginning in the late 1940s, neoliberalism and racial liberalism sought to graft their views of a good society onto the American-centered liberalism that emerged in the aftermath of World War II.

In this era, neoliberal economists believed they were fighting for market freedom that would counter Soviet-style socialism. Notably, though it often goes unremarked on in the literature, the neoliberals built their thinking out of a classical liberalism that naturalized and rendered invisible racial stratification in both the economy and society. The neoliberals were primarily American, British, and European men whose thinking was dominated by a fear of World War II’s totalitarianisms. Their enemy was the state.

Their answer was a free enterprise system. They imagined and then built that system through intellectual networks like the Mont Pelerin Society; academic



centers, including most prominently the economics departments at the University of Chicago and the University of Virginia; and political strategies perhaps best exemplified by the Powell Memo, written by then-soon-to-be Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell in 1971, and which opened with the line, “No thoughtful person can deny that the American economic system is under broad attack” (Powell 1971). The free enterprise system required an amassing of political power, which the neoliberals achieved through a fusion of libertarian economics, socially conservative evangelical Christian politics, a network of dark money funders, and Republican Party leadership (MacLean 2017).

Neoliberalism’s anti-government focus had several strands of thinking about race. The first was more subtle with respect to white racial dominance. Neoliberal arguments from the 1950s and 60s, primarily those associated with the Chicago School of economics, emphasized that only unregulated private corporations could create economic growth. They held, in Milton Friedman’s famous turn of phrase, that the “social responsibility of business is profit” (Friedman 1970). Students of “human capital,” like Gary Becker, argued that market freedom could best “compete away” racial segregation in the labor market (Becker 1957, 1971). These arguments gained real audiences and adherents. Friedman’s assertion, in *New York Times Magazine*, was a “free market manifesto that changed the world” (New York Times 2020). Becker’s was a “discipline-changing insight” (Murphy 2015). These were the expert intellectual justifications for a pro-business, anti-labor policy and jurisprudence. Racial inequality would, in this view, sort itself out. The real evil was the threat the state posed to economic freedom.¹⁰

The second strand of neoliberalism’s thinking about race was more frontal. By the 1960s and 70s, other branches of neoliberalism, especially the Virginia school of political economy most closely associated with James Buchanan, developed their anti-government theories of public bureaucratic rent-seeking and pro-privatization at exactly the time when school systems in Virginia closed for five years, handing out private school vouchers rather than integrating Black and white children (MacLean 2017; Steinbaum 2017; Moreton 2017). The scourge of “big government” was ostensibly about operational efficiency, but was in reality about massive resistance to integration.

This was the mainstream economic context within which the mid-century civil rights movement operated as it pursued racial justice for Black Americans and other people of color.

¹⁰ For an excellent narrative of Friedman’s views here, see Zachary Carter’s “The End of Friedmanomics” (2021).



***Brown v. Board* and Racial Liberalism**

American racial justice leaders in the 1940s had come of age during a horrific era of terror lynchings and de jure segregation, two white American levers for maintaining racial dominance (Equal Justice Initiative 2017). After World War II, there was a debate within the movement, and particularly within the NAACP, over whether to continue focusing on a legislative advocacy strategy to outlaw lynching or to prioritize a litigation strategy focused on ending de jure segregation. Ultimately, this debate culminated in a mainstream agreement to pursue educational desegregation and access to a growing American capitalism.

THE FIGHT FOR FULL EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC RIGHTS

The fight for full employment also became a civil rights issue, especially in the postwar era. Black-led organizations and labor unions, most prominently the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), were part of the coalition that pushed for the passage of the 1946 Full Employment Act, which led to the establishment of the White House Council of Economic Advisors and Congress's Joint Economic Committee (Baker, Rawlins, and Stein 2017).¹¹ In the South

and Southwest, Mexican American rights groups, including League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and other more overtly economic or electoral organizations, including the Japanese Mexican Labor Association (JMLA) and El Congreso de Pueblos de Habla Española (the Congress of Spanish-Speaking Peoples), fought against segregation and exclusion, and for greater political rights, for immigrant and migrant workers (Garcia Bedolla 2014).

In part because of the legal success of the educational desegregation approach and in part because of the massive pushback against desegregation, the dominant civil rights strategy of the 20th century focused on access to K–12 schooling, and by extension on attacking the entire system of racial segregation.¹²

The centerpiece of this approach became the NAACP's enormous victory in the unanimous ruling of the landmark 1954 Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of*

¹¹ Importantly, demands from Black-led and union organizers for more specific planning mechanisms were cut from the final bill, in large part due to Southern white Democrats. Carter Manasco, Chair of the House Expenditures Committee (AL-7), objected on the grounds that full employment might lead to a shortage of farm workers.

¹² Whether the choice to focus on education was the result of movement capture by white funders, as Megan Ming Francis argues, is a profoundly important question about how to build cross-racial alliances, and where power in those relationships resides. See Megan Ming Francis and John Fabian Witt's "Movement Strategy or Movement Capture" (Francis and Witt 2021) and Megan Ming Francis's *Civil Rights and the Making of the Modern State* (Francis 2014).



Education. Brown shifted American thinking about justice and changed America itself, striking down *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) with “the doctrine of ‘separate but equal shall not stand.’”

However, because the Court led not with a systemic or economic critique, but instead focused on the psychological harm to Black children who lacked access to the schools and other educational opportunities that white children enjoyed, some critics have lamented *Brown's* hegemony. As law professor and civil rights theorist Lani Guinier argues, the focus on the individual and psychological harms downplayed both the role of economic redistribution and the role of systemic reproduction of white supremacy (Guinier 2004).¹³ This is in line with the more radical arguments about systems change that emerged as part of the civil rights movement throughout the 1960s and 70s. Dismantling de jure segregation was certainly part of a larger set of arguments rooted in a theory that shifting resources to Black people and other people of color would create more economic opportunity, and especially more job opportunity. But for mainstream politics those arguments became less prominent than the school integration fights.

This was in large part because the *Brown* decision became its own center of gravity, setting off tectonic changes in American politics. Southern Democrats pledged Massive Resistance to integration and signed a manifesto pledging to defy the Court by “all lawful means” (Day 2014). The legal and political opposition to desegregation in schools and in housing became central to politics across America. With the 1955 *Brown II* Supreme Court decision that declined to put a federal timetable on school desegregation, school integration became a matter of local politics, igniting a fight that consumed the country for the next 20 years.

The Breadth of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Power, New Immigrants, and a Changing America

At its height, the civil rights movement won lasting victories, pushing *Brown* beyond its legal tactics and its psychological, individualized emphasis. The movement utilized organizing at scale to build real power and ultimately win landmark legislation: the Civil Rights Act of 1964, outlawing discrimination and requiring desegregation of public facilities; the Voting Rights Act of 1965,

¹³ Guinier (2004) argues: “*Brown's* legacy is clouded at least in part because post-World War II racial liberalism influenced the legal engineers to treat the symptoms of racism, not the disease. Their strategy was to eliminate desegregation, which they assumed would strike a fatal blow to racialized hierarchies. The lawyers’ assumption and its corollary remedial emphasis were limited by the nature of their allies, who wanted to do good without sacrificing any of their own privileges, believing integration was possible without significant resource redistribution.” This reflects well the larger critique of 20th century racial capitalism.



mandating federal oversight of elections in districts with histories of racial discrimination; and the Fair Housing Act of 1968, outlawing discrimination in housing.

This was the age of the Great Society. Decades of activism led to the expansion and creation of major social programs—Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, and food stamps—that benefited poor Americans and especially people of color. The Johnson administration saw the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) and the Head Start pre-school program (1965) as ways to use the power of the federal government to improve schooling for children in poverty. Though progress on racial desegregation was limited even with the lever of increased federal funding of schools (Frankenberg and Taylor 2015), expanding educational and economic access was a key movement goal in the 1960s that led to real victories.

Transformation and power-shifting were part of the mainstream fight for civil rights and were far more central to the Black Power movement. By the late 1960s, mainstream civil rights leaders were embracing deeper critiques of capitalism. Redistributive arguments animated the March for Jobs and Freedom in 1963 and later the Poor People’s March on Washington in 1968, both led by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As King said in February 1968, “It didn’t cost the nation one penny to integrate lunch counters . . . but now we are dealing with issues that cannot be solved without the nation spending billions of dollars and undergoing a radical redistribution of economic power” (Engler 2010). The Black Panther Party was another leading voice in the struggle for economic redistribution, providing children with free meals in its Free Breakfast for School Children Program, distributing groceries to families in need with its Free Food Program, and opening free health clinics in dozens of cities throughout the country (National Museum of African American History & Culture n.d.).

Immigration Shifts: From National Origins to Family Reunification—the Rise of Latinx and Asian America

Black activism inspired and catalyzed other civil rights victories. One of the most significant changes of this era was the move away from a patently racist immigration system that prioritized European immigration and dissuaded or forbid immigrants from other parts of the world, and toward accepting many more immigrants from Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Immigration through most of the 20th century was governed by the Immigration Act of 1924, an explicitly racialized law designed to preserve US racial hegemony



by imposing quotas based on country of origin (Office of the Historian n.d.). The 1920s were a period of rampant, explicit xenophobia and nativism, and Jim Crow. The Immigration Act of 1924 kept out Asian immigrants—Chinese, Japanese, and South Asian Indians. Non-European immigrants in particular were subjected to laws that reflected their status as colonial subjects, such as for Filipino contract laborers, or as “guest workers,” as in the Mexican Bracero program. Official US policy during this period of xenophobia made immigrants from Asia, Central America, and Latin America, in Mae Ngai’s phrasing, “impossible subjects,” physically and socially present but legally without standing, without rights, and excluded from citizenship (Ngai 2004).

But by 1965, a new Immigration and Nationality Act, better known as the Hart-Celler Act, “ripped out the National Origins Quota System by its roots” (Chin and Villazor 2015). Hart-Celler is rarely cited in popular history as one of the landmarks of the civil rights era, but, as legal scholars Gabriel Chin and Rose Cuison Villazor argue, Hart-Celler “should be understood as a sibling of the other great civil rights laws of those years” (Chin and Villazor 2015).

Hart-Celler was complicated. It showed both the power and the limits of racial liberalism. It certainly did not end racially driven immigration fights in the United States. The new law emphasized reuniting family members of US citizens and legal permanent residents. It also rewarded professional skills or other categories in which there was a “labor shortage.” It effectively eliminated bans for most Asian immigrants. But although the law no longer privileged Western European immigrants, it did impose quotas on all nations. By subjecting people from Central and Latin America to numerical limits that were far lower than the number of people from those regions who had long lived in the US given the territorial fluidity of the American southwest, Hart-Celler created an entire category of people who were suddenly “illegal” or undocumented (Hong 2015).

The law had major, if unintended, consequences. At the bill’s signing ceremony, President Johnson proclaimed the new immigration system “not revolutionary,” and said that it would “not affect the lives of millions” (Johnson 1965). That turned out to be wrong. Hart-Celler led to significantly more immigration from Asia, Africa, and Central and Latin America—the “browning of America” that is now central to our national politics. The political mainstream’s new awareness of race, discrimination, and civil rights, and the Hart-Celler rules that resulted, meaningfully changed both the policy terrain and America’s sense of its own racial and national identity.



