Race Publics

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RACE PUBLICS

Civic illiberalism, or race after Reagan

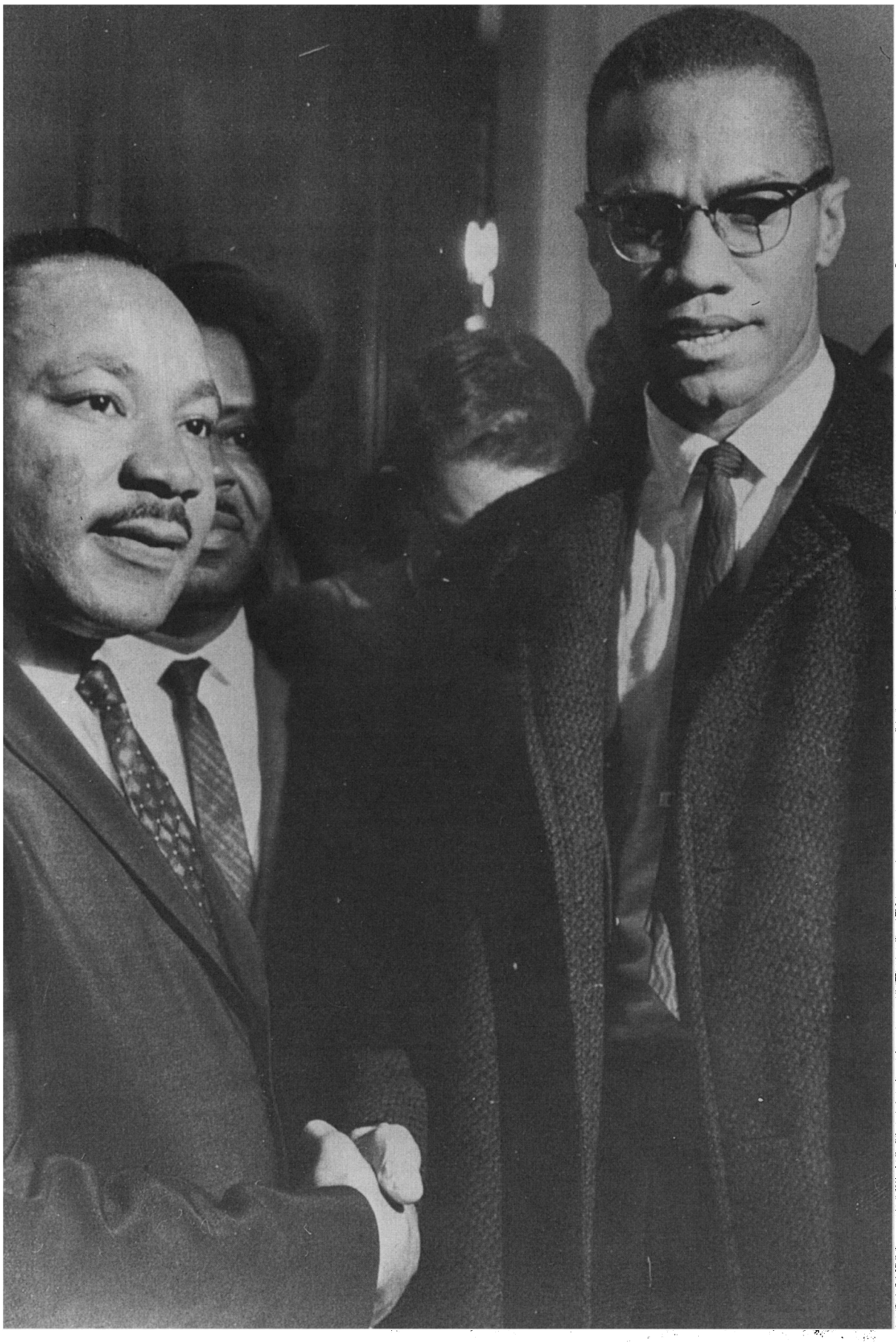
John Brenkman

The last two decades have born witness to a profound transformation of American politics, a transformation emblematized by the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. One need look no further than the Republican takeover of both houses of the Congress to observe that the spectrum of American political opinion has shifted dramatically to the right since the Reagan-Bush era. What has been insufficiently observed and what is perhaps crucial to understanding the dynamics of this moment in American political history is how Reaganism succeeded in dislocating a value painstakingly established in the years following the Second World War. Reaganism excised *racial justice* from public discourse, transforming this powerful, tenuously shared expression of a common good into a tabooed slogan.

A chasm seems to separate us from the time when racial justice was becoming part of the national purpose. A sign of this chasm is the intensity with which "Malcolm-and-Martin" have recently emerged within the black public sphere as powerful icons, beckoning from a distant past: twins and rivals, martyrs and ideals, whose very return seems to diminish, even chastise, the leaders who have come since. From Eugene Rivers' attempt to synthesize Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., into a single, unified emblem of black political experience and thought, to Spike Lee's juxtaposition of their irreconcilable words at the end of *Do the Right Thing*—"Violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both impractical and immoral. I'm not against violence in self-defense."—black intellectuals and artists are still powerfully and deeply summoned by their conflicting images.

At the heart of the continuing relevance, even urgency, of their contrary messages is the fact that both King and Malcolm articulated a moral vision of racial injustice in America, and sought to define a politics that, in being sustained by that moral vision, would overcome the injustices themselves. But racial injustice was experienced differently by these two

UPI/Bettman



January 20, 1992: Candidate Bill Clinton speaks at a Martin Luther King Day celebration

Alex Brandon, AP/Wide World

leaders, giving rise to very different symbols of evil, very different images of justice.

Malcolm X's prison conversion to the Nation of Islam was an experience of *purification,* as he overcame his addictions to tobacco, drugs, and alcohol and felt cleansed by fasting and giving up pork. He associated his former addictions and habits with the influence, the weight, the burden, of the white world upon him. His renunciations of those influences provided, in turn, an emphatic experience of coming into freedom. Freedom thus took the form for Malcolm X of a separation from everything associated with the white world, and his rigorous moral discipline and religious submission took on the meaning of liberation.

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s moral vision

developed out of an altogether different experience. The discipline he and his followers practiced was that of non-violence as a political strategy of *confrontation*—with police, courts, and violent whites. As a political discipline, civil disobedience denounced unjust laws in the name of higher laws, and at the same time prefigured a new civil order based on equal rights and mutual obligations. As a moral stance, non-violence also required the arduous task of imagining that the humanity of your oppressor or antagonist outweighed and would outlive the violence and harm he perpetrated against you. The experience of this non-violence, including the violence it brought down on the protesters themselves, projected liberation as reconciliation—a reconciliation between races, a reconciliation within a single, shared polity.

For Malcolm the evil of racial injustice was symbolized in impurity and dependence. For King it was symbolized in hatred and violence. Both visions arose from the fabric of everyday experience, and they both fused out-of-the-ordinary self-mastery or self-discipline with a forceful articulation of injustice and justice. Moreover, both King and Malcolm looked to a process of persuasion and learning that had to encompass whites as well as blacks. Even in the midst of his most ferocious chauvinism and separatism, Malcolm believed his purpose was "to devote . . . my life to telling the *white man* about himself—or die." The imperative of persuasion and learning permeated every aspect of the civil rights movement under King's direction. Civil disobedience was designed to inaugurate a learning process within communities—and within the nation—by precipitating confrontations that forced people to reassess, often agonizingly, their values, perceptions, habits.

While the Nation of Islam worked to organize a separatist black community and fostered millennial expectations of the fall of white people, it also always taught strict obedience to civil authorities. King, by contrast, organized confrontations with civil authority and gave his movement a political dynamic that was without corollary in the Nation of Islam. By the time of his break with Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm was acutely aware of this political absence; his own mastery of mass media as a vehicle of political expression and organization had carried him beyond the Nation's boundaries. He had, in short, created a new kind of engagement in, and with, the public sphere. It is clear from the closing chapter of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* that in 1965, on the eve of his death, Malcolm was still seeking an apt political vision to synthesize Black Nationalism and his new universalist perspective. In the film *Malcolm X,* Spike Lee captures that moment of quandary in the brief scene where Malcolm has taken refuge alone in the New York Hilton. Beleaguered, pursued, he is shown thoughtfully, perhaps enviously, watching TV news footage of civil rights confrontations in the South as he puzzles over the direction of his Organization of Afro-American Unity.

The discourses of Malcolm and King belonged to the protest tradition of African American publicness. Protest does not merely seek to make an opinion known within the established political order; it aims to alter the very structure of participation and the very horizon of discussion and debate. King found and Malcolm sought a grammar of political action

that could give form—that is, lend reality—to what were fundamentally moral visions. Too often theorists and critics neglect the moral dimension of the public sphere. But the transformation of the public sphere in the wake of the Reagan Revolution has, to a significant degree, hinged on the massive alteration of the moral-political values that organize national political debate. The terms of policy and of protest, the prevailing consensus and the language of political criticism, the meaning of publicness itself, have all been affected by this transvaluation of values.

The "public sphere" is a crucial but messy concept. The most important attempts to provide a theory of it, beginning with the invaluable work of Jürgen Habermas, tend to subordinate the empirically rich question of the formation of publics and communicative forms to some general overriding model of an ideal public sphere or, alternatively, of a hegemonic versus counterhegemonic public sphere. But the public sphere is not really a "sphere" in the sense of a self-enclosed or institutionally autonomous zone of communication. As a feature of modern societies, it is the space or opening in which information, opinion, and criticism can thrive independent of government dictate or state control. The public sphere in this sense belongs to, and nourishes, civil society; on the other hand, civil society and the state are not strictly separated but overlap and interpenetrate, as can be seen in the many hybrid institutions of the public sphere, from privately owned, government-regulated media to publicly financed universities.

Nor can the public sphere be analyzed through a singular methodology, since it manifests itself simultaneously as discourses, as institutions, and as publics. While I am preoccupied in this essay with the discursive or rhetorical formation of the public sphere since Reagan-Bush, and especially with the moral dimension of political persuasion, it is necessary to remain mindful that the public sphere is made up of a web of institutions, and that the formation of publics is an ongoing, protean process. Even the idea of publics needs to be multifaceted, since a public can be examined variously as an audience or a market or a constituency.

The idea of the black public sphere is not uncontroversial and can be extremely misleading if reified into *the* black public sphere, as though the communicative forms and publics of African Americans were not interwoven with the public sphere in general. It is also misguided to think of the black public sphere as an internally unified field of expression or opinion. Public spheres are structured spaces of debate and contention, even when they establish some prevailing consensus. The whole process through which leaders or spokespersons emerge to lay claim to representing a larger community, or the "people," is itself highly contentious, continually volatile.

African Americans have been neutralized as a constituency in national politics

Nevertheless, there *is* a black public sphere. Through numerous cultural and political initiatives, African Americans create and transform discourses, institu-

tions, audiences, markets, and constituencies which help determine the forms and meanings of publicness in American society.

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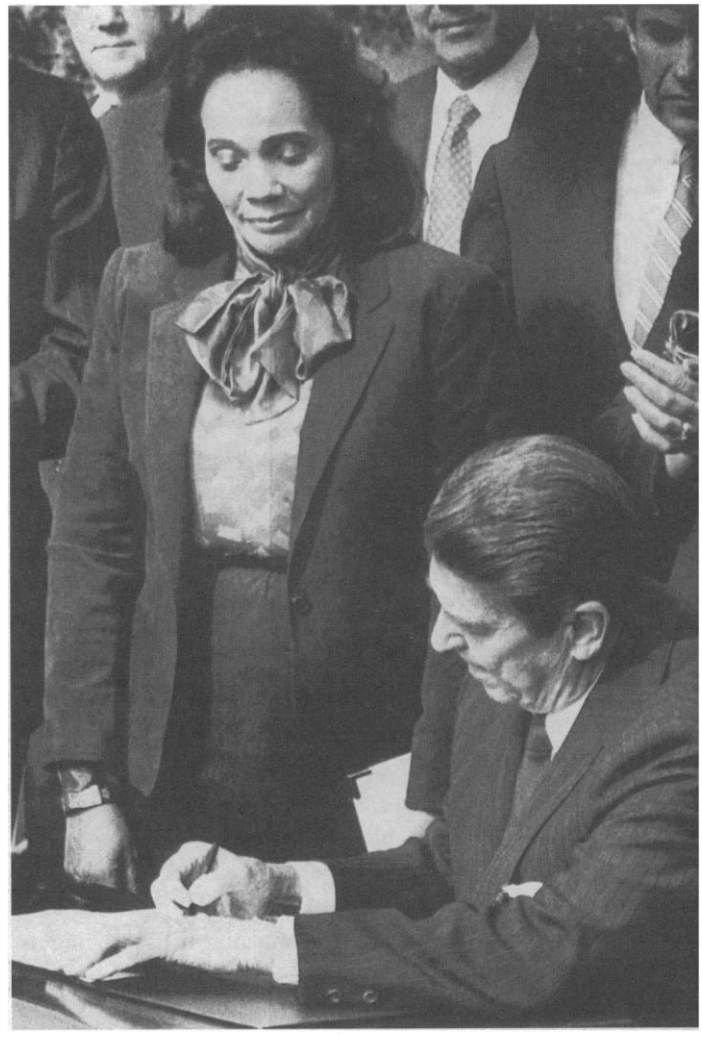
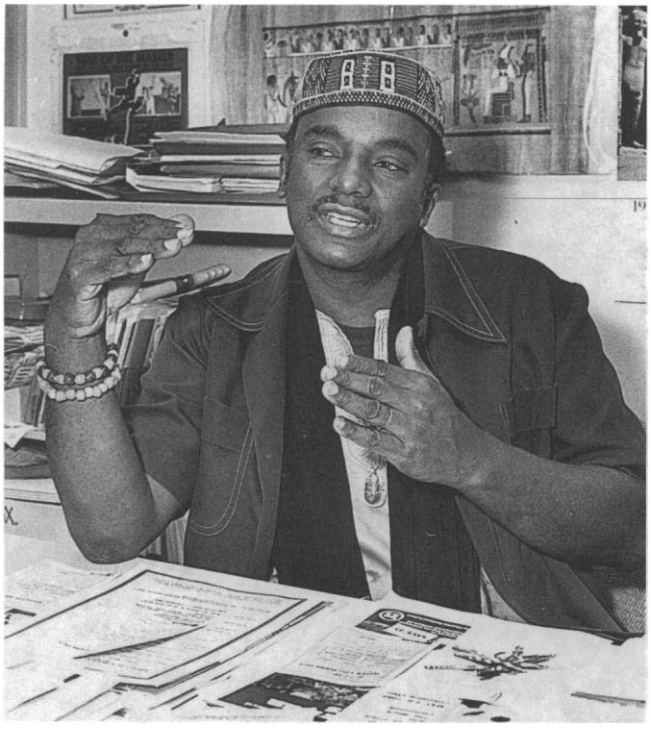
How has the radical alteration of the public sphere affected the development and the shape of the black public sphere? At first blush there is a kind of paradox, for even as Reaganism successfully shattered black political agendas and gutted vital social programs, the black public sphere grew in reach and complexity. African Americans have undertaken initiatives throughout civil society to build new institutions and create new forms of communication and criticism. The interaction of the black public sphere with mass culture and the national mass media has multiplied, through developments as diverse as *The Cosby Show,* the new black cinema, and Nike's marketing strategies. A new generation of African American intellectuals has redrawn the boundaries between academic and public culture, engaging in forms of cultural debate and commentary as varied as scholarly essays and autobiography, the polemical broadside and the political sermon. Various new magazines, from *Emerge* to *Transition* and *Reconstruction* have demonstrated the economic and intellectual vitality of diverse segments of the black reading public.

Yet even as these black publics have grown—as audiences and as markets—African Americans have been in effect neutralized as a constituency in national politics, as participants in the national political discourse. This paradoxical disjunction between the growth of the black public sphere and its political impact is a measure of how deeply Reagan-Bush altered the nation's public culture.



November 2, 1983: President Ronald Reagan signs legislation establishing a national holiday in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. King's widow, Coretta Scott King, looks on
Rich Lipski, UPI/Bettman

Forceful responses to just this alteration did much, of course, to extend and diversify the black public sphere. Black elected officials found ways of building significant interracial constituencies in several major cities and congressional districts; it is generally acknowledged that holding those constituencies together has required politicians who artfully synthesize pragmatic approaches to policy and nearly unanimous support from black vot-



CUNY Professor Leonard Jeffries

F. M. Kearney, Impact Visuals

ers. Jesse Jackson's two presidential campaigns gave voice to an anti-Reagan agenda and brought millions of minority and poor voters into the political process. Formal and informal organizations have created networks among black professionals capable of influencing government or corporate policy (the Black Congressional Caucus struggled mightily to become influential, culminating in its lobbying effort for the restoration of President Aristide); they also help raise the capital and pool the talents required to undertake new ventures in communication and culture. At the same time, many writers and filmmakers brought an increasingly complex and diverse African American tradition to new publics, revitalizing cultural nationalism while simultaneously expanding the influence of black culture on American culture as a whole. Such developments were a bulwark against Reaganism and remain vital resources for political change.

Other developments within the black public sphere, however, bear the excision of racial justice from the national discourse like a scar. I have in mind three phenomena of the 1980s—the new black conservatism, Afrocentrism, and the media-centered politics of racial confrontation associated in New York with Al Sharpton, Vernon Mason, and Alton Maddox, Jr.—all of which, despite other political differences, take that excision to be a permanent and irreversible condition of American politics. In these three discourses, the imperatives of moral-political persuasion that King and Malcolm elaborated have undergone a profound transformation.

The new black conservatism is itself a product of the gains of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Its most forceful and representative spokesmen have been beneficiaries of the educational opportunities that have fostered the extraordinary growth of the black middle class. As Stephen Carter's autobiographical *Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby* vividly demonstrates, the life-pattern of the new conservatives is beset by a particular conflict: the promises of civil rights legislation have largely been fulfilled at the level of their personal success (career, income, tenure, etc.), but their professional peers, and white society as a whole, remain reluctant to recognize those successes as truly earned. Rather than confronting this white backlash to affirmative action, the black neoconservatives seek to salvage their self-esteem by joining in the denunciation of "preferential treatment," "special pleading," and "quotas."

There is also, I believe, a usually unstated historical assumption that informs the writings of Carter, Shelby Steele, and Stanley Crouch, namely, their belief that American society is simply not going to

undertake the massive social reforms required to give all African Americans equal participation in the economic, political, and cultural institutions of this society. Steele makes the assumption explicit in *The Content of Our Character*:

But my deepest feeling is that, in a society of increasingly limited resources, there will never be enough programs to meet the need. What I really believe is that we black Americans will never be saved or even assisted terribly much by others, never be repaid for our suffering, and never find that symmetrical, historical justice that we cannot help but long for.

The black neoconservatives have read the Reagan-Bush era as a watershed in which the forms of black participation in society have congealed and been normalized. If justice is not in the offing, what remains is self-reliance. What they then advocate is an individualistic rather than communal form of self-reliance.

These writers have recalibrated their desires and recalculated their interests in response to the times. They have broken faith with both integrationist and nationalist claims to *racial* justice by declaring that the minimal legal protections against discrimination which already exist provide equality enough to permit individual achievement and success. They thus recoup the meaning of their own achievement and success, and offer themselves as evidence that younger blacks can make it in American society even without government programs and "quotas."