THE MULTIRACIAL POLITICS OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

As the dynamics of America's racial landscape shifted over time, the racial justice movement itself also grew and became even more explicitly multiracial. The civil rights and Black Power movements both inspired and were deeply connected to other important movements led by people of color. Many of these were anchored in the American West and Southwest: The Chicano movement and Cesar Chavez's organizing for farmworkers' rights through the United Farm Workers (UFW) grew out of labor and other civil rights fights in early 20th century California. The 1969–1971 Indians Of All Tribes (IOAT) takeover of Alcatraz saw the rise of "Red Power" as a political force. The IOAT movement was rooted in longstanding Indigenous struggles for

greater sovereignty and against federal "relocation" of Indigenous people—and catalyzed more of those fights throughout the 1970s (Blansett 2018). The Asian American "Yellow Power" movement of the 1970s created an Asian American identity and attempted to forge ties across Chinese and Japanese people who had been in the United States for generations, and Asian people who immigrated in the 1970s, whether as war refugees or students in search of higher education. For many people in these movements, and for white allies in the labor, student, and women's rights movements, the hope for a race-forward, multiracial politics in the late 1960s and early 1970s was real.

Racial Backlash and the Limitations of a Rising Neoliberalism

The full force and power of the civil rights movement transformed American society. But the racial justice movement existed within the larger context of white-dominated politics and an increasingly narrow liberalism.

The passage of the great civil rights laws of the 1960s led to a partisan transformation. Democrats became the party of civil rights, and southern white segregationist "Dixiecrats" became Republicans—transforming the American political landscape to this day. The Republican Party became increasingly white. The Democratic party was a larger, more multiracial tent, with strongholds in major northern cities. But even at the movement's height, leading racial liberals—mostly white northern Democrats—stopped short of supporting the movement's deepest economic and social demands, especially around integrating schools, dismantling residential segregation, economic redistribution, and political power-sharing at the uppermost levels of government.¹⁴

By the late 1960s, the racially stratified status quo was the norm. Movement fights continued, from Black Power and full employment to affirmative action and desegregation. But neoliberals, by vilifying both Soviet-style socialism and racial uprisings as threats to American society, rendered any more state-focused policies

¹⁴ Black politicians did win significantly more municipal governmental power in the 1960s. In 1967, Carl Stokes became mayor of Cleveland, Ohio and Richard Hatcher became mayor of Gary, Indiana. But this power coincided with huge losses of municipal revenue in these cities in ensuing years, largely due to the flight of white businesses and residents. As a result, Black mayors often governed under conditions of severe fiscal crisis.



politically and emotionally “radical” and therefore out of bounds for mainstream policymakers. The scientific appeal of supply-and-demand-driven choice-making, combined with a weaponized political racism, fused big business opposition to the New Deal order with movement and social conservatism’s opposition to government intrusion into private (white nuclear) family norms.

This was the era of Richard Nixon’s law-and-order, Southern Strategy 1968 campaign. Nixon’s Republicanism still played out within the New Deal framework, but as a politician, Nixon weaponized white racial fear, winning the White House in part by demonizing Black-led uprisings—from Watts to Detroit—against joblessness and police brutality.

All of this, combined with a lack of will from white moderates, meant that the strongest, most race-forward elements of the civil rights agenda—especially those focused on economic redistribution and community empowerment—lost the political battle. Conservative politicians deliberately stigmatized many of the social welfare aspects of the Great Society agenda by race, from Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) to Medicaid. In 1976, Ronald Reagan weaponized the welfare system with his racialized and gendered “welfare queen” story, which garnered headlines and took on a long life of its own despite its falsehoods (Schnurer 2013). Meanwhile, Jimmy Carter’s 1976 election began the Democratic Party’s turn toward a post—civil rights, Southern Democrat, race-neutral technocratic approach.

INDIGENOUS MOVEMENT VICTORIES IN THE 1970s

Much of the story of the 1970s is one of gathering neoliberal storm clouds, with devastating effects on communities of color. But importantly and perhaps surprisingly, the Indigenous movement made real progress on a number of movement demands during this era. This was in part because Indigenous leaders were able to take advantage of rising anti-government sentiment in the 1970s, linking it to their own demands for self-determination. While other groups also found ways to utilize neoliberalism to advance specific goals, the Indigenous movement’s advances in the 1970s were notable and in some ways distinct, as they were rooted in an important recognition of Indigenous sovereignty.

The Indians of All Tribes movement—which occupied Alcatraz in the early 1970s, marched on Washington in 1972, and occupied Wounded Knee in 1973—catalyzed a long-term vision for “Red Power”—

creating legal and political pressure, and ultimately material victories. These wins included the retaking of 1.3 million acres of Indigenous land that had been stolen in the 1950s and early 1960s through the 1953 Termination Act, the renewal of Indian fishing rights throughout the Pacific Northwest, and greater self-determination and autonomy over programs and services within Indian Country as part of the Indian Self-Determination Act of 1975. These victories were largely the result of movement organizing.

However, many of the economic, educational, and health equity outcomes for Indigenous people still remained poor throughout this period—a result of land theft and relocation, which intensified in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s as the Bureau of Indian Affairs pushed Indigenous people to relocate from rural reservations to cities (Nesterak 2019).

Race-Neutral Jurisprudence and “Morning Again in America”

By the late 1970s, the pushback against civil rights policies as pursued in the courts and in local jurisdictions—against desegregation and affirmative action—led to an assiduous race neutrality embraced by both Democrats and Republicans. With the 1974 *Milliken v. Bradley* decision, which held that school districts were not obligated to desegregate without proof that district boundaries were drawn with racist intent, the US Supreme Court essentially committed to the resegregation of public schools (Nadworny and Turner 2019). The court’s 1978 *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* decision, which outlawed the use of numerical targets in affirmative action, nominally upheld affirmative action for the sake of diversity. But it also privileged the rights of individual white applicants against the long-standing race-based exclusions claimed by Black, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous applicants (Harris 2018).¹⁵ Affirmative action could no longer be justified because of historical systemic discrimination against people of color. The majority opinion, written by Justice Lewis Powell—of the Powell Memo (1971)—was a major setback to the civil rights cause, and further advanced what we would now call a neoliberal view of market-based opportunity.

Ronald Reagan capitalized on this confusion and chaos. He took the same ingredients of Nixon’s fear-based racial politics and packaged them into a sunnier and simpler view that, for all its empirical and moral shortcomings, was politically successful. Tax cuts, deregulation, and the refusal to recognize or enforce the provisions of civil rights laws, would lead to “morning again in America” (Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute 2019).

¹⁵ In his dissenting opinion, Justice Harry Blackmun wrote: “I suspect that it would be impossible to arrange an affirmative action program in a racially neutral way and have it successful . . . To ask that this be so is to demand the impossible. In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race. There is no other way. And in order to treat some persons equally, we must treat them differently. We cannot—we dare not—let the Equal Protection Clause perpetuate racial supremacy” (Harris 2018).



BROKEN ECONOMIC PROMISES

The economic context of the 1960s and 70s was both a backdrop to and driver of the failure of more—and more structural—racial justice reforms. By the mid-1960s, the postwar economy began to contract. Wages stagnated, and the “Great Compression” of incomes at the top and bottom faded. For many families, only two incomes could provide a decent living, but the system was not built to support working parents, particularly working mothers. In the 1970s, companies that had provided jobs (mostly to white men) moved south, where labor laws were looser, and

then ultimately moved offshore in search of even cheaper labor. More economic globalization without real international labor protections meant less labor power for Americans, both white and people of color.¹⁶ Nonunionized, low-paying, insecure service jobs became the norm in the American economy (Rosenfeld, Denice, and Laird 2016). Throughout this period, despite the promises of both desegregation and market-based antidiscrimination, the Black unemployment rate consistently remained twice as high as the rate for white workers (DeSilver 2013).

1980-2016: THE RISE AND FALL OF TWO LIBERALISMS, AND THE FAILURE OF RACE-NEUTRAL POLITICS

The post—civil rights era of racial liberalism and neoliberalism, which we define roughly as 1980 to 2016, was about the broad acceptance of “colorblind individualism” and an “opportunity” focus on both sides of the American political aisle.¹⁷ This was a consensus that, as Nils Gilman and others have pointed out, addressed “white people’s definition of racism”—which largely focused on eliminating overt bigotry and discrimination while ignoring the impact of unequal structures and systems (Gilman 2018). Racism in these decades didn’t disappear, of course, but largely went underground in our political mainstream, and “dog whistle racism” became the norm (López 2014).¹⁸

¹⁶ This was the beginning of a pro-corporate, anti-regulatory era, during which Democrats embraced pro-corporate policies—for example trade liberalization, which by the 1980s became the “Washington Consensus”—that hurt the party’s Black and brown constituents as well as white voters.

¹⁷ The term “colorblind” is still commonly used, but for many is a manifestation of contemporary racism. It implies a kind of erasure. Additionally, and according to Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, colorblind racism “explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics. Whereas Jim Crow racism explained blacks’ social standing as the result of their biological and moral inferiority, color-blind racism avoids such facile arguments. Instead, whites rationalize minorities’ contemporary status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and blacks’ imputed cultural limitations” (Bonilla-Silva 2018).

¹⁸ Scholar Ian Haney López refers to “dog whistle racism” as a strategic, divide-and-conquer tool used by politicians to invoke racial fear in white people without ever explicitly mentioning race. Dog whistling consists of three steps: “(1) punch racism into the conversation through references to culture, behavior, and class; (2) parry claims of race-baiting by insisting that absent a direct reference to biology or the use of racial epithet, there can be no racism; (3) kick up the racial attack by calling any critics the real racists for mentioning race and thereby ‘playing the race card’” (López 2014). By following these three steps, politicians are able to persuade some people that “undeserving” people of color—and the liberal government that coddles them—both waste the hard-earned tax dollars of white Americans and pose a threat to white America.



The 1980s and 1990s: Reagan’s Neoliberalism, the Anti-Immigrant Movement, and the Rise of the Carceral State

By the 1980s, the victories and the spirit of the civil rights era were weakened by neoliberalism and racism. This period demonstrated the limits of racial liberalism when faced with Ronald Reagan’s economics and racialized dog whistle politics. The neoliberalism of the 1980s came to power as an individualized, marketized, and ahistorical worldview, both political and economic. It directly countered the transformative potential of the late 1960s job-focused, more redistributive vision for racial justice. The combination of continuing white flight, increased joblessness in Black communities, and the beginnings of mass incarceration was both incendiary and disempowering.

The Reagan era was both explicitly and implicitly anti-civil rights. Both as president and certainly before 1980, Ronald Reagan regularly opposed civil rights legislation, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964, on neoliberal grounds (individuals have the right to private property and to do business with whomever they choose). Various movements did pressure Reagan during his presidency into supporting some civil rights legislation, including an extension of the Voting Rights Act and reparations for incarcerated Japanese Americans. But overall, the Reagan years solidified racist narratives about “undeserving” people of color and the injustice of white humiliation. In 1981, Reagan cut welfare (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) and imposed work requirements that hurt women of color disproportionately (Benenson 1984). He oversaw the enactment of “tough on crime” legislation, beginning with the 1984 Sentencing Reform Act, which has had disproportionate and devastating effects on Black and brown communities (Alexander 2010).

Bill Clinton’s presidency institutionalized both race neutrality and neoliberal austerity within the Democratic Party. His symbolic politics—notably his overseeing of the execution of Ricky Ray Rector during the 1992 presidential campaign and his criticism of Black writer and activist Sister Souljah—were not dissimilar to Richard Nixon’s or Ronald Reagan’s. Clinton’s policy agenda focused on individualism—both “opportunity” and “responsibility”—with policies like opportunity zones, public school choice, and increased community policing.

The 1990s also brought a more frontal nativism from Republicans and continued triangulation from Democrats on both structural economic reform and mass incarceration. Anti-immigrant sentiment toward the Latinx community was a powerful political driver for California governor Pete Wilson, who in 1994 used Proposition 187 to develop a state system for screening “illegal aliens” and denying



them all social services, health care, and education. The law catalyzed scores of Latinx and Asian community organizations into activism and ultimately into politics, while also weakening the California GOP statewide—but was a harbinger of racially inflected nativism that proved to be effective for Republicans two decades later (Damore and Pantoja 2013).

The Clinton era was distinctly not focused on systemic, material drivers of resegregation, job loss, occupational segregation, and over-incarceration. To the contrary, Clinton signed several laws that led to increased incarceration nationwide and reinforced racist paradigms of Black and immigrant criminality: the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996, and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996. Clinton was perhaps most criticized for signing into law the 1996 welfare reform bill, implementing work requirements for aid recipients, giving states much more latitude in granting or withholding aid, and making new immigrants ineligible for aid—all radically reducing the number of aid recipients. The majority of those affected were women of color, who were pushed even further into long-term poverty and low-wage, insecure jobs (Burnham 2001).

The strong economy and strong labor market of the late 1990s, from which Black Americans did benefit, may have helped paper over some of this.¹⁹ But the economic gains for people of color within an increasingly neoliberal system were not lasting. Despite neoliberal economists' promises, based on the theory that racial discrimination would compete itself away, the reality was that even in strong labor markets, the gap between white men's employment and employment for Black and Latinx workers never meaningfully closed (Rodgers 2019).

The 2000s: Racial Liberalism's High-Water Mark, and an Economy in Crisis

By the early 2000s, racial liberalism had settled into a groove. It primarily focused on nondiscrimination and universalism on the policy side. Broadly shared cultural goals, at least across the center-left, included tolerance, multiculturalism, and the "politics of recognition." On the one hand, neither political party

¹⁹ The Black unemployment rate did drop to the lowest on record in the late 1990s, but was still twice as high as the overall rate. Per the Economic Policy Institute, "In the five-year period between 1995 and 2000, during which the annual unemployment rate dropped to 4 percent: the black unemployment rate fell to 7.6 percent, the lowest rate on record and the closest it has ever been to the white rate (within 4.1 percentage points) during a period of economic expansion. Real wage growth for African Americans narrowly exceeded that of whites, as median hourly wages of black workers grew by 2 percent per year compared to 1.7 percent per year for whites" (Wilson 2015).

permitted overt bigotry within its establishment ranks. But on the other hand, the lack of overt bigotry in the political mainstream and the focus on nondiscrimination did not lead to materially better outcomes for most people of color.

Barack Obama's rise to political power can be seen in this context. Obama's rhetoric regularly focused on opportunity and America's promise of progress. His 2004 keynote address at the Democratic National Convention highlighted "hard work and perseverance" and his belief that "with just a slight change in priorities, we can make sure that every child in America has a decent shot at life and that the doors of opportunity remain open to all" (Obama 2004). In his 2008 "More Perfect Union" speech, focused on his association with Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Obama proclaimed that the reverend expressed a "profoundly distorted view of this country" in believing that white racism was endemic (NPR 2008). Obama called for actions from the white community: investing in schools and communities; enforcing civil rights laws and fairness in criminal justice; providing ladders of opportunity that had been "unavailable for previous generations." The speech today reads as an artifact of its times—the hope that came with Obama-era universal policies. But then, it was widely praised by mainstream political observers, and helped him win the presidency at perhaps the most perilous moment in his campaign.

The lack of overt bigotry in the political mainstream and the focus on nondiscrimination did not lead to materially better outcomes for most people of color.

Obama's presidency represented a high-water mark of racial liberalism—both an end and a beginning. His election as the nation's first Black president marked a sign of racial progress but also set off racist backlash. It is fitting to see Obama's presidency as, in Nils Gilman's words, the "apotheosis" of racial liberalism: "Indeed, as a testament to racial liberalism, Obama's presidency could hardly have been more self-refuting. It brought the tacit compact of the racial liberal consensus to an end by exposing the contradictions and limitations of that consensus in ways that became impossible to ignore" (Gilman 2018).

President Obama came to power as Lehman Brothers failed, Wall Street panicked, and millions of Americans lost their homes and livelihoods. During the Obama presidency, the health and stability of the economy were central issues. The financial crisis and Great Recession drove a profound change in economic thinking and forced a careful look at the harms that neoliberal financialization wrought.



Between 2006 and 2008, the housing bubble burst, the economy slowed, and ultimately the bank failures and the financial crisis wrecked both domestic and global politics. The 2009–2014 recovery was painful for many—with very slow growth and close to half of all new jobs in poverty-wage sectors. The long-term deleterious effects of the crisis and recession were highly racialized (National Employment Law Project 2014). Black and Latinx Americans were worst hit by the financial crisis, in part due to predation, as subprime lenders targeted communities of color with bad mortgage deals. Black families lost more than a third of their wealth, and Latinx Americans lost more than 40 percent (McKernan et al. 2013).

The failure of the financial system and the Occupy Wall Street movement catalyzed groundbreaking economic scholarship and activism (Naidu, Rodrik, and Zucman 2019). The new economics—“after neoliberalism”—makes it clear that the combination of deregulation, attention to financial markets rather than labor markets, low wealth and top-rate income taxation, and gutting of public investment and social insurance via budget austerity have led to economic inequality and climate disasters, compounding racial inequality of all kinds.

The brutality of the carceral state and policing in Black and brown communities also became central during the Obama years. The 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin and the subsequent acquittal of George Zimmerman, and the 2014 police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, sparked the Black Lives Matter movement, which is now a force nationwide. BLM has driven deep changes in both policy and politics and catalyzed a shift in mainstream America’s idea about whether Black Americans can get justice in the US “justice” system, or whether the carceral state has instead been an engine of racism, corruption, and predation.

One of President Obama’s enduring legacies is the lack of progress on immigration reform on his watch, in contrast to the “si se puede” of his 2008 campaign promises. In 2012, Obama issued a presidential memorandum offering temporary protection to children brought to the United States—the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, program. But the DREAM Act, which would have provided permanent status and a path to citizenship, is not yet law due to continued obstruction in Congress. And under the Obama administration, nearly 3 million immigrants, many of whom had no criminal records, were deported—leading to claims from some organizers and activists that he was the “Deporter in Chief” (Gonzalez 2017).



The End of Liberalism: Donald Trump, Black Lives Matter, and Justice

American liberal politics went off the rails in part because of racism, and in ways that exacerbated racism. The details are familiar: the rise of the Tea Party as an anti-governmental force; the rise of birtherism; and Donald Trump's election on specifically racialized grounds. Many things, of course, allowed Donald Trump to rise to power. But one likely factor was the failure of racial liberalism, thinned by neoliberalism. The globalized, financialized neoliberalism of the 2010s did not deliver widespread economic or political security.²⁰ This created the weakened democratic and social conditions in which Trump's overt racism became mainstream.

American liberal politics went off the rails in part because of racism, and in ways that exacerbated racism.

Trump's racism—more than any mainstream national political movement in at least the last 100 years—gained power from its shock value, and its audacity. His success in 2016 and his continued hold on Republican Party politics even after his 2020 loss are evidence that one of liberalism's core promises is fraying. For most of the last 40 years, the ostensible norm had been that overt racism, sexism, and xenophobia had no place in American life. Racist dog whistles prevailed, but outright racism moved to the background of at least mainstream politics. Now, as many as 25 percent of all Americans find Trump's outright racism affirmatively appealing (Mason, Wronski, and Kane 2021).

Trumpism incited some particularly vitriolic strands of America's racist traditions. In particular, he fused racism and nativism straightforwardly and unapologetically. He tapped into the "law and order" strains of anti-Black sentiment among mostly white voters, attacking Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of police killings as "symbols of hate" (Barrón-López and Thompson 2020). Trump stoked a range of anti-Latinx and anti-Asian fears, from labor competition to the feeling that Asians and Latinx people will be forever "foreign," and he exacerbated post-9/11 anti-Muslim hysteria under the guise of national security.

²⁰ In fact, wealth inequality has continued to grow throughout the past few decades (Schaeffer 2020).



Anti-immigrant racism has long been part of American society, and in particular the GOP. But Trump successfully made anti-immigrant politics (“Build the Wall”) central to the Republican agenda, which now leads with “America First” rhetoric. Trump’s political weaponization of immigration was straightforwardly racist—for example, through his ongoing, public use of racist slurs (“Mexican rapists,” “s**thole countries”) and his hiring of Jeff Sessions, Steve Bannon, and Stephen Miller—who encouraged and conferred with white supremacists—as leaders on immigration policy.

The Trump administration also took pride in its overtly anti-Muslim politics. Beginning in January 2017, Trump issued a controversial, and in some cases unconstitutional, series of executive orders banning entry into the US from majority-Muslim countries—prompting chaos in the immigration system and widespread protest at airports nationwide, but ultimately telegraphing the administration’s intentions clearly (National Immigration Law Center 2019). The Trump administration went on to usher in a major overhaul of the entire immigration system, taking unprecedented steps to shrink legal immigration and end asylum and refugee resettlement. Trump also reveled in anti-Asian politics, not just targeting China as a geopolitical or international economic competitor, but regularly using anti-Asian slurs (“Kung Flu,” “China virus”) once the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 exacerbated long-standing racial disparities, with the virus disproportionately impacting Black and brown communities because of social inequities (Kolata 2020). By the summer of 2020, after the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, arguments that organizers and scholars had been making for at least a decade—that the carceral system perpetuates white supremacy and violence—seemed more evident, both morally and politically, to the broader public.

Widespread and blatant racism embraced by one of our two major political parties marks the clear end of racial liberalism. As Adam Serwer has argued, “the cruelty is the point” (Serwer 2018); Trumpism’s dissonance, “advocacy for discriminatory, even cruel policies combined with vehement denials that such policies are racially motivated, provide the core of its appeal” (Serwer 2017). Nor is this contradiction new; as Serwer (2017) points out, the United States is “a society founded by slaveholders on the principle that all men are created equal.”



SECTION II

THE EMERGENT THEMES OF A NEW RACIAL JUSTICE PARADIGM

The crises and upheavals of the last decade have brought to the fore new scholarship, a new understanding of our history and present, and a newly empowered racial justice community. Together, they are driving a new racial justice paradigm that moves beyond neoliberalism and racial liberalism, and builds on ideas that have been ever-present in American justice movements.