The distinctive position that black neoconservatives have staked out in the spectrum of American political opinion also responds to the changing dynamics of social class among African Americans. Desegregation, equal opportunity, and affirmative action opened avenues of education and employment that in the space of a generation have enabled truly significant growth in the black working class and middle classes. At the same time, the poorest third of the black population has sunk into deeper and deeper poverty and isolation. Earlier generations of black intellectuals could picture themselves part of a Talented Tenth with the responsibility to advance conditions for the race's other ninety percent. All that has changed. The enlarged middle class has fostered a new diversification of black political opinion, including these dissident conservative voices. Moreover, the underclass to which the abandoned third of the black population belongs is not so easily an object of identification and solidarity for the new middle-class intellectuals. Social critics like Crouch and Carter shun the popular culture of inner-city black youth, hip-hop and rap, failing to see in it a language of social criticism or ciphers of collective aspirations. The black neoconservatives tend to view the problems of the underclass as a matter of self-reliance and personal motivation.

At what might seem the opposite pole of the political and cultural spectrum are those radical strands of Afrocentrism which attempt to turn the black public sphere in on itself in a search for a symbolic and institutional space in which self-expression, mutual recognition, and racial solidarity might develop unhampered by white racism. Yet these permutations on black nationalism share the black neoconservatives' most basic assumption: that, as regards race, the legal and institutional framework of American society is unsusceptible to reform. The absence of racial

justice in the national political discourse is treated as an unalterable fact, evidence of the permanence of racism.

Leonard Jeffries' mythification of racial difference as a global opposition between the Sun People and the Ice People and Molefi Kete Asante's total program for remaking one's personal and collective identity according to principles of "Africanity" hold out African identity as a compensation for the alienations and injustices of everyday life. Like the form of black nationalism Malcolm X ultimately rejected, the Afrocentrism of Jeffries and Asante offers a millennial anticipation of liberation through racial solidarity, not a program of social reform. The ideal of a completely autonomous black public sphere inflects the cultural styles and educational projects of Afrocentrism. Built on a counterfeit notion of the unity of all African culture, culture gets reduced to identity, identity to solidarity. Ironically, this form of cultural nationalism disavows the essential hybridity which has always characterized black culture. It absents itself from the contentious, unpredictable evolution of black culture in the context of the New World.

The constituency whose beliefs and fears have been most significantly molded to their racial identity in the 1980s are whites

While Afrocentrism strives to build an autonomous black public, the politics that Al Sharpton, Vernon Mason, and Alton Maddox, Jr., practiced in the late 1980s sought to create a distinctive form of protest capable of seizing the terms of debate, however briefly, in the local mass media. As media-savvy as Malcolm X, they mounted intense campaigns around highly charged criminal cases—the Howard Beach killing of Michael Griffith, Tawana Brawley's accusations of kidnapping and rape, the murder of Yusuf Hawkins in Bensonhurst. Their efforts were marred by wild claims, lies, and irresponsible tactics.

They departed from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s protest tradition by failing to bring their grievances to bear on specific, deeply entrenched policies or laws or practices. They had no goal beyond the dramatization of the grievance. Many community leaders have remarked on the failure of these protests to leave any plans for continuing activity in their wake. Predicated on the conviction that American society in fact could not redress legitimate black grievances or further racial equality, these leaders' strategy in effect aimed for irresolution.

It is extremely important, however, not simply to join the chorus of denunciations of Sharpton, Mason, and Maddox. For that chorus has illegitimately projected them as virtual exemplars of black political attitudes in the 1980s. Moreover, the critics typically fail to ask why these media campaigns were so powerful, why, however briefly, they fascinated and energized blacks and frightened and alienated whites.

The campaigns were a kind of Rorschach of the crisis of the public sphere. The white perception of contemporary urban life almost universally associates blacks with crime. At the same time, the institutions of criminal justice have for most urban blacks an aura of illegitimacy; they do not expect justice from the courts,

The Reverend Al Sharpton
Mery Levin, Impact Visuals

they do not expect protection from the police. Moreover, as the Reagan years marched forward, the needs and interests of urban blacks were substantially excluded from political debate. When a gang of whites chased Michael Griffin to his death, when Tawana Brawley accused whites of raping her, when Yusuf Hawkins was shot to death in front of a threatening mob of white men, what the public sphere suddenly had to register were evidence and symbols of white criminality, black vulnerability to crime, the lack of police protection, and, most significantly, the improbability of justice being served.

All of the phenomena I have outlined—black neoconservatism, Afrocentricity, media-centered grievance protests—are responses, however inadequate and symptomatic, to the transformation of the public sphere in the Reagan-Bush era. In the rhetoric of their discourses and in the grammar of their political actions, these 80s phenomena indicate important lines of division and debate within the black public sphere. While the intellectuals and leaders who have shaped these trends variously declare their continuity with Martin Luther King, Jr., or Malcolm X, much has been lost in the translation. The neoconservatives have in fact abandoned King's visionary, confrontational politics, and the synthesis of black nationalism and universalist morality which Malcolm was seeking at his death does not find resonance in the rhetoric of Jeffries or Asante.

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The American *res publica* has come to look more and more like *race publics.* Neoconservatives and neoliberals berate black leaders, usually singling out Al Sharpton or the Afrocentrists, for pushing politics based on racial identity. They object to traditional liberals and radicals for "injecting race" into political debate, for de-

fending "race-based" social programs, for organizing constituencies and movements "by race."

The political public sphere and the electorate have indeed been contoured according to "race" and racial identity. But the constituency whose beliefs and fears have been most significantly molded to their racial identity in the 1980s are *whites.* White race identity and the racism it inevitably underpins played a decisive role in electoral politics. The racial anxieties and animosities of a bloc of white voters has had an inordinate impact on elections and policies in the last decade and a half.

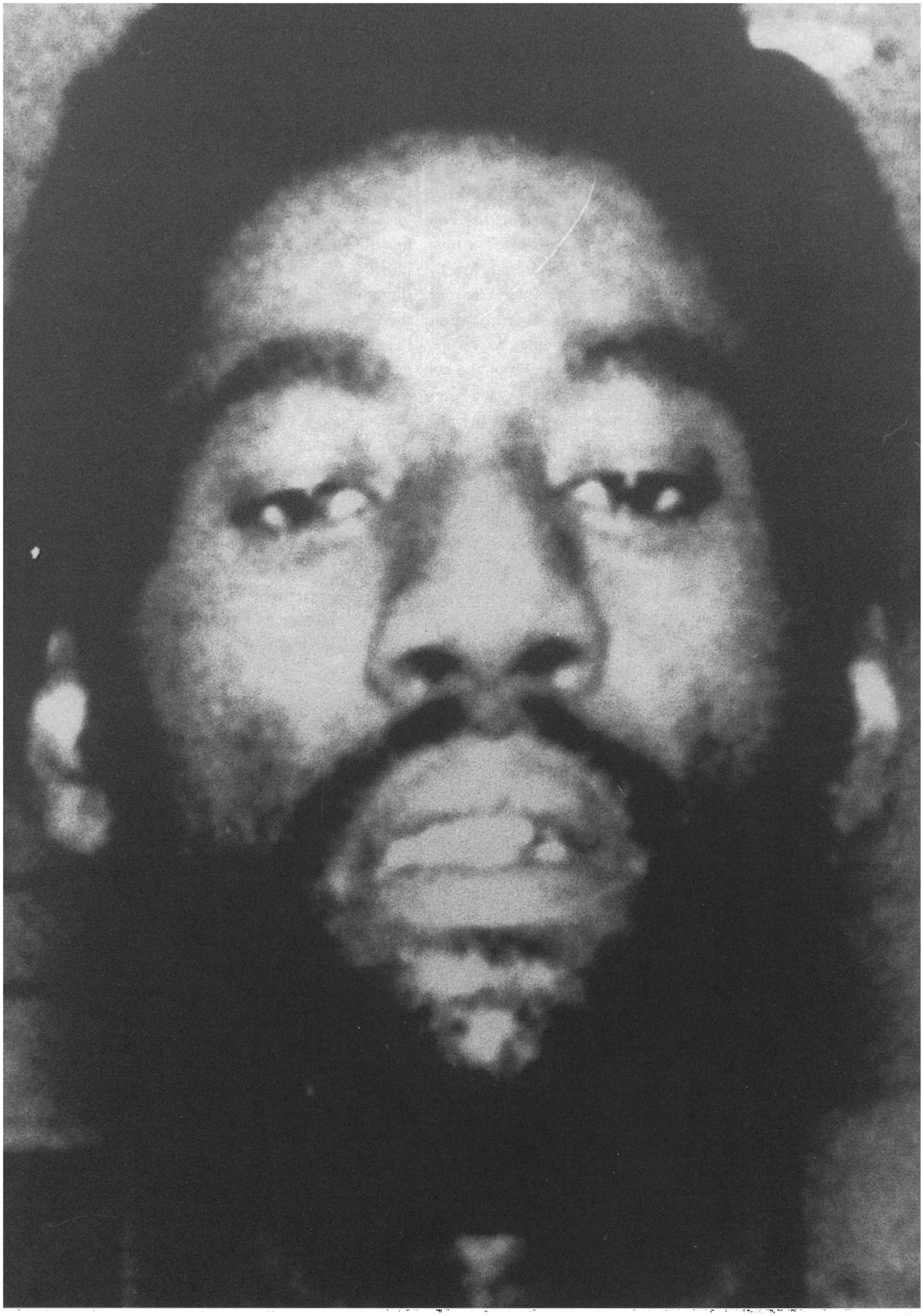
Indeed, the infusion of "race" into electoral politics went hand-in-hand with the excision of *racial justice* and *racial equality* from political discourse. Being *white* has often been a refuge and compensation for various social groups experiencing decline, failure, or disempowerment. But while George Wallace in America in 1968 or LePen in France today could mount an openly racist political campaign, declarations of racial prejudice are now—for now—taboo in American political debate. They are required to be covert, the efforts of Charles Murray and the late Richard Herrnstein notwithstanding. Indeed, racial appeals to whites must be expressed in "race-neutral" terms, even with open disdain for racial categories.