Today's movement openly recognizes the mutually reinforcing systems of racial capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy as significant barriers to racial justice. Rejecting neoliberalism and racial liberalism's respective promises that market freedom and access and opportunity for people of color would bring about racial justice, today's movement—in the literature, throughout our culture, and on our streets—demands freedom and liberation, repair and redress of historical harms, and material equity.

THE RACIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT TODAY

The movement brings together scholars, public intellectuals, activists, and historians—sympiotically, and with rising power. A new race-forward scholarship has gained traction over the last decade, anchored and driven by Black thinkers and other scholars of color.²¹ Several lines of thought have emerged and coalesced, including economists focusing on racialized wealth and stratification economics, abolitionist thinkers focused on radical transformation and an end to the prison industrial complex, and legal scholars focused on the ways in which American law has legitimated race-based subordination.

²¹ The new scholarship owes a great debt to early 20th century scholarship, especially that of W.E.B. Du Bois, whose work emphasized a number of ideas that remain animating today. Du Bois' work recognized the connection between the spiritual and the material, with the color line held not just by economic opportunity or lack thereof, but also by the "psychological wage of whiteness" (Du Bois 1935).



A new popular history has accompanied, elevated, and amplified the new scholarship, bringing race-forward ideas to mainstream American culture. *The New Jim Crow*, “The Case for Reparations,” and the 1619 Project are just some of the many literary works that have catalyzed new conversations about the foundations of American history and the ongoing legacy of slavery and oppression (Alexander 2010; Coates 2014; Hannah-Jones 2019). These scholars and other popular writers are in conversation with today’s movement organizations, most prominently and powerfully the Movement for Black Lives and the immigrant justice movement. Their policy demands are bold and wide-ranging.

What all of these movement thinkers and activists share is a structural view of change. They do not simply want greater access to existing programs. The root of their argument is that the economic system is predicated on exclusion, and that post hoc solutions—based on redistribution after the fact—will not suffice; that today’s immigration system is based on racial terror; and that the current voting system deliberately suppresses Black and brown voices. These movement leaders call for fundamentally altering relationships of power. This has begun to shift politics, with many grassroots leaders moving beyond outsider organizing to seek and win elected office.

These ideals are not wholly new. They are rooted in a strong foundation that connects today’s movement with the radicalism and ideals of past racial justice movements throughout history: Abolitionists and the Radical Reconstruction era, the civil rights and Black Power movements, and the associated movements for justice—Mexican American/Chicano, Asian, Indigenous, and many parts of 1970s feminism.

Many of today’s scholars, organizers, and activists share common themes in their answers to the question “what does racial justice require, and for whom?”

The movement is broad. Organizers and organizations often differ in strategy, tactics, and theories of change. But they share some overarching values in their vision for a racially just future and what we must do to make that future a reality. Our review of today’s movement elevates three themes that could form the backbone of a new paradigm for racial justice.



Freedom and liberation

A vision for individual and collective self-determination, free from systemic oppression.



Material equity

An equitable distribution of resources, decision-making power, and material outcomes.

Repair and redress

An honest reckoning of America's legacy of white supremacy and violence, followed by concrete, reparative action to redress those harms.



1. Freedom and liberation:

At the core of the movement is the vision for individual and collective self-determination, free from systemic oppression. The movement's notion of freedom is distinctly non-neoliberal, and is tied to older visions of American freedom—freedom situated outside of market exchanges, and freedom from oppressive and exclusive laws and social arrangements. This freedom is about liberation, and has deep roots in the abolitionist, civil rights, and women's liberation movements.



2. Repair and redress:

Achieving racial justice requires an honest reckoning of America's legacy of white supremacy and violence. It requires taking concrete, reparative action to redress the legacy of harm that continues to shape our communities today. Drawing on the new history, repair and redress makes central the idea that an understanding of the past and affirmative actions to repair past wrongs are necessary for justice.



3. Material equity:

Moving beyond the neoliberal worldview that believed increased access and opportunity to the current system was sufficient to bring economic equality, today's movement pursues equitable material outcomes and centers racial equity. True equity means equity of outcome, and not accepting the promise of "opportunity" within a system that continues to systematically exclude. It demands redistribution of resources—especially when wealth for some has been extracted from many—and a redistribution of decision-making power.

While distinct, these themes are not mutually exclusive, and cannot be siloed. In fact, many racial justice advocates argue assiduously for all of them. They are also important as individual analytical categories and as moral values. They distinguish today's scholarly and movement thinking from the paradigms of neoliberalism and racial liberalism.

- Where neoliberalism and racial liberalism were ahistorical, the new thinking about racial justice requires a reckoning with the past both for moral reasons and so we can understand the specific harms of past policies and make recompense.
- Where neoliberalism—and, to a lesser degree, racial liberalism—focused on market exchange, material accumulation, and economic incentives, the new thinking about racial justice focuses on social incentives and the power and pull of collective action.
- Where neoliberalism and racial liberalism were about individual accomplishment within a constrained, increasingly financialized capitalism—within which politics was thin and transactional—the new racial justice thinking focuses on a more balanced form of action and agency: democratic politics as collective action, collective governance, and collective self-governance.

The new worldview brings the themes of freedom, repair, and equity together in a story of what America can become. We can have a more equitable, multiracial economy, society, and democracy. But to get there, we must honestly reckon with the real cultural, policy, and political reasons that people of color—Black, brown, Indigenous, Asian—have been subjugated, excluded, and “othered.” Achieving a more equitable economy and inclusive democracy requires centering the experiences, the voices, and ultimately the political power of Black Americans and other people of color.

The themes we detail below play multiple roles in today's racial justice movement. They are important in and of themselves—evocative and powerful. They are related clearly to each other; for example, material wealth inequality is the result of historical injustice, and as such requires equity policies rooted in redress.

Finally, these themes have deep roots in the racial justice movement, but they also reflect universal values. As such, they might be able to connect what movement leaders are demanding to a broad, strong, and lasting political movement that has the support of a majority of Americans.





People and communities must have power over the shape and structure of their lives, and freedom and liberation from systems of oppression.

The distance from the end of the Civil War, with the birth of Black citizenship and civil rights, to the state-sanctioned beating and torture of Freddie Gray constitutes the gap between formal equality before the law and the self-determination and self-possession inherent in actual freedom—the right to be free from oppression, the right to make determinations about your life free from duress, coercion, or threat of harm. Freedom in the United States has been elusive, contingent, and fraught with contradictions and unattainable promises—for almost everyone.

– Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2016)

We must continue to decolonize our minds, communities, and sovereign nations. The decolonization of our communities and people is directly related to our ability to prosper.

– NDN Collective (n.d.)

At its heart, the moral core of a post-neoliberal progressive vision is also the idea of “freedom”—not the narrow individualized market freedom of conventional conservatism, though, but rather the thick moral vision of freedom as emancipation from conditions of structural inequality and subordination.

– K. Sabeel Rahman (2019)

Central to today's racial justice movement is an expansive vision of freedom and liberation. Advocates for a more expansive vision of freedom vary widely, from academics to activists. However, they share three important conceptual shifts from the neoliberal view of freedom, which focused on economic liberty.

- First, today's advocates seek the liberation of people who have been collectively oppressed because of their identities.
- Second, they seek for those people not just the ability to freely contract within the economic marketplace, but instead a deeper sense of agency and self-determination over many elements of human life, from family decision-making to community governance.
- And third, they see freedom as part of a broader justice, based not in an individual's right to economic choice, but instead in a necessarily social form of non-domination.

As academics like Danielle Allen, Rohini Somanathan, Elizabeth Allen, and K. Sabeel Rahman have argued, a series of interrelated conceptual shifts is necessary for this type of freedom:

- Justice must move to a focus on non-domination, away from a reliance on the difference principle of John Rawls (2001), who argued for the greatest benefits to the least advantaged, and away from the multiculturalism of Charles Taylor (1994), who argued for a recognition of difference but also, according to critics, inadvertently focused on stigma.
- Genuine representation is not just about statistical mirroring: The goal is not to have a mathematically proportionate representation of people in groups, but to use lack of representation to question the driving forces behind inequalities.
- Our understanding of identity should move from fixed to fluid: Identity is a complex concept—identities are not static; they can change throughout the course of our lifetimes. If one accepts that individual identities are fluid, then the concept of social identity groups should also be thought of as fluid. Group identities are ever-changing and should be understood as emergent from shifting social, economic, and political processes (Allen and Somanathan 2020).

Freedom need not be situated in market interactions (Konczal 2021). Instead, an older, pre-neoliberal notion of freedom and liberation is ascendant, stemming from movements against systems of oppression, including the struggle for



freedom of enslaved Black people from chattel slavery before the 19th century, and from racial terrorism, state violence, penal servitude, and mass incarceration.

Of course, the idea of freedom as liberation is not only academic. Freedom and liberation are rallying cries, central to today's Movement for Black Lives. The movement for Black liberation is storied—from abolitionists in the 19th century to the Black Power movement and the Black Panthers in the 20th century. This is about both liberation and self-determination: the freedom to live outside of the dominant (white) gaze. Black radical feminists have also long argued for an intersectional freedom. In the words of the Combahee River Collective: "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression" (Taylor 2020).

The rising prison abolition movement also begins with freedom.²² "The history of policing that I became most interested in did not start with cops, but with freedom. The people who suffer the most from police violence descend from people who were once free from it," writes Derecka Purnell (2021). "Border creation and patrol in response to Indigenous and Mexicans are just one example . . . To make the slave trade possible, capitalists, the owners of companies that profited from slave labor, paid people to catch, kidnap, purchase, and kill people who were free" (Purnell 2021).

This is an expansive vision of freedom. It is about the ability to truly live free, to chart your own life path without hindrance or fear because of the color of your skin. It is about freedom from police violence, freedom from worry that the water or air in your community might be polluted, freedom to vote and to govern, and freedom to live in a neighborhood of your choosing.

Many scholars and movement leaders argue for policy and legal change that centers freedom by taking seriously both group rights and the need to curb corporate dominance. They also argue for greater community control—often in the forms of participatory budgeting of municipal funds and shared governance over grants for community improvement initiatives. Others call for policies that replace funding for police departments and carceral institutions with investments that make communities safer by disrupting the conditions that lead

²² Demands that prisons and police be abolished have existed for decades, but these calls have been reignited in recent years. Abolitionist scholarship challenges our societal norms, demanding that we question our theories of punishment and examine the policing and penal systems' intimate ties with chattel slavery. See Mariame Kaba (2021) and Angela Y. Davis (2003).



to crime and eliminating the need for more carceral institutions.²³ This kind of agency and self-governance is central to the demands of many community, labor, and environmental justice organizations, which argue that economic benefits, like federal resources, should not be put in the hands of private corporate actors, as they often are when community development programs are designed as tax incentives.²⁴ Instead, these resources are owed to communities and groups that have been historically underserved and underrepresented. Decision-making control of those resources should lie directly with those communities, on the grounds that those who are closest to the problem have the deepest understanding of, and are also closest to, the solution.

As Mariame Kaba argues, “I am looking to abolish what I consider to be death-making institutions, which are policing, imprisonment, sentencing, and surveillance. And what I want is to basically build up another world that is rooted in collective wellness, safety, and investment in the things that would actually bring those things about” (Taylor 2021).