Mounting such a political task and honing such a complex rhetorical strategy evolved slowly, just as it took work to expunge from the national political consensus values that had come to express the promise of ending centuries of dehumanization, exploitation, and neglect. That work was the achievement of the Republican Party, a task begun as soon as the monumental voting rights, housing, and civil rights laws of the mid-60s had been enacted.

In broad strokes, the backlash began when Richard Nixon capitalized on the Wallace movement and pursued the Southern Strategy of 1972. By the late 70s, the "tax revolt" fueled a repudiation of the welfare state with a racially charged polarization of "taxpayers against tax recipients." Reagan's 1980 election campaign capitalized on this polarization, extending it to an attack on quotas as well as food stamps and AFDC and generalizing it into a rejection of "government interference" in the economy. At the same time, Budget Director David Stockman pursued economic policies expressly designed to further bankrupt the Federal Government, the repository of black aspirations for justice and fair treatment since Reconstruction. Reagan deepened this strategy in 1984 by tapping the fears and angers of lower- and middle-income white workers who blamed their declining economic and social standing on blacks; these Reagan Democrats joined his crusade against welfare, affirmative action, busing, and public employees. Appeals to racial justice were in effect rendered irrelevant in American politics. By 1988, Republicans could run the Willie Horton ads without seriously exposing their candidate to the taint of racism.

What I have just described follows the general outline of Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall's trenchant analysis of the impact of Reagan-Bush politics on the Democratic Party in their 1991 book, *Chain Reaction.* They contend that white working-class and lower-middle-class voters, who had once anchored the New Deal coalition, fled the Democratic Party because they increasingly perceived its

Willie Horton
AP/Wide World



"identification with" civil rights and blacks as well as with feminists and gays. Mondale in 1984 and Dukakis in 1988 remained trapped in a rhetoric whose meaning had been altered from below by voters who consistently reinterpreted the candidates' slogans in racial terms. Mondale's pledge, for example, to restore "'fairness' in the distribution of the tax burden" was "heard as advocating a redistribution—*from* whites *to* the black and Hispanic poor."

Meanwhile, the Reagan-Bush campaigns used far more sophisticated polling procedures than the Democrats to help them craft slogans which were explicitly "race-neutral" but which these same voters were known to interpret in strictly racial terms. "Quotas," "preferential treatment," "groups" were so many codewords that appealed directly to the attitude held by many whites that government had to direct resources away from minorities.

The Edsalls' book was written to influence the Democratic primaries and presidential campaign of 1992. The book is remarkable on two counts. On the one hand, it is an insightful diagnosis of the rhetorical transformation of the public sphere; there emerges from it a clear picture of precisely how the Republicans excised *racial justice* from the nation's political discourse. On the other hand, the book is at the same time a callow blueprint meant to teach the Democrats how to complete just this process of excision and cash in on it. The Edsalls were on the forefront of Democratic analysts and intellectuals who devoted themselves to discovering how Democrats could oust George Bush from the White House. Their views overlap significantly with those of E. J. Dionne, Jr., Jim Sleeper, Christopher Lasch, and Mickey Kaus.

These commentators shared the view, first, that Democrats could not win a presidential election without winning back the segment of the electorate usually called the Reagan Democrats; and, second, that these voters typically despised the Democratic Party's support of the "rights revolution." An unspoken assumption, of course, was that blacks, always numerically important to Democratic victories, could be counted on to vote Democratic even if the campaign ignored them. As Andrew Hacker has remarked, "for all practical purposes, the 1992 contest was staged before an all-white electorate."

The new strategy of persuasion devised by the Edsalls, et al., was, as we know, adopted by the Clinton campaign from the earliest primaries on. It emphasized approaches to general economic recovery ("It's the economy, stupid."), distanced candidate Clinton from blacks by repudiating black cultural nationalism while criticizing extremists (the attack on Sister Souljah), and by diminishing the presence of any black agenda in the party's platform and program (the isolation of Jesse Jackson), and dissociated candidate and party from Democratic welfare policies of the past, particularly by supporting workfare.

Voters in 1994 saw neither sincerity nor principle in Clinton's domestic agenda

Having belatedly identified the group of voters who had been wrested away by

the Republicans, the Democrats of 1992 sought to square the party's political stances and rhetoric with those voters' most entrenched attitudes. Herein can be seen an increasingly important feature of the public sphere in mass democratic electoral politics, as Habermas glimpsed thirty years ago. Politicians have heightened their ability to measure, adjust, or predict the public impact of their positions, their slogans, their symbols. Sophisticated polling can track demographically specific voter attitudes over time and use focus groups to test potential messages. The overwhelming temptation is to treat a particular constituency's values and prejudices as simple givens, intractable convictions. Political persuasion becomes the effort merely to harmonize a message with those convictions.

This style of thinking permeated the Clinton campaign, which never seriously registered the need, urgent or long-term, to confront the harmful, deeply distorted racial outlooks that are encysted within the American electorate. A truly significant segment of the polity—in essence, a substantial bloc among middle-class and working-class whites, especially suburbanites and distressed industrial workers—is locked into an entire set of racially antagonistic attitudes. Among these voters the learning process inaugurated by the civil rights movement stalled long ago.

Harkening back to Reagan's diatribes against "welfare queens" in 1980, this bloc of much sought-after voters has remained convinced that social programs which target the needs of blacks and Hispanics are intrinsically unfair. They believe that the prime source of their own economic insecurity is welfare and affirmative action. When the Democratic Party had its pollster Stanley Greenberg extensively survey Reagan Democrats after the 1984 debacle, he reported:

> *These white Democratic defectors express a profound distaste for blacks, a sentiment that pervades almost everything they think about government and politics. . . . Blacks constitute the explanation for their vulnerability and for almost everything that has gone wrong in their lives; not being black is what constitutes being middle class; not living with blacks is what makes a neighborhood a decent place to live.*

In 1990, when asked why "blacks have worse jobs, income, and housing than white people," a plurality of whites as a whole believed that blacks' lack of "*motivation* or will power" was a greater factor than either *discrimination* or inadequate "*chance[s] for education.*"

Any evocation of the civic ideal today has to face the fact that its original social underpinnings have utterly disappeared

During the Reagan-Bush years, working-class and middle-class whites were willing to accept the massive shift of wealth from the middle classes to the rich so long as they simultaneously perceived that Reagan's policies were transferring wealth from blacks to whites. The immiseration of urban blacks was not simply the unfortunate side-effect of Reaganomics. It was the tacit justification for those policies in the first place in much of the white electorate's eyes. It was what made

Sister Souljah

Jenny Brown,
Impact Visuals

the engorgement of the wealthy palatable.

Clinton's New Democrats predicated their successful attempt to seize the terms of political debate in the 1992 election on their ability to finesse and placate these voters' attitudes. This strategy possessed sufficient canniness to get Clinton elected, but it did not possess the weight and integrity he needed to govern. His first major initiative, the economic stimulus package, floundered because the very attitudes he played up to in the election undermined support for every social program not specifically tailored to the middle class. Similarly, universal health care could not survive the anxiety, legitimated by Democrats and Republicans alike, that it would help "them" more than "us." Clinton has been unable to sustain a coherent politics over time because the only principles guiding him are conservative ones which genuine conservatives articulate far more forcefully and with greater sincerity. Voters in 1994 saw neither sincerity nor principle in Clinton's domestic agenda. The Republicans' Southern Strategy has prevailed, making its most venerable and vicious exemplar chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and its most vocal, intolerant, and retrograde offspring Speaker of the House.

Neither New Democrats nor liberals will overcome the practical political flaws of Clinton's politics unless they overcome its moral-political flaw. To whatever extent our nation has laid to rest the supremacist ideology that gripped the South and the overt prejudice and racism that prevailed in the North around 1963, we

have thus far failed to dissolve the core of racism that still taints the political consciousness of many whites and still stains the body politic. The Democratic Party of the 1990s has not had the courage to confront such attitudes, believing instead it could capitalize on them in the guise of "swing voters." But left unconfronted, these attitudes have merely fueled the careers of Southern white demagogues who nostalgically evoke life before the 1960s and who have revived, as in California's Proposition 187, racially motivated immigration policies.

It remains to be seen whether a more courageous politics can emerge from the Democratic Party. Weighing against that possibility are the intellectual foundations and social perceptions of New Democrat thought itself.

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In their effort to furnish the Clinton administration with ideas and rhetoric for its domestic policy, New Democrat intellectuals, stimultated by the Democratic Leadership Council and its Progressive Policy Institute, have fashioned a new vocabulary of social reform. It largely rests upon a changing social perception of poverty and race. The intellectuals have had the task of translating this new sensibility—what Mickey Kaus calls Civic Liberalism—into a specific vision of the polity, its politics, and its policies.

Civic Liberals declare a kind of wholesale commitment to "race-neutral" institutions and values. As with Shelby Steele's allusion to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s phrase "the content of our character," the New Democrats claim continuity with King in supporting "race-neutral" social policies and "race-transcending" politics. But in fact their ideas owe more to the corridors of the Reagan White House than to the streets of Selma. For what is meant by integration today? How is a race-transcending politics envisioned? An electoral strategy that depends upon placating racial animosities toward blacks is not "race-transcending." Social policies which have a far greater negative impact on blacks than whites are not "race-neutral." As Martin Kilson has said, we do not live in "a racially integrated society" today because "(1) the overall range and caliber of black/white social interaction is not sufficient and (2) the extent of equality for Afro-Americans is inadequate."