²³ The protests that ensued following the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other Black Americans killed by police officers resulted in growing calls to defund the police and instead invest in non-punitive, restorative social programs and services. See Movement For Black Lives (n.d.).

²⁴ With the passage of the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, investment in “Opportunity Zones” was incentivized by allowing investors to defer or potentially even lessen their capital gains taxes. These provisions of the Act have been criticized as creating tax breaks for the wealthy without meaningfully improving community members’ lives. Moreover, communities do not have the agency to dictate how the capital invested in their neighborhoods is spent (see Frederick and Ortiz 2020).



Truth and justice require a reckoning with America’s legacy of slavery, white supremacy, violence, and exclusion. We must not only acknowledge this history but provide repair by addressing and redressing the harms done.

The idea of reparations is frightening not simply because we might lack the ability to pay. The idea of reparations threatens something much deeper—America’s heritage, history, and standing in the world.

— Ta-Nehisi Coates (2014)

I am a survivor of the Tulsa race massacre. Two weeks ago, I celebrated my 107th birthday. Today, I’m visiting Washington, DC, for the first time in my life. I’m here seeking justice, and I’m asking my country to acknowledge what happened in Tulsa in 1921.

— Viola Fletcher (2021)²⁵

The redress campaign wasn’t just about trying to gain monetary compensation. I mean, you figure three years of imprisonment and the 30 years of guilt and shame we lived with, \$20,000 wasn’t going to abrogate all of that. But the money was part of the message. The American public didn’t give a damn until the minute we started demanding compensation.

— John Tateishi (2020)²⁶

²⁵ This quote is from Ms. Fletcher’s testimony before the House Judiciary Committee at the hearing, “Continuing Injustice: The Centennial of the Tulsa-Greenwood Race Massacre” on May 21, 2021 (New York Times 2021).

²⁶ This quote is from an interview with NPR’s Isabella Rosario regarding the Japanese American reparations movement (2020).

Today's movement demands a true reckoning with the American past. Its arguments are rooted in a historical understanding of systemic exclusion and stratification: the 400-plus year exclusion of Black Americans from paid labor and from wealth building; the over-incarceration and criminalization of Black people; and the broader story of historic racial exclusion in the US—the genocide of Indigenous people, the theft of tribal lands and the breaking of sovereign promises to Indigenous peoples, and the deliberate second-class non-citizenship of Black and brown immigrants from Central and Latin America, Asia, Africa, and across the world. Racial justice, in this view, requires acknowledgment, accountability, repair, and redress.

Various movement demands range from those focusing directly on the need for reparations payments to descendants of enslaved Black people, to those demanding an overhaul of the US immigration system, to those who are seeking recognition of Indigenous sovereignty or of other historic harms suffered by people of color, often at the hands of the US federal government. Many communities have begun incorporating various elements of healing in their calls for repair, seeking to build a reparative society that addresses the trauma endured within oppressed communities over the course of generations.

Reparations for Descendants of US Slavery

Reparations for past and continuing harms has long been on the policy agenda for racial justice advocates. In particular, many reparations advocates argue for direct payment from the federal government to Black American descendants of US slavery (Darity and Mullen 2020). They focus specifically on the economic calculation of wealth lost when the promise of land to emancipated people was broken in the 1860s. They also count, as part of the debt that is owed, white wealth extraction from Black Americans from the 17th century to the present: from enslavement, lynching, sharecropping, prison labor, the redlining of property in majority-Black areas, and 20th century civil rights reforms that lacked economic recompense. Further, they argue that the federal government owes that debt, because the federal government is responsible for the laws that prevented Black people from earning wages and amassing wealth, and because it benefited directly from the slave trade (as did the British and other governments worldwide). As such, they hold that reparations paid by cities, states, or individuals are insufficient.



Centering the direct recognition of past harm to Black people is a markedly different approach to racial justice than a focus on access and opportunity, or even an approach focused on desegregation and affirmative action.

That said, one of the notable developments in the debate over reparations is the increased frequency of institutions and municipalities seeking redress and recompense for historical harms. In 2021, Congress held hearings to discuss potential redress for survivors and descendants of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. Several universities, including Georgetown, Princeton, and Virginia Theological Seminary, have announced reparations funds specifically designed to recognize their own benefit from enslavement, and have focused on recompense for descendant communities (Lockhart 2019). These efforts—as well as other efforts led by cities like Evanston, Illinois, to tie housing funds to “reparations”—have been controversial among those in the larger reparations advocacy community, who say they distract from a full recognition of the debt that is owed (Darity and Mullen 2021). But these efforts do represent an important shift. Centering the direct recognition of past harm to Black people is a markedly different approach to racial justice than a focus on access and opportunity, or even an approach focused on desegregation and affirmative action.

JAPANESE AMERICANS’ FIGHT FOR REPARATIONS

Reparations campaigns, and the question of what is owed to whom, are not new in American history, and not limited to Black Americans. One of the most prominent campaigns has been the demand of the Japanese American community for recompense after the US government’s 1941–1945 incarceration of 110,000 people of Japanese descent, most of them American citizens. The campaign for reparations was hard-fought both within and outside of the Japanese American community, and in 1988, President Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act, which offered a formal apology and \$20,000 in reparations to those who had

been incarcerated. Driven by activists in the 1960s and 70s, most prominently the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), one core claim of the Japanese American reparations movement was the breaking of silence (part of the Japanese American ethos of *shikataganai*—“it cannot be undone”) and the public acknowledgment of internment and incarceration. Some Japanese Americans today have expressed solidarity with the Black-led reparations movement, out of the desire to be the “allies they never had themselves” (Hayman n.d.).



Indigenous Sovereignty

Indigenous movement demands for repair and redress center not just on any one policy but rather a broader call for sovereignty and a restoration of separate governance. As Professor Shaawano Chad Uran notes: “Tribal sovereignty is derived from the people, the land, and their relationships; tribal sovereignty was not a gift from any external government” (Uran 2018). Today, groups like the NDN Collective in its Landback campaign focus on dismantling the mechanisms that forcefully removed Indigenous people from their lands (NDN Collective 2020). The movement goes beyond monetary compensation for stolen land. As historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (2014) notes, “no monetary amount can compensate for lands illegally seized, particularly those sacred lands necessary for Indigenous peoples to retain social coherence.” The movement therefore connects calls for returning “Indigenous lands to Indigenous hands” to other demands for the dismantling and defunding of white supremacy, including the police, the military industrial complex, prisons, the criminal justice system, and ICE. The movement also demands the free consent of Indigenous people for all decision-making on Indigenous land stewardship and use—connecting the demand for freedom as self-determination with the demand for redress.

Reckoning with the US Immigration System

Immigrant justice activists demand a reckoning and overhaul to the US immigration system, which has grown out of a racialized system of labor categorization, especially for Asian and Latinx immigrants, that dates to the 1920s and was never fully reckoned with in the immigration overhauls of the 1960s. This is especially true for immigrants from Mexico and Central America. The numerical caps added to immigration law in 1965 meant that people from this region who had been living legally in the territorial United States for decades were suddenly, after Hart-Celler, deemed “illegal” (Hong 2015).

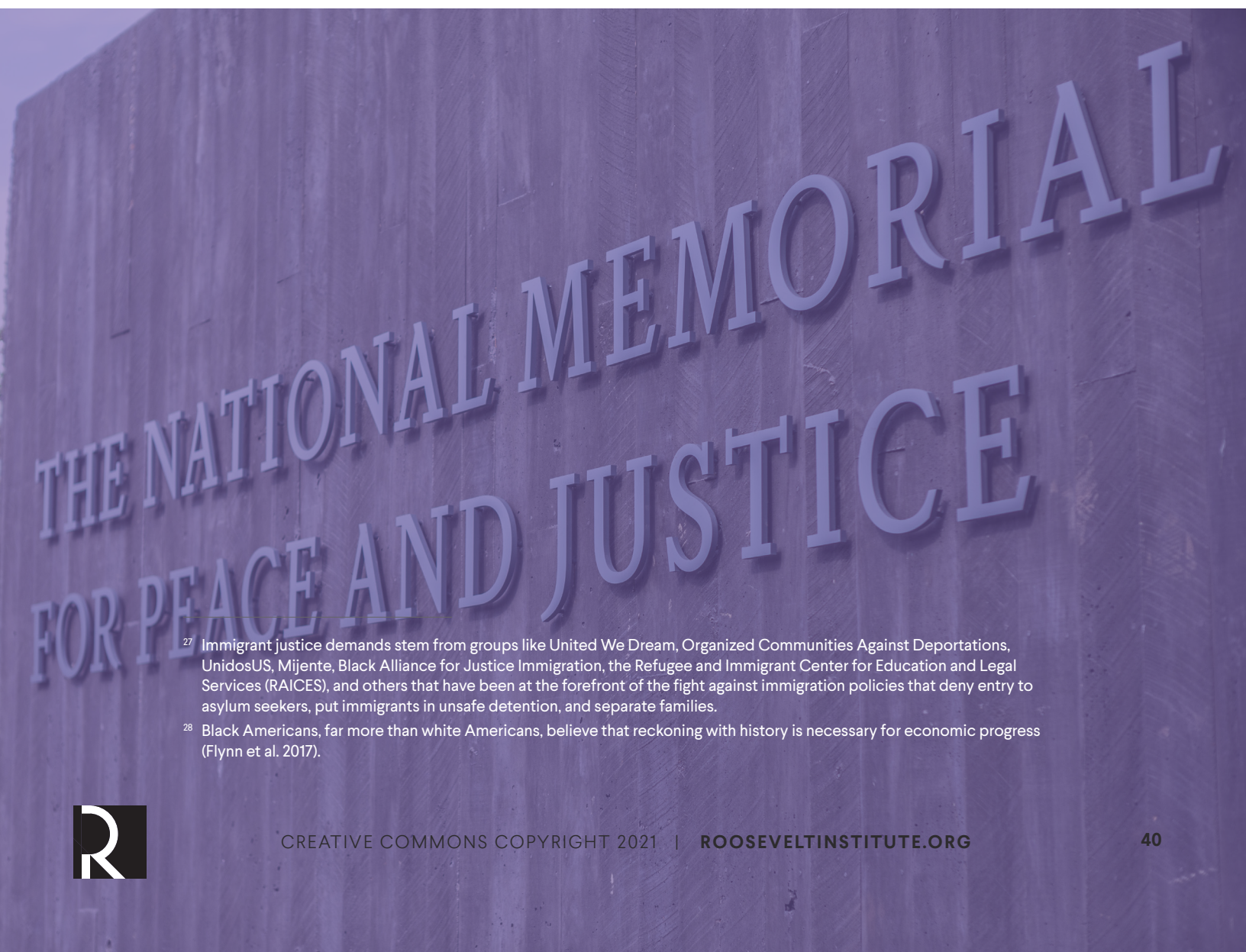
Immigrant rights organizations have been working for decades to challenge the resultant US immigration system, which lacks a path to citizenship for 10.5 million undocumented people, creating deep injustices as well as distorted labor markets (Budiman 2020). The Trump administration’s deliberately heightened deportation and family separation policies shone a national spotlight on the trap that immigrants find themselves in, but it is a decades-old problem. Millions are without documentation, legal standing, or a path in any direction out of the



purgatory created by policy decisions that are both ill-suited to the present and, in some cases, intentionally cruel.

This has given rise to demands that ICE be abolished. The broad criminalization of undocumented people is at the root of this part of the movement. Other movement demands for repair and redress include citizenship; refugee and asylum reforms; the right of return for deported people; clearing of the backlog in the immigration courts; and a significant increase in the numbers of immigrants, migrants, and refugees admitted legally to the United States.²⁷

All these claims connect the present to the past: They demand broad public recognition of both past harms and present policy rooted in past racial discrimination and animus. These various policy agendas taken as a whole show clearly that systemic reform is not possible without a true historical reckoning.²⁸



²⁷ Immigrant justice demands stem from groups like United We Dream, Organized Communities Against Deportations, UnidosUS, Mijente, Black Alliance for Justice Immigration, the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (RAICES), and others that have been at the forefront of the fight against immigration policies that deny entry to asylum seekers, put immigrants in unsafe detention, and separate families.

²⁸ Black Americans, far more than white Americans, believe that reckoning with history is necessary for economic progress (Flynn et al. 2017).



Equity goes beyond equal access and opportunity. It means equitable material outcomes, closing gaps—in wealth, income, health, criminal justice, education, and more—that have persisted for generations and worsened over the last half-century. It is about a distribution of resources and of decision-making power, with an emphasis not only on individual equity but on equity for communities that have historically been excluded.

Studying and working hard hasn't been enough for Black Americans. Since the United States started tracking unemployment by race, the unemployment rate for Blacks has remained roughly twice as high as the white rate regardless of education . . . Wealth disparities persist with high levels of education, too . . . Black households in which the head graduated from college have less wealth than white households in which the head dropped out of high school.

– Darrick Hamilton (2019)

When we come upon cases where the distribution of people in organizations and institutions and where allocations of social power and opportunities do not mirror population distributions, we need to identify the causes of those nonmirroring distributions and make a judgment about whether those processes reflect domination.

– Danielle Allen and Rohini Somanathan (2020)

Equity is the superior growth model.

– Sarah Treuhaft, Angela Glover Blackwell, and Manuel Pastor (2011)

Issues of material equity—not just opportunity and access—are key to today’s demands for racial justice. This is because racial liberalism failed empirically in producing material equity—dealt a death blow by neoliberalism’s market-imposed limitations. Despite its promises, an “access and opportunity” focus yielded insufficient gains for people of color. In fact, the “race-neutral” governing logic of racial liberalism led to a rolling back of certain advances. On almost every measure (income, wealth, health, criminal justice), Black Americans have lost ground since the 1970s. In the years between 1980 and 2020, affirmative action, school desegregation, and housing desegregation were never fully enforced by law, and instead have faded both as legal and political priorities. As a result, racial wealth gaps have worsened for Black and Latinx Americans, and schools are resegregating (American Educational Research Association 2019; Chang 2018).

Low wages, weak job opportunities, and occupational segregation, combined with the divergent fortunes of so many Americans, have shown the limitations of race neutrality.²⁹

In response, three key focuses have emerged in the agenda for material equity.

- **Distributional outcomes.** Scholars today are working to unmask the systemic structures of subordination, wealth extraction, and other forms of exclusion to identify the interventions needed to target systemic roots and impact outcomes.
- **Wealth inequality.** Advocates are focusing on the lived experience of racialized wealth inequality, helping to better illuminate the types of transformative interventions required to move beyond the older, race-neutral, meritocratic framework of “access and opportunity.”
- **Community investment.** Advocates are also focused on the collective, moving toward the types of deeper, structural reforms that lead to systemic investment in entire communities.

Distributional Outcomes

Material equity is about measuring well-being and the actual allocations of resources, acknowledging the shortcomings of our procedures and the necessity of structural transformation. The question is less about opportunity than

²⁹ The focus on material equity makes clear the ways in which racial liberalism pitted people of color against one another. The model minority myth is rooted in a competitive vision of successes, measured by comparative income or wealth charts, and can be extraordinarily damaging: “If X people can succeed, the reason Y cannot succeed must be about Y themselves.”



outcomes. Inequality can be measured by wages, wealth, occupational and educational segregation, housing values, health access, criminal justice, and life expectancy. Scholars and movement leaders discuss the need to apply a much more critical analysis to the formulaic assumptions of institutions that directly influence policymakers' decisions, as distributional outcomes are consistently and systematically lower for communities of color than for white Americans.

The US tax code, for example, greatly favors wealthy white people, while disproportionately burdening Black and Latinx taxpayers (Steverman 2021). Taxation of homeownership provides one clear example: Interest paid on mortgages is tax deductible, but renters do not receive similar benefits. This has a directly racialized impact; in 2017, only 41.8 percent of Black people owned a home, compared to the nearly 72 percent of white people who were homeowners (Choi 2020). Following the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, the discrepancies between tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans and those for middle- and working-class Americans have been staggering: The average tax cut for the wealthiest 1 percent is about 50 times greater than for middle-income earners and 850 times greater than for low-income earners (Hamilton and Linden 2018). Without a greater emphasis on providing more support for those who are consistently burdened and left behind by our policy decisions, policymakers will continue to perpetuate disparities in outcomes.

Wealth Inequality

The second collective focus is on the lived experience of wealth inequality, as compared to wage inequality alone. For the past several decades, there has been a standard story about labor income inequality that focuses on growing disparities within the workplace. This is the story of the "1 percent," the inequality between top executives and their employees. This inequality has increased dramatically since 1980, with the top 1 percent roughly doubling their share of income and returning it to the levels seen before the Great Depression (Zucman 2019).

The dispossession of previous generations cannot just be overcome by energy and talent; those who are the victims of plunder will always be working at a disadvantage.



An emerging consensus on inequality has expanded on this story and led to a closer examination of racial capitalism, and wealth itself—how, whether held in housing or land, wealth has been systematically stripped from people of color and has served as a mechanism for intergenerational transfer of power. The compounding nature of wealth surfaces an important argument: The dispossession of previous generations cannot just be overcome by energy and talent; those who are the victims of plunder will always be working at a disadvantage. The material equity policy agenda reflects this by focusing on demands for reparations and other forms of redress.³⁰

Community Investment

Movement leaders and scholars have increasingly focused on the ways in which disinvestment from communities has perpetuated itself over generations, leaving communities of color behind. This is driving a wide range of activism, from environmental justice to efforts to end mass incarceration, that focuses on the control of federal money to disinvested communities.

Importantly, in the last decade, calls for environmental justice have been increasingly central in the larger environmental community. Issues like climate justice and pollution had for decades been sidelined in service of a focus of “preservation” and “conservation,” especially among some of the largest and best-funded environmental organizations in the US.³¹ But new leaders and organizations in today’s environmental justice movement have refocused the climate fight to look at the ways in which communities of color face greater danger through austerity and disinvestment. Whether it is the Flint water crisis or other infrastructure crises in cities across the US, climate justice is driving attention to the frontline communities who will bear the brunt of climate change.

³⁰ Stratification economists argue that economies are intentionally structured to maintain the economic, social, and political power of the dominant group. Proposals by stratification economists William A. Darity, Jr. and Darrick Hamilton have found their way into mainstream policy discourse. For example, Hamilton has argued for “baby bonds,” a form of capital building for young people that would, if designed properly, especially help Black and brown Americans (Berlin 2019). Racial wealth scholars have also argued for a federal job guarantee program, which would provide jobs to those who need them, act as an automatic stabilizer to maintain levels of employment throughout economic crises, and confer a legal right to employment, thus transforming our labor market by providing a floor for wages and benefits and a different level of competition for private-sector employers (Paul, Darity, Hamilton, and Price 2017).

³¹ Historically, mainstream environmentalist movements in the United States have typically been devoid of any meaningful analysis of environmental racism. At their worst, these movements have been outwardly racist. See Jedediah Purdy (2015).

Ending mass incarceration works similarly. Movement demands for “defunding the police” include demands for funding a broader range of social programs and community support (Reed 2020). Mass incarceration has deprived communities of color not only of people but of resources, creating a predatory structure in which policing profits from the immiseration of communities (Sanders and Leachman 2021). Policies that divest and then reinvest demonstrate that criminal justice reform requires a broader focus on specific material harms to those imprisoned, their families, and their communities.

This broader agenda for material equity continues to evolve as today’s racial justice movement grows. That specific demands for policies centered on tangible resource redistribution are being made by various identity groups highlights the shift from neoliberalism’s and racial liberalism’s promises of “access and opportunity,” to the emerging paradigm’s demand for concrete, material equity.

ECONOMIC
JUSTICE



FOR ALL
PEOPLE

POLITICAL
POWER



COMMUNITY
CONTROL



SECTION III

A NEW PARADIGM FOR RACIAL JUSTICE: OBSTACLES AND PROMISE

If we are to see a paradigm shift away from neoliberalism and racial liberalism—toward more transformation and a system that actually works for people of color—the racial justice movement must be central.

Today's movement—made up of organizers and activists, as well as scholars and public intellectuals—is not solely, or even primarily, about changing paradigms through compelling data or conversations only at the level of the business and policy elite. It is about building movement power to elevate new ideas, experiences, and stories, focusing on those most impacted by the failures of old policies. Policymakers and other elite leaders have certainly been influenced by the racial justice movement, and the elite do have a role to play. Together, the movement and influential policy and cultural figures might be able to forge a new narrative that leads with racial justice and becomes the new common sense.

Over the last several years, we have already seen change: cultural, electoral, and policy. Especially during the summer of 2020, the movement shifted the commonly held narrative of what is politically possible and desirable, and drove its new worldview further into mainstream discourse.

Whether and how the movement's emergent worldview can become the new common sense in American politics is a central question. Huge obstacles remain, including volatile public opinion, with a significant and persistent minority of Americans attracted by overt racism, and the capture of the Republican Party by this overt, antidemocratic racist and nativist strand.

But there are reasons to believe that a new paradigm is possible. Policy green shoots at the uppermost levels of the federal government—paired with a new economic narrative that promotes universal deservingness and prioritizes the health of workers over the health of capital markets—can serve as the root of a stronger, greener, more caregiving-focused economy and society.



OBSTACLES TO THE EMERGING WORLDVIEW

The shift to a new paradigm centering racial justice certainly will not occur if we simply look to be guided by public opinion. History teaches us that public opinion lags social justice movements (Nawaz and Khan 2020), but that movements can lead to breakthroughs. In early 1965, as the Voting Rights Act was being debated, the American public was decidedly mixed about the civil rights movement. Many worried about how the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act would be implemented, but were supportive of the demonstrators in Selma, Alabama. By April 1965, a month after Bloody Sunday and the Selma march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, almost three-quarters of Americans were in favor of the voting rights bill (Kohut 2015).

Progress requires a willingness to challenge existing structures and to move institutions—via the media, leading political figures, and other influencers—toward deeper change. Public opinion is volatile but can follow when movements make clear, often moral, demands and when institutions and laws change—providing the space for the lagging public to catch up.