The New Democrats do not acknowledge that there are fundamental institutional and political barriers to racial integration in American society today. Nor do they recognize that the meanings and the forms of racial integration have to be worked out with the broad participation of blacks, across a wide spectrum of political and cultural outlooks. In these important respects, the New Democrats resemble the New Right. They have accepted the disappearance of *racial equality* from the national understanding of the common good.

Civic Liberals worry less over how to get everyone into the public square than how to make sure they behave well

Civic Liberalism also has an ambiguous, finally deceptive, relation to the important ideals it evokes from the civic republican or civic humanist tradition of

Western democratic thought. It professes commitment to the public sphere as the place where the members of society can face one another as equals, whether for purposes of debate and deliberation or conviviality and celebration or mutual defense and community service. According to Kaus, the public realm should have a "class-mixing" function, ensuring that individuals' rights and responsibilities, their contributions and influence, and the public realm should be the product of their citizenship and not of the power they derive from their wealth.

Any evocation of the civic ideal today, however, has to face the fact that the original social underpinnings of that ideal have utterly disappeared. The democratic values of the civic humanist tradition—drawn from Aristotle's idea that participation in the public life of the city, *civitas,* is the highest form of human activity—are severely tested in the modern world. The civic ideal was anchored in the social homogeneity of the citizens of ancient, medieval, and early modern cities; the ideal polity presupposed a fundamental sameness among the citizens, who made up but a fraction, the male property-owning fraction, of any republic's actual inhabitants. Equals among themselves, they were a minority among those they ruled.

How, then, can this ideal be squared with modern mass democracy, in which political participation is extended, in principle, to all social classes, to women, ultimately to all individuals regardless of race or religion? And how can it be squared with the modern metropolis, in which publicness cannot be restricted to the tastes, habits, or expressive forms of any particular faction within the society? Those questions weigh on the practices and haunt the institutions of modern democracy.

Rather than explicitly owning up to these difficulties of democratic thought and practice, leading Civic Liberals like Kaus, author of *The End of Equality,* and Jim Sleeper, whose book *The Closest of Strangers* has had a profound impact on liberal attitudes toward race in New York, exude confidence that simple adherence to the values of work and civility is all a healthy democracy requires. They believe that the terms of proper citizenship have already been carved in stone in the American polity and that it is simply the responsibility of every individual, "regardless of race," to live up to the existing rules and expectations.

It turns out that Civic Liberals have little imagination—or patience—for the actual diversity of the American polity. The public gatherings and goings-on they envision, and idealize, are in the end culturally very homogeneous. Because the Civic Liberals relish civility far more than participation, they worry less over how to get everyone into the public square than how to make sure they behave well. Just as John Stuart Mill trimmed his democratic commitments out of revulsion toward the clamor of democracy, they disdain the often raucous, disruptive, anticonformist publicness of contemporary urban life. They opt for homogeneity over plurality, civility over participation.

White neighborhoods are easily romanticized

Don't be misled by the Civic Liberals' emphasis on class-mixing or civic equality. Their vision of the ills and the possible renewal of the public sphere has everything to do with race. What has caused the erosion of the public sphere, the dis-

ruption of its civility, the decline of its vitality? For Kaus, the culprit is the "underclass"; for Sleeper, it is urban black politics. How, then, do they explain why whites resist sharing public spaces, schools, and institutions with blacks? According to Kaus, it's because of their "fear of the 'ghetto poor' underclass"; according to Sleeper, it's because of working-class and middle-class whites' resentment of the "social engineering" that forced the integration of their neighborhoods and schools in the 1960s. These fears and resentments are considered perfectly justified. While 60s liberals, who used transfer payments, affirmative action, and anti-discrimination laws to mold social policy, are blamed for inflicting the original damage to our civic culture, present-day blame falls on the underclass itself, whose life-world Kaus epitomizes as a rejection of the work ethic, and on black politicians, whom Sleeper epitomizes as media-grabbing radicals and Afrocentrists.

This entire style of analysis, with its effortless slippage from effects to causes, victims to perpetrators, incidents to principles, anecdotes to structure, ultimately produces vivid scapegoats. Kaus synechdochally reduces the underclass to pregnant black teenage girls seeking welfare payments; Sleeper reduces black politics of the 1980s to Al Sharpton and Aldon Maddox telling lies about Tawana Brawley.

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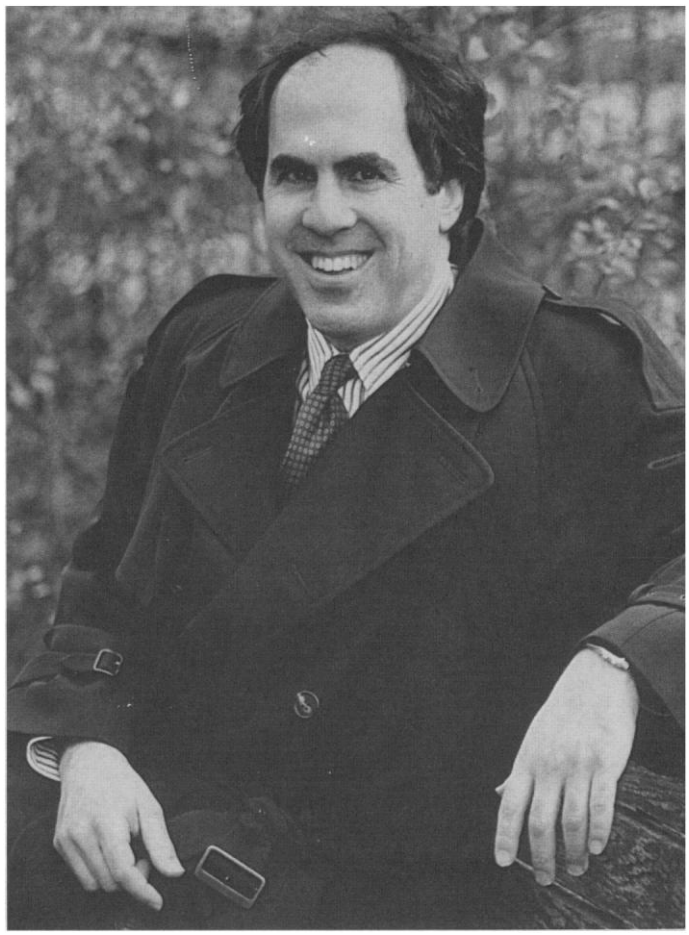
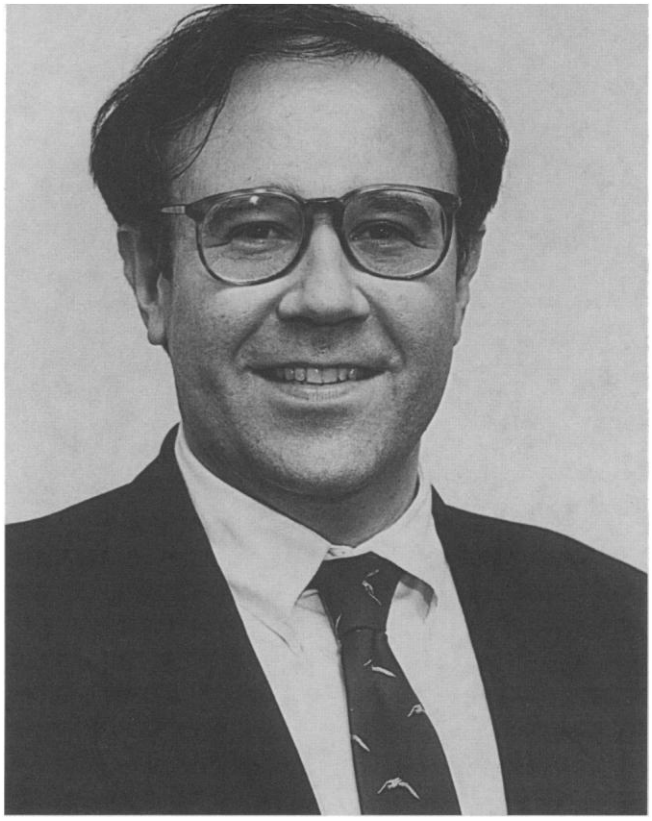
Sleeper's argument is ambitious in scope. With the aim of repairing civility and civic virtue—that is, presumably, the ability of citizens to sustain commitments to the common good—he scrutinizes many features of race and the public sphere in the context of New York City today: how race gets injected into public debate; how racial and interracial constituencies form; how black political leaders use publicity to define black agendas; how the contradictions of city government contribute to the problems of the modern, multiracial metropolis.



Mickey Kaus
Diana Walker

From what perspective can one comprehensively decipher, diagnose, and evaluate black politics in relation to the values of *civitas* and the forms of publicness which prevail in American political life?

Like many voices among the New Democrats, Sleeper is sure he possesses just that perspective. It is liberal, "race-neutral" and "race-transcending," pragmatic, and devoted to an ethic of individual responsibility. These values get defined through ever sharper repudiations of their supposed antagonists, namely, the



Jim Sleeper

positions and actions of "black militants," "their white apologists," "professional blacks," and "the white left."

Fallacies abound as Sleeper parcels out blame for New York City's racially charged politics and the worsening conditions of urban life. He illegitimately takes Maddox, Mason, and Sharpton to embody the emergent or even the prevailing political trend in New York City's black community. He likewise reduces the complex insurgency of much black culture in the 1980s to Afrocentrism. Having thus caricatured current black political and cultural trends, he holds them responsible for shredding the fragile fabric of civic culture and civic virtue in New York City.