Public Opinion and Today’s Racial Justice Movement

Since the Black Lives Matter uprisings in the summer of 2020, political opposition to the movement’s anti-racist agenda has played out in different ways. This is a time of both movement and stasis for public opinion and race. The Democratic-Republican partisan divide on perceptions of race and discrimination—bad for decades—is worsening. A subset of white voters has dug in against any and all racial justice arguments, and is instead leading a backlash. A different subset of white voters has been more supportive of the racial justice movement, and in particular the Movement for Black Lives, although that support has waxed and waned.

Additionally, voting patterns among people of color may also be more fluid—with nascent but surprising recent movement from segments of Black and Latinx voters, especially those without college degrees, toward the Republican Party. Support for Trump among Black men and women increased by 6 and 5 percentage points, respectively, from 2016 to 2020 (Nagesh 2020). Support for Trump among Latinx men and women during the same period increased by 4 and 5 percentage points, respectively (Nagesh 2020). This reflects a change from long-held voting patterns; since the partisan realignment of the 1960s in the wake of the Civil



Rights Acts, Democrats have largely been the party of civil rights, and have counted especially on Black and Latinx voters. Whether the 2020 results were a one-time event—part of a single, and singular, election—remains a topic of serious debate.

That said, white Americans are clearly the group with the most divergent views on race, racism, and racial policy. The views of white Americans and Americans of color—especially Black Americans—have long split on questions of racial discrimination. A large majority of white people do not believe that there is systematic unfairness against people of color. But Black Americans feel more discriminated against than they did two decades ago, with almost two-thirds now reporting unfair treatment.³²

In recent years, white Democrats have become increasingly vocal in their beliefs about the prevalence of racial discrimination. Increasingly, white Democrats see systemic racism—whether labor market exclusion or militarized policing—as a genuine barrier for people of color.³³ But white Republicans have said precisely the opposite: that the country has gone far enough to rectify issues of racial discrimination, and that paying less attention to race is preferable.

These patterns hold among Democrats and Republicans overall. By the fall of 2020, after the death of George Floyd and the national uprising over police violence, a growing share of Democrats (almost 80 percent of Democrats and Democratic leaners) said the country had not gone far enough to combat racial discrimination (Horowitz et al. 2020). This is an important move away from individualized understandings of inequality that blame lack of hard work or a culture of poverty. However, by contrast, close to 80 percent of Republicans consistently disagree, with many arguing that paying less attention to race would reduce racial inequality (Horowitz et al. 2020).

Of course, the membership of American political parties is racially skewed: 81 percent of registered Republicans are white, as compared to 59 percent of registered Democrats (Gramlich 2020). As such, it is tempting to see the racial divisions in opinion as primarily driven by partisanship. But recent research suggests that racism itself, and not partisanship per se, is at the core of this schism.

³² See polls from Gallup, Pew, and Harvard (Jones 2019; Lopez et al. 2018; Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health 2017).

³³ Between 1985 and 2016, the percentage of white Democrats who said inequality is caused by individuals' willpower fell tremendously, from 60 percent to 28 percent. Over that same period, the percentage of white Democrats who cited discrimination as the cause for inequality grew from 44 percent to 54 percent (McElwee 2018).

Lilliana Mason, Julie Wronski, and John V. Kane (2021) have demonstrated that a faction of Americans—perhaps as much as 30 percent—“responds especially well to the hatred of marginalized groups.” This faction includes people of color. According to Mason, it “has moved from party to party” and “can be recruited from either party . . . They’re not just Republicans or Democrats. They’re a third faction that targets parties” (Mason 2021). Since 2010, this group has become increasingly Republican, because its members found Donald Trump’s overt racism and nativism appealing. But before 1964, this group was aligned with (southern) Democrats. And the arguments they are attracted to and now espouse, sometimes violently—American culture as white, Christian, and male—have for centuries been part of American politics writ large.

In the 2010s, a range of commentators had argued that a more multiracial America would produce a more progressive politics (Phillips 2018; Greenberg 2019). Today, the combination of right-wing backlash and the complex and nuanced experiences of different marginalized groups in America challenge that assumption. Since before the United States was founded, white supremacist structures have been upheld by the powerful. To preserve their economic position, the elite who benefit from the system as it is have strategically divided low-income white people from people of color.³⁴ Today, to break that pattern, the racial justice movement must continue to go on the offensive to build a coalition that centers its own needs and is powerful enough to win against entrenched interests.

Clear Dangers: GOP Nativism and Racism Justifying Attacks on Democracy

The political realities of the current moment pose some obvious dangers to the racial justice movement. The partisan division over race is one clear factor, and the move of some voters of color toward Trumpism should be a reason for deep political worry. But a deeper problem is the new center of the Republican party, which has outwardly co-opted “multiracialism” in a thin veneer covering a white nativism that justifies the “Big Lie”—the highly racialized, false narrative of a stolen 2020 election—and partisan election administration.

While it is true that a core group of nativists and racists has always been part of American politics, since at least the mid-20th century, racial liberalism’s broad

³⁴ One notable example of strategic racial division culminated in the aftermath of Bacon’s Rebellion, when white indentured servants and enslaved Black people joined together in rebelling against Virginia Governor William Berkeley. After the uprising, those in power feared future working-class rebellions. As a result, they relied on strengthening racial caste, so as to prevent racial solidarity in the future. See Anderson (2012).



acceptance meant that overt white supremacy had to seek a home outside of the two-party system. (For example, George Wallace, the segregationist governor of Alabama, was forced to run a third-party campaign in 1968 against Republican Richard Nixon and Democrat Hubert Humphrey.) But today, Donald Trump's racism has become core to his party's existence.

On the surface, some Republicans have adopted a populist, working-class multiracialism. Conservative intellectuals have been arguing that their future, and the future of the Republican Party, is multiracial. Think tank leaders, like Oren Cass at American Compass and Sam Hammond at the Niskanen Center, have been making this claim, primarily based on the noncollege base of Republican voters and the movement of some voters of color toward Donald Trump in 2020. Republican politicians like Marco Rubio, who is Cuban American, said in November 2020 that "the future of the party is based on a multiethnic, multiracial, working-class coalition" (Treene 2020). Donald Trump told Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) attendees in February 2021 that "the future of the Republican Party is as a party that defends the social, economic, and cultural interests and values of working American families of every race, color, and creed" (Higgins 2021).

The sincerity of thinkers like Cass and Hammond notwithstanding, for most Republican political figures, adopting multiracialism seems more likely to serve as co-option and a cover for an economic post-neoliberal populism that is exclusionary: a welfare state and industrial policy agenda that benefit the wealthy few. At worst, it is a thin cover for a much deeper acceptance, and even embrace, of straightforward nativism.

Racialized voter suppression, which has been part of Republican policy for years, was supercharged in 2013 when the Supreme Court's ruling in *Shelby v. Holder* struck down a key federal oversight provision of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, further opening the door to a wave of voter restriction laws. Post-Trump, Republicans have accelerated efforts to suppress the vote—continuing a long tradition of denying voters of color the franchise (Corasaniti and Epstein 2021; Sweren-Becker and Klain 2021). In the first half of 2021, more than 400 bills with provisions restricting voting were introduced in 49 states (Brennan Center for Justice 2021). Further, Republicans are turning to new tactics that put partisans in charge not just of poll watching but also election certification. In Arizona, a lawmaker introduced a bill that would allow a majority of the legislature to "revoke the secretary of state's issuance or certification of a presidential elector's certification of election" (Kagan 2021). These efforts are part of a pattern of GOP



attempts to maintain power through antidemocratic measures—but they are now even more racialized and based on widespread public hysteria, stoked by right-wing media and politicians.³⁵

Republican leaders and voters continue to perpetuate the “Big Lie.” On January 6, 2021, a mob of almost exclusively white Trump supporters stormed the Capitol with Confederate flags and hangman’s nooses, clear symbols of anti-Black lynching and white terror. That evening, 147 GOP congressional members—who had been hiding from the mob just hours before—objected to the certification of the election results (Zhou 2021). In August 2021, two-thirds of Republican voters continued to believe that the 2020 election was “rigged and stolen from Trump” (Dickson 2021). Some lawmakers have gone so far as to recast the events of January 6 as akin to an “ordinary tourist visit,” rather than a day in which five people were killed, 140 Capitol police were beaten and injured, and calls to “hang Mike Pence” were chanted by the insurrectionists (Itkowitz 2021).

This “disinformation” has racist roots, not only in anti-Black terror but also in anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiment. The post-9/11 national security state centered on racial profiling, exclusion, and the abrogation of civil rights in the name of (white) American safety (Ackerman 2021). Both anti-Blackness and anti-immigrant sentiment form the core of the white MAGA fear of replacement. A decade ago, this was the province of fringe French intellectuals (Camus 2011); today, it is part of Fox News and Tucker Carlson’s regular fare (Baragona 2021).

Trump’s bizarre stolen election narrative is clearly rooted in racism. It is also extremely popular³⁶—and now drives official GOP policy.

ACTION THAT MEETS THE MOMENT: POLICY AND PARADIGMS

Paradigm shifts are rare, especially in politics. But they do happen when the reality of people’s everyday lives becomes radically out of sync with their understanding of how the world is supposed to work. In economics today, the shift beyond neoliberalism is now embraced by major thinkers and funded by

³⁵ The litigation that ensued following Trump’s false claims of voter fraud and a rigged election were described by Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel as rooted in anti-Blackness: “Really the themes that we see, that persist, are this: Black people are corrupt. Black people are incompetent and Black people can’t be trusted. That’s the narrative that is continually espoused by the Trump campaign and their allies in these lawsuits” (Boucher 2020).

³⁶ A Reuters/Ipsos poll from March 2021 found that 6 in 10 Republicans believe that the November 2020 election was “stolen” from Trump through voter fraud (Oliphant and Kahn 2021).

major foundations, and it animates the potential for foundational and historic legislative efforts of the Biden administration.³⁷

Our charge now is to broaden the paradigm shift that is already underway, and to show that solving problems with individualized, marketized, neoliberal solutions does not “compete away” racial discrimination, but instead compounds white supremacy. The racial justice movement’s calls for freedom and liberation, repair and redress, and material equity require policy solutions that are systemic and address the rules-based, root causes of racial exclusion.

We are at a crossroads. The racial justice movement faces real threats—especially from within our current electoral party system. But across the country, local movement power is being translated into political power. Racial justice champions are being elected to political office, and movement demands have translated into a White House that has promised a “whole-of-government” approach to addressing systemic racism.

Policy Shifts

In the wake of the 2020 racial uprisings, the Biden-Harris administration pledged to make racial justice central to its policy platform. This will not be easy. The shape and structure of most government institutions remain focused around a neoliberal policy design—tax credits rather than direct provision, means testing rather than universality, and very little data collected to disaggregate outcomes for people of color. The uphill battle is made worse by our current legislative structure, which effectively requires a supermajority to pass democracy reform, immigration reform, and other policies critical to a racial justice agenda; partisan pushback on voting rights, as discussed above; and a jurisprudential approach that favors race neutrality.

**This is not about any single policy or even a policy agenda.
It is about an approach to policymaking for this moment that would center
race and racial justice.**

³⁷ President Biden said of the American Jobs Plan, “[I]t’s going to create the strongest, most resilient, innovative economy in the world. It’s not a plan that tinkers around the edges. It’s a once-in-a-generation investment in America, unlike anything we’ve seen or done since we built the Interstate Highway System and the Space Race decades ago” (White House 2021).

But there are clear steps forward. This is not about any single policy or even a policy agenda. It is about an approach to policymaking for this moment that would center race and racial justice. Based on the movement's emergent racial justice approach, we see two important guidelines for federal policy:

- First, center race in every policy decision. Be aggressive and attentive to racialized policy outcomes.
- Second, focus on democratizing policies, in particular how policies are created and implemented.

Center Race in Every Policy Decision

Because our racial disparities are so severe across all elements of the American economy and society, no policy, even if facially race-neutral, is race-neutral in practice. The design of all policy proposals—big and small—must be attentive to racial outcomes. All policy, from vaccine distribution to higher education funding to tax reform, will have racialized effects. Recognizing this reality, and always considering race in policy design, is therefore vital.

At the federal level, the Biden-Harris administration's first executive orders focused on racial equity: a "whole-of-government" approach to equity, with an agency-by-agency assessment of systemic barriers to advancement (Executive Order 13985). Strengthening fair housing policies, modernizing regulatory review, and limiting and ultimately ending federal use of private prisons were also part of the administration's initial race equity efforts. Some of the approach is also about recognizing the particular claims of people of color—for example, in the administration's calls to commit the federal government to "strengthen the Nation-to-Nation relationship between the United States and the Tribal Nations," and to combat xenophobia against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

Whether and how these efforts come to material fruition—whether executive action or legislation truly involves and benefits frontline communities—remains uncertain. Whether policy can be implemented in ways that are direct, clear, and are of community benefit will be challenging, given the lack of race-focused, community-focused government policy pathways and the atrophying of federal-state-local agency capacity over many decades. But centering race equity as a key measure of successful outcomes, which more generally challenges older racial liberal ideas prioritizing access and opportunity, will be pivotal to shifting policy norms and expectations.



Focus on Democratizing Policies

Building a more inclusive and transformative politics requires power sharing and affirmatively using the power of government for, rather than against, people of color.

This is about more than questions of funding. It is about a focus on democratic process. Who is making decisions about how a particular program is implemented, whom it serves, and how equitably it is governed? At the federal level, are we staffing—including at the senior-most levels—our key economic, domestic policy, and national security jobs with people who reflect the communities they serve, and who understand that all policy decisions have racialized impacts? Are local membership organizations run by Black and brown people, with real accountability to and for people of color, at the governing table?

The post—2020 election reality of a Democratic-controlled but narrowly divided Congress, and the sense among some centrist lawmakers that a polarized electorate warrants moderation—means that the legislative landscape, especially given anti-majoritarian Senate rules, is even less hospitable to wholesale reform. But incremental approaches will only serve the status quo.

It will be critical over the next several years to use all the tools of government—executive action; agency tools, including existing departments and regulatory mechanisms; legislation; and more structural democratic measures, such as court reform—toward a more racially just economy and democracy.

Those in power must take transformative action and usher in structural change. It will be critical over the next several years to use all the tools of government—executive action; agency tools, including existing departments and regulatory mechanisms; legislation; and more structural democratic measures, such as court reform—toward a more racially just economy and democracy.

In this environment, a focus on democracy and racial justice means that filibuster reform or elimination must be on the table. The filibuster has been disproportionately used throughout history by segregationists and other white supremacists to slow or stop laws intended to promote racial equity (Williamson,



Baptiste, and Spaulding 2021). Today, it continues to stall progress on key democracy priorities: protecting voting rights; ending partisan gerrymandering; curbing the influence of corporate money and lobbying in our rulemaking process; and creating stronger ethics laws for federal officeholders. These all have racial justice implications, since the current system prioritizes a lobbying and corporate interest—driven system that is dominated by those who are wealthy and white, and whose interest is in preserving the status quo.

A New Paradigm for Racial Justice

To lead a recalcitrant and divided public, and to make a new policy approach possible, we need a new paradigm—meaning a new, broadly held common sense for what racial justice requires.

To lead a recalcitrant and divided public, and to make a new policy approach possible, we need a new paradigm—meaning a new, broadly held common sense for what racial justice requires.

We believe that freedom and liberation, redress and repair, and material equity can provide a strong foundation for a new paradigm. These themes are central to today's call for racial justice. And they are deeply rooted in American, and even universal, values.

We have seen important framing work take shape in recent years—targeted universalism (powell, Menendian, and Ake 2019), the race-class narrative, and arguments for public investments that benefit us all (McGhee 2021). These represent some of the most ambitious efforts to bring forward a new narrative fusing race and class—bringing white, Black, brown, Asian, and Indigenous people together to see their fates as linked.³⁸ Our hope here is to build on this existing work by helping to build a narrative based on a new racial justice paradigm. The

³⁸ These efforts are similar conceptually to the racial rules work that links economic outcomes to racialized laws and practices across issue areas. See *The Hidden Rules of Race: Barriers to an Inclusive Economy* (Flynn et al. 2017). They are also related to those who are fighting for a race-inclusive, post-neoliberal economics—including “economic democratists,” like labor organizers who focus on empowering care workers and other low-income women of color, and also to locally focused economic organizers of color who argue for community control.

themes illuminating the emergent worldview are deeply connected to important post-neoliberal ideas about both race and economics, in particular:

- **Work, workers, and deservingness.** Embedded within the new racial justice worldview are new ideas about work and workers, and about deservingness as it relates to race. For instance, if we viewed low-income service workers as deserving of higher wages, would employers and policymakers raise wages in the face of “labor shortages” rather than complain that no qualified people are available?
- **Wealth and debt.** The new worldview clearly demonstrates that economic and social outcomes carry over generationally. This means that wealth, and not just income, matters. It also means that, for the many instances in which the US government enabled or facilitated resource theft from communities of color—land from Indigenous people, labor value from enslaved people, housing value from Black Americans, property from Japanese Americans—a debt is still due, and reparations are owed. This contrasts with ideas of wealth as earned, and of private families as deserving (or undeserving) based on merit.
- **Individuals and collectives.** Because much of our current economic standing is due to racialized rules that apply to whole groups of people, the protagonist in any economic and political story must be the collective community in addition to individuals. The older economics focused on individual actors and private collectives, but not on the effects of racial or group identity.
- **Public and private.** Public goods matter. Public employment matters. In a variety of ways, the federal government has often provided goods and services to people of color where the private market would not—from public provision of broadband (or, 75 years ago, rural electricity) to municipal jobs to universal pre-K, childcare, and health care. This is contra to neoliberalism’s relentless faith in private market provision.
- **The importance of economic and political history.** There is no present without the past, as the current legacy of past economic rules and decisions shows us. Relative status is not static; we cannot understand today’s relative status, and solve for greater equality, without understanding the factors that have driven that status. The older economics took a person’s standing as given, without considering historical roots or precedent.



These are structural demands. As such, they remind us that some of the responses we have seen from mainstream institutions and elite influencers to the groundswell for racial justice are insufficient. Advertisements in support of the movement, or pledges of charity from multinationals, still leave power structures intact. Removing racist symbols is important but insufficient if not followed by broader power sharing. Such actions are typically “reformist” reforms, and risk co-option. Even expanding social insurance without also combatting corporate power and undemocratic, lobbyist-driven political rulemaking is insufficient to the challenge before us.

The politics of a post-Trump era suggests to some that perhaps we can return to “normalcy” and get back to the way things were when racial liberalism was dominant. Overt racism and bigotry would no longer be tolerated, and calmer heads would prevail. But this “normal” never worked for many people. And there is no going back.

Many people still hew to the ideas of racial liberalism, whether out of belief or out of old habit. Across the political spectrum, many still default to the language of race neutrality and are often uncomfortable with conversations about the costly solutions required for ending structural racism.

A deeper underlying paradigm shift is therefore necessary. Much work remains to be done to transform our emergent narrative around racial justice into a more commonly held paradigm. The themes we highlight are grounded in a growing body of data, scholarship, and evidence, as well as in a newly urgent racial justice movement. All draw from a rich movement tradition. They also have universal appeal.

Given the white supremacist backlash and weaponization of 2020’s demand for racial justice, developing a new, more widely available narrative will require a political fight as well as ongoing strategic acumen. As Maurice Mitchell argues, “We recognize this is not simply an issue fight, this isn’t simply a narrative war—what we think we’re experiencing is a social and cultural realignment” (Barrón-López and Thompson 2020). Bringing themes led by the movement, sharpened by the movement, and now central to the movement into the mainstream of American politics will not be easy. But other transformations—away from the system of legalized enslavement, away from de jure Jim Crow, away from the National Origins Act as the foundations of our immigration system—have happened in American history. The time is ripe for a Third Reconstruction.



CONCLUSION

The new racial justice movement—and the stark, often horrific racial conditions that catalyzed uprisings worldwide—has revealed the twin failures of neoliberalism and racial liberalism.

Neither lived up to its promise of shared prosperity, greater racial equality, or greater racial justice. The new racial justice movement and new economics movement share much in common. The call for a recognition of historical truth, for real material equity, and ultimately for a freedom based not in market transactions but in self-determination, all require structural changes.

Power relationships within a market-based society have changed somewhat over the last century. But they remain entrenched in racialized capitalism and a politics that have yet to fully reckon with those deep roots. Many thus continue to believe in a skills-based, opportunity-focused liberalism that denies the history and present effects of race-based economic stratification. Therefore, our mainstream politics has yet to recognize, prioritize, and make central the reckoning, race equity, and self-determination that a multiracial democracy would require.

The work of the racial justice movement over the last decade shows how we all can move forward.

We can make clear strategic moves to help consolidate a new paradigm for racial justice that meets the moment.

We can make sure that the current federal emphasis on outcomes—labor, housing, education, health, transportation, and general well-being—for people of all races becomes part of our new governing common sense and government institutions. We can argue for jurisprudential change, replacing the 1970s' race-neutral legal standards with race-conscious interpretations of our laws and constitutions.

We can make the compelling case that racial justice makes all of us materially better off.



And we can remind all Americans that there is no justice without racial justice, and that our democracy must be multiracial. In so doing, we can bring that paradigm, and its core values, to a broader group of Americans.

This means arguing for a democracy that is free of domination—racial or otherwise—in a way that recasts American “freedom” in its most morally appealing sense, reminding us that we can still live up to our country’s greatest ideals (Rahman 2019).

Will a new progressivism be born from the ashes of 20th century liberalism? Such a vision has been imagined, catalyzed, and carried by a new movement. It has been supported by a new way of thinking about our problems and our solutions. And it has been pushed into the mainstream of American life—welcomed by many, resisted by some—by a new politics. We see a new alliance, centered in movements led by people of color and appealing to, and joined by, Americans of all backgrounds.

What happens next, and whether a multiracial democracy for the 21st century can come into being, depends on the strength of those politics. Political change of this magnitude will not just happen. It will require leadership and persuasion—grassroots power, political courage from elected officials, and popular and political will to challenge the racist structures of our governing institutions.

We believe that the new politics must be powered by a shared belief, vision, and narrative that recognize this truth: The promise of American democracy rests in something we have yet to achieve as a nation—shifting, and sharing, power to build an equitable economy and society across racial lines.



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