A final fallacy, shared by the Edsalls, Lasch, and others, pictures "white ethnics" as the misunderstood victims of radical activism and liberal reform. Working-class ethnic communities are said to have suffered the brunt of 60s "social engineering"—that is, forced integration, housing projects, busing. In a narrative that the New Democrats have picked up from the New Right, Sleeper sees the roots of the miseries of the 1980s in the changes and confrontations of the late 60s:

> *The confluence of radical spite, absurd legal extrapolations, and liberal disdain for white ethnics that led to forced busing, the bloating of welfare rolls, and the ma[u]-mauing of white teachers broke the spine of New York's civic culture.*

The spine-tingling hyperbole aside, such one-sided explanations of the political conflicts of recent decades cloud the author's perspective. Sleeper's initial intention of criticizing a left-liberal agenda in order to sharpen it all but evaporates by the time he starts repudiating "radical integrationists" in the same terms and tones he uses against "militant black nationalism." His polemical certitude wipes out his empirical reliability. He so broadens the scope of what's unacceptable in black politics and so narrows what's acceptable that he can no longer account for the diversity of black political ideas and movements or their rootedness in black people's actual experiences.

Wistful reflections on the interracial nature of the civil rights movement easily slip into nostalgia for a moment that cannot be duplicated. The struggle against legal segregation in the South spawned unique strategies and alliances. Those strategies, and the harmony between liberals and activists, were bound to change once the overt legal barriers to segregation had fallen and the civil rights movement moved North, to begin attacking forms of discrimination and racial inequality that were not overtly legislated but were ingrained in the very institutions and practices of civil society.

Many were the events that interrupted the course of the civil rights movement and threw into question the will of white Americans to carry through fundamental change: King's assassination and the response to the rioting that followed, the FBI's murderous campaign against the Black Panthers, George Wallace's successes in the 1968 campaign (he won the Democratic primary in liberal Wisconsin), the election of Richard Nixon. These events do not find any place in Sleeper's narrative. From this period of history he finds salience only in the reaction of "white ethnics" against "social engineering."

But white neighborhoods are easily romanticized. Racism played a role in their very formation as geographical and symbolic spaces. As Martin Kilson and Clement Cottingham point out, white ethnic neighborhoods were historically ethnically heterogeneous, not homogeneous; not until middle- and working-class blacks sought to live in those neighborhoods did the white enclaves seek to protect their "neighborhoodness." The social identity of "white ethnics" becomes largely racial insofar as their self-perception comes to lie in being *white*; their ethnicity as Irish, Italian, or Jewish Americans is then shaped as much by the act of differentiating, and separating, themselves from blacks as by their own adherence to specific religious or cultural traditions.

Like the New Democrat electoral strategists, Sleeper simply legitimizes this subtle form of racism. The moral balance-sheet he draws up in evaluating the threats to civility is terribly skewed by his apologia for "white ethnics." *The Closest of Strangers* is filled with equivocation whenever the response of "white ethnics" to blacks is at issue. On why Boston whites responded to forced busing by enrolling their children in private schools: "in order to keep them in their neighborhood and *away from the strangers flooding into their local schools.*" Strangers? All children meet strangers in school; it is indeed a part of the supreme civic value of schooling. But "strangers" does not of course mean unknown persons here, it means *blacks.*

Even where the topic is explicitly "Black Crime, White Prejudice," Sleeper softens the evidence of white prejudice with sympathetic understanding—"we need to take a closer look at white ethnics' contention that what they hate [sic] is not color per se but the emergence of color in association with crime, [real estate] speculation, and social engineering"—

"Nationalism" is not an extremist position simply at the opposite pole from integration

while reinforcing without challenge the category of *black crime.* A symptomatic passage tells a harrowing tale from 1982 of a gang of black men rampaging through a neighborhood, invading houses, terrorizing, and robbing the inhabitants. With great flourish, Sleeper reveals, at the very end of the story, that this neighborhood was Howard Beach: "The route [the gunmen] followed was close to that followed on another December night four years later by a pack of local white youths chasing three black men, one of whom, Michael Griffith, would be killed by a passing car."

The first level of modern urban racism is the mental leap from crime to race, that

is, from the incidence of crimes committed by blacks to the idea of the criminality *of* blacks. Whites frequently turn their fear of crime into a loathing of blacks, especially black men, especially young black men, especially young black men whose demeanor does not match middle-class ideas of respectability. Rather than challenging this social perception of crime and race, which is truly debilitating to the civic bonds of the modern metropolis, the New Democrats have turned to crediting it, and indeed using it, to justify their call for a new docility and conformity in black politics.

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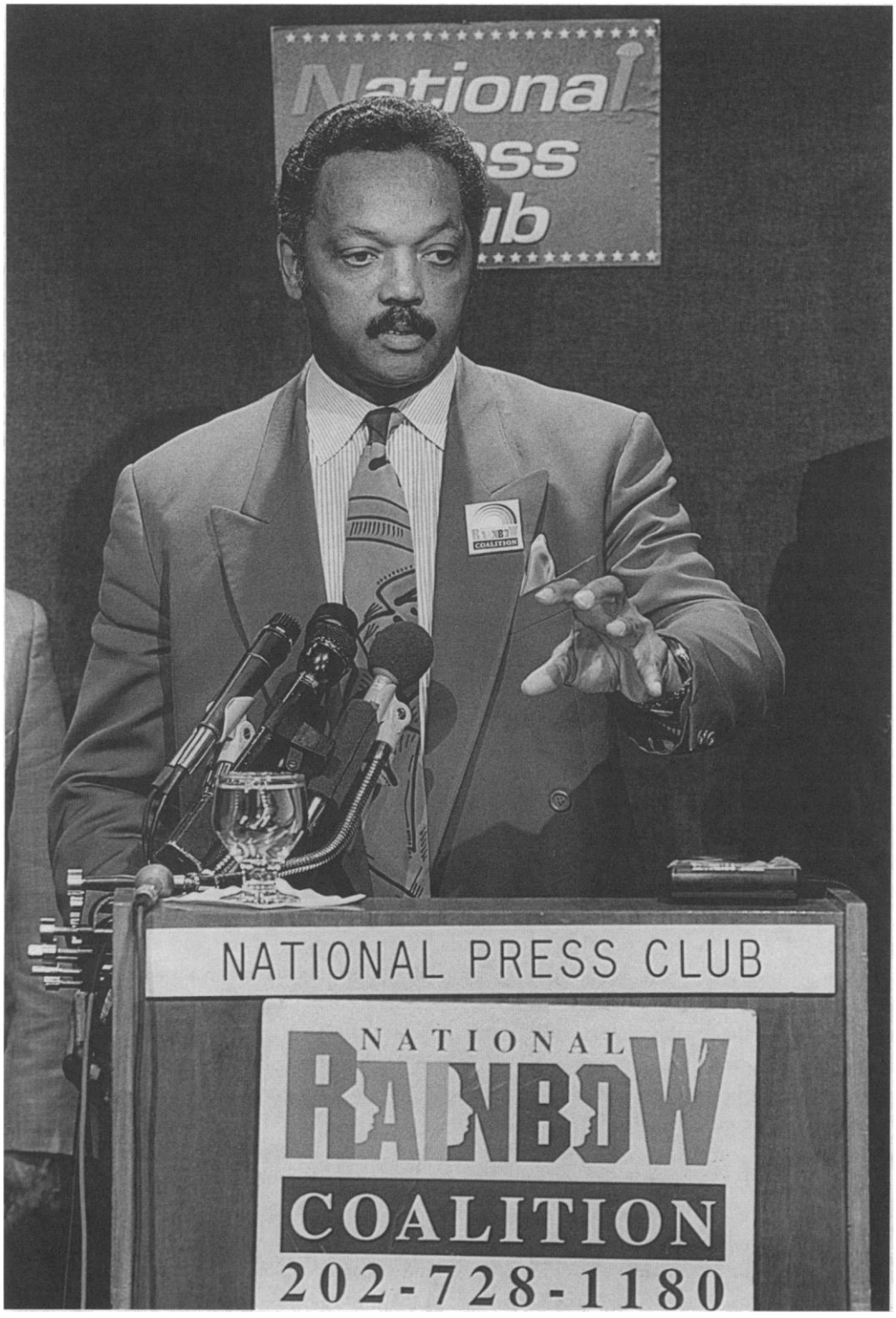
How much the New Democrats limit the range of acceptable black political behavior is revealed in the discussions of Jesse Jackson. Surely, Jackson's prime importance in the Reagan-Bush years lay in his efforts to mobilize black participation in electoral politics in the hope of establishing a national constituency that could demand recognition of its agenda. To cite Kilson, "Jackson's combination of black politics and general egalitarian politics is, at least over the long-run, intrinsically transethnic. Its basic thrust is to broaden pluralistic forces." Between the 1984 and 1988 campaigns, Jackson diversified his alliances and deepened his support among white voters, including many distressed industrial workers. Moreover, his was the only real effort to transform white working-class animosity toward blacks into common cause with them.

None of this finds its way into the New Democrats' and Civic Liberals' views of Jackson, despite their continual lip-service to pluralism, civic egalitarianism, and interracial politics. Sleeper broaches his discussion of Jackson with innuendo and *ressentiment*—"While [Muhammad] Ali was a pleasant, passing dream for the left . . . Jackson is a real, live lover, flawed, sometimes faithless, but in the end, apparently, irresistible"—and proceeds to denigrate the evolution of Jackson's leadership between 1984 and 1988. As though drawing a conclusion against Jackson, rather than from him, he stresses that the 1988 campaign was far more successful, including the New York primary, because it was "far more racially inclusive." What he refuses to acknowledge is that there can be no dramatic racial inclusiveness unless blacks are already making their presence felt as a nationally recognized constituency.

The Edsalls consider Jackson the lightning-rod of white resentment toward the Democratic Party. He is the all-purpose stigma in their analysis. His 1984 message, "Our time has come," "sent a chill down the spines of many white voters buffeted by racial resentments and by twenty years of cataclysmic racial and cultural change"; the Democrats had reason to fear giving him a prominent role in 1988 because of "the danger of provoking the unfavorable views of Jackson held by a majority of whites"; in 1990, according to the Edsalls, the Republicans won every election in which they "made race a major factor, through the issue of quotas or through campaign advertising linking the Democratic candidate to Jesse Jackson." According E. J. Dionne, Jr., author of another New Democrat handbook for 1992, *Why Americans Hate Politics,* Jackson "has his feet planted firmly in *both*



The Reverend Jesse Jackson at a Rainbow Coalition Press Conference, November 11, 1994

Rick Reinhard, Impact Visuals

The Reverend Jesse Jackson speaks at a rally in Seattle, Washington during the Machinists Union strike against Boeing, October 1989

Bill Cooke, AP/Wide World

traditions of the black movement of the 1960s—the integrationist wing that sought coalitions . . . across race lines, and the separatist wing that saw black solidarity and confrontation with whites as the only avenue of advancement." He concludes, simplistically, that only the "conciliatory" Jackson is effective "within the white community [sic]."

In the peculiar mix of high-toned morality and hard-nosed strategizing which is the signature affectation of New Democrat intellectuals, they never accept the challenge of confronting and transforming white prejudice in order to heal racial divisions. Their moral balance-sheets continually exonerate whites, whose real economic sufferings are allowed to excuse their imagined racial injuries, while downplaying the economic impact of Reagan-era policies on blacks and expecting them to subordinate their own social and political needs to the electoral agenda of the Democratic Party.

New Democrats' noisy denunciations of separatism are hollow evidence of their own commitment to integration. Integrationist-versus-separatist accounts of contemporary black politics are true to neither the facts nor the values of black

civitas. "Nationalism" is not an extremist position simply at the opposite pole from integration. "[A]mong blacks," in the words of the National Research Council's monumental 1989 study, *A Common Destiny: Blacks and American Society,* "varieties of 'nationalism' hold many positions in the continuum of ideologies between extreme separatism and extreme cultural and biological assimilation." Moreover, "the preservation of black culture and group identity" is a condition "that many blacks' definition of 'integration' requires."

African Americans have been part of American society for nearly 400 years; they do not need to undergo some special process of assimilation to fit themselves for full participation in the polity. Rather, the structure of the polity has to change in order to accommodate the plurality of blacks' political, cultural, and social values. As the black public sphere elaborates group identity and sifts and synthesizes black culture, it does the work of shaping a black constituency, indeed black constituencies, that can act in the realm of politics and public debate.

When E. J. Dionne, Jr., imagines a Jesse Jackson who might articulate integrationist values without nationalist overtones, he is merely wishing for a docile black electorate. When Jim Sleeper appeals to blacks "to distinguish that part of the black agenda which is internal to the community—in that it is primarily cultural and spiritual—from that which is political and therefore appropriate to pursue in the pluralist public arena, in liberal institutions and the news media," he draws a false line between community and polity and an ultimately repressive line between black culture and American politics. Our liberal institutions and values become ever more distorted in failing to prize black participation over black conformity. What is "appropriate to pursue in the pluralist public arena" has to be defined by the actual plurality of the citizens' aspirations and needs, not vice versa. The New Democrat and Civic Liberal response to the complexities of political participation, opinion-formation, and leadership among African Americans in the end simply pits white civility against black *civitas.* That this white civility is largely imaginary hardly blunts the effect.

The idea that the public sphere *is* race-neutral is empirically false. It is used to bolster the equally erroneous idea that the United States *has* a universal, "American," culture—typically characterized as a belief in individualism, technological progress, and the work ethic, and then extended promiscuously to include all manner of "mainstream" habits and tastes, from the nuclear family to a preference for the Boston Pops over Snoop Doggy Dogg.

Civic Liberals downplay black people's experiences of the racially charged character of publicness in our society and dismiss as uncivil or retrograde many important initiatives that black people undertake within civil society to enrich their communications with one another, to influence public debate on their own behalf, or to exert their control over specific public spaces.

Thanks to various legal and institutional achievements, the public sphere in the United States is indeed "open" to all segments of society. But, contrary to the democratic ideal of openness, it is not open to all equally. It is not genuinely "inclusive." Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has eloquently, and quite rightly, I believe, de-

fended "race-neutral" interpretations and applications of the First Amendment. The legal and constitutional principles needed to secure the *conditions* of a democratic public sphere must be race-neutral. But the political and cultural forces that actually enlarge or contract participation in that public sphere cannot be adequately understood in legal terms. Even "inclusion" is an imprecise term. Blacks are not excluded from the public sphere, any more than they are absent from public spaces. But their participation and their presence are constrained. Insofar as this inequality of participation is a racial inequality, the actually existing public sphere cannot legitimately be called race-neutral or race-transcendent.

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Philosophers and jurists teach us very little about the everyday life of the public sphere. That is more appropriately the task of novelists, filmmakers, and ethnographers. In telling their stories, they create what Mikhail Bakhtin called "chronotopes," that is, the social spaces or *topoi* within where some socially significant human action takes place at some specific moment in the actors' individual and collective histories (*chronos*). When these time-sites refer to public spaces—restaurants, city streets, barbershops—they provide a kind of cipher of the workings of the public sphere.

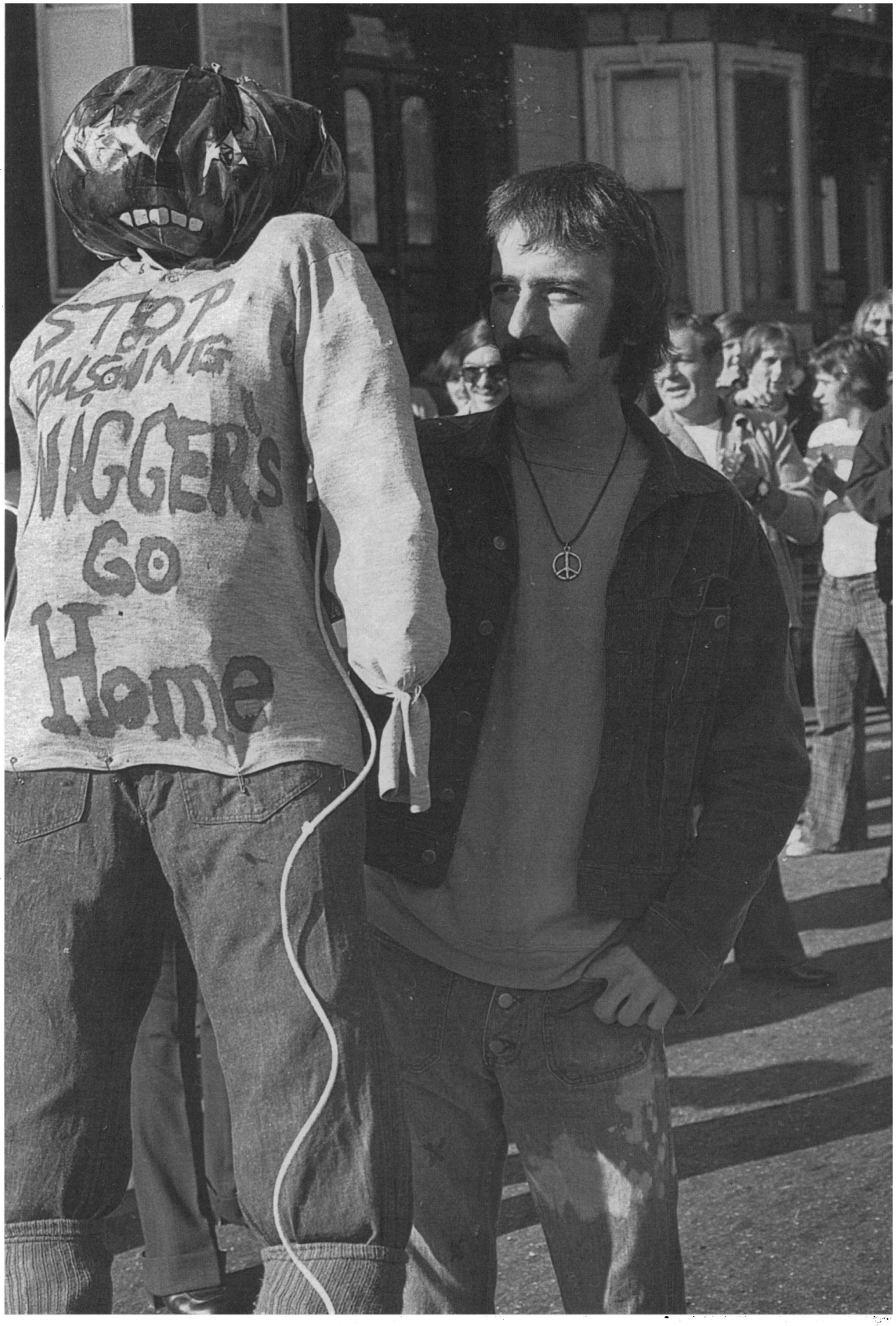
The everyday encounters of blacks and whites on city streets create the elementary choreography of urban publicness. "The black male in public" is a social phenomenon studied by ethnographer Elijah Anderson in *Streetwise,* his account of two adjoining neighborhoods in Philadelphia: the predominantly black, declining ghetto he calls "Northton," and a racially mixed, increasingly gentrified area called the "Village." Young black men's identity and demeanor are continually complicated by the social meaning of their very presence on these neighborhoods' streets.

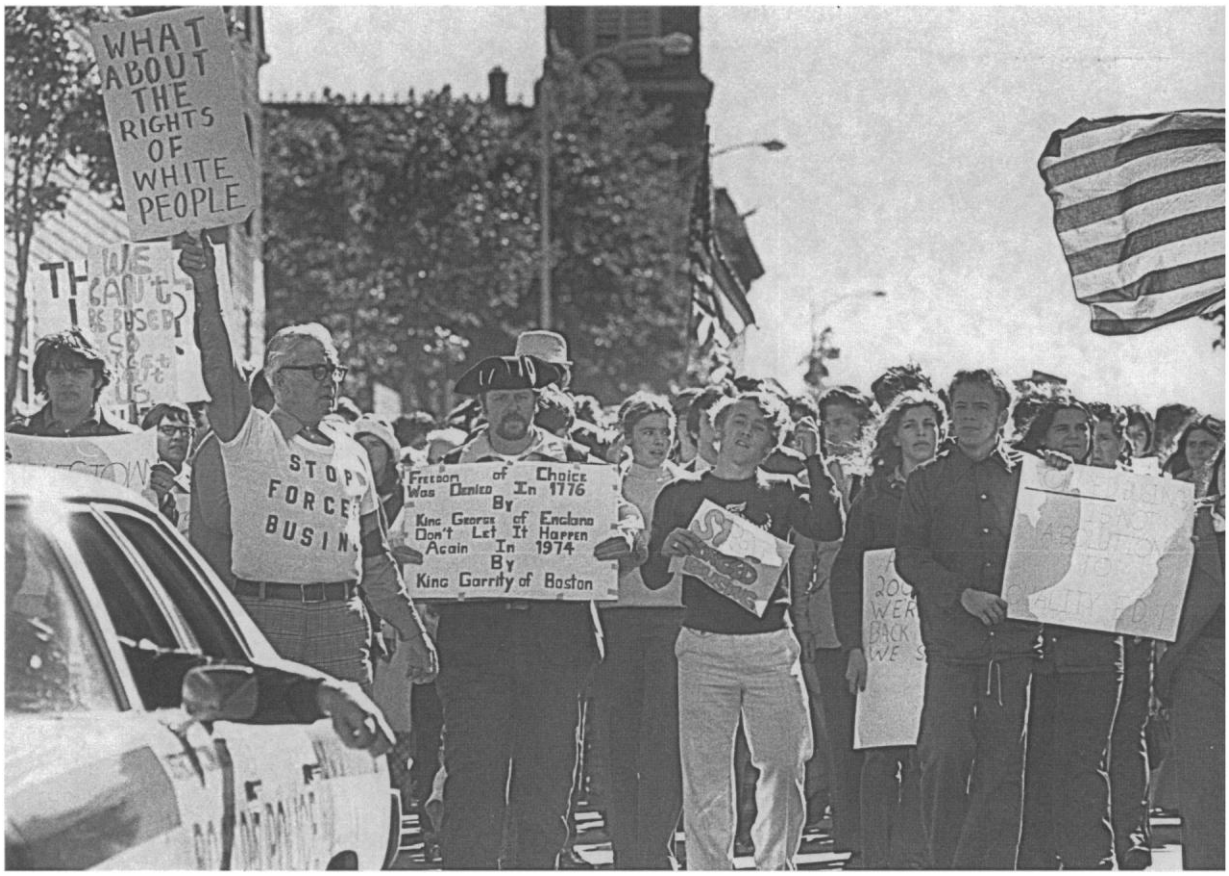
Young blacks know that "most residents ascribe criminality, incivility, toughness, and street smartness" to them, but they themselves must also alertly assess the intent of the strangers they pass on the street. They use greetings, through which blacks have traditionally expressed politeness and respect toward elders or solidarity toward one another, to test out a passerby's attitude or intent; conversely, they exhibit toughness or feign potential aggressiveness—by "getting ignorant" or "going for bad"—to discourage potential predators.

Unable to distinguish symbolic from real menace, menace from caution, caution from friendliness, whites distrust all blacks

Knowing that others, especially whites and the police, regard them with automatic suspicion, young black men may respond with displays of incivility, laughing at whites' "paranoia" and enjoying a fleeting sensation of power. But it is no less common for young black men to attempt to counteract the ascription of incivility and criminality. They might make a point of smiling at whites, opening doors for them or saying hello upon entering

Don't want you, babe: white ethnics protest the court-ordered integration of Boston public schools, September 20, 1974
UPI/Bettman





White noise: anti-busing demonstrators march in support of a school boycott by whites, September 30, 1974
UPI/Bettman

the men's room at work. One young black man conspicuously carries books to signal his civility, while another rushes to pick up the groceries a white woman drops at the store and rebags them for her. When a white woman carrying a purse hurries away from a group of black men late at night and rushes onto a porch pretending it is her home, they stop, and one of them says, "Miss, you didn't have to do that. I thought you might think we're some wolf pack. I'm twenty-eight, he's twenty-six, he's twenty-nine. You ain't gotta run from us." They pull money from their pockets. "See this, we work."

While young black men thus often "respond to prejudice by putting on a performance of civility," frequently with exaggeration for whites, "the message that they are crime-prone" continually presents them with a dilemma. "They must simultaneously prove that they are worthy of respect for their common decency, and they must protect themselves from predatory youths by looking tough and capable of 'handling the streets,' " which, of course, renders them menacing in the eyes of whites, police, and many middle-class blacks.

Meanwhile, whites do not share the black community's codes of greeting, gauging, or assessing strangers. They generally see black youth primarily through the lens of race and criminality. A young man's cautionary and defensive toughness they treat as an insignia of ill intentions. Unable to distinguish symbolic from real menace, menace from caution, caution from friendliness, they distrust all blacks. The aggressiveness that whites convey through suspicious looks and unwelcoming gestures sends a racial message to the

youths themselves. It carves public space into white and black.

The chronotope of the Village's streets unfolds a typical drama of the 1980s. As the youth of the increasingly impoverished ghetto of Northton walk through the gentrifying Village—it is on the way to the main public transportation routes—they meet and pass many who are part of the recent influx of whites into the neighborhood:

the newcomers are unaccustomed to and frequently intolerant of neighboring blacks and have not learned a viable street etiquette. The run-ins such new people have with blacks contribute to a general black view of "the whites" of the Village as prejudiced, thus undermining the positive race relations promoted over many years by egalitarian-minded residents.

The result is that the white and black communities become collapsed into social monoliths.

The race publics that shape the American *res publica* take hold in these daily transactions of the lifeworld. A spiral of mismatched meanings exchanged between blacks and whites etches the codes of race into public spaces. The public sphere as manifested in urban streets scarcely approximates an open space of mutual or reciprocal recognitions; it is an arena of conflicting meanings and misrecognitions that cannot hope to become "race-transcending" without fully recognizing race.

Among the most insightful chroniclers of 80s chronotopes is Spike Lee. *Do the Right Thing* turns Sal's Pizzeria into a time-site where race relations and property relations in the ghetto strain civility to the breaking-point. What brings down the fire this time is an explosive conflict over the very meaning of publicness.

Sal's is a crucial gathering place for the neighborhood's young people. The smoldering dispute is whether the pizzeria's white owner or its black customers will shape this space's message, style, identity. Neither Sal's nor the Korean-owned store across the street, the only places of commerce around, reflect black life. Only Love Daddy's storefront FM station secures a public space for black culture. To Buggin' Out, the wall of photo portraits of famous Italian-Americans is an affront; if black people are footing the bill, black portraits should hang on the Wall of Fame. Sal believes ownership gives him absolute say-so.

Meanwhile, Radio Raheem's "box," whose twenty "D" Energizers continually blare Public Enemy's "Fight the Power," is of course the veritable archetype of the conflict between black youth culture and urban civility and decency. The tenderness of Radio Raheem's love of the music and the box is easily eclipsed in the eyes of others by its volume and his bulk. The corner men, led by Sweet Dick Willy, cringe when he walks by. A group of Latino men scream at him as he approaches, until he, having shown the superior power of his boombox over theirs, happily retreats back down the street. Even Buggin' Out questions him if that's the only tape he's got; Radio Raheem replies it's the only tape he likes.

When Buggin' Out and Radio Raheem join forces to challenge Sal—who wouldn't serve Radio Raheem earlier until he turned off his music—the final explosion detonates. When Sal goes for his baseball bat, he is defending his say-so over the images and the music—an irrational but accurate measure of how important images and music are to creating

one of the neighborhood's few public spaces. "I just killed your fucking radio."

As Sal's Pizzeria is trashed and torched by the rioters, the flames rise as though avenging Radio Raheem's death at the hands of the police. But in the morning the ashes are simply a sign of sheer loss—the loss of Radio Raheem's life, the neighborhood's one gathering place, Mookie's job, and Sal's life-long labor creating the place board-by-board, tile-by-tile.

True to its Brechtian aesthetic, the film juxtaposes passions and exposes social forces but leaves the attentive viewer to ponder difficult moral and political choices. In provoking analysis and decision, the film itself exemplifies the deepest values of the democratic public sphere even as it dramatizes how tragically warped those same values are in the everyday forms of the public sphere.

Multiracial, multicultural cities stagger between two possibilities: the invention of new cosmopolitanisms and the eruption of racial cataclysms

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Analysis and decision, debate and deliberation—these essential processes of citizenship are also anchored in the everyday lifeworld. Civic Liberals tout the conversational model of civility but ignore the actual conversations in which opinion forms. A key chronotope of black *civitas* is often the cafe or the barbershop, where ordinary people interpret events, mimic and challenge the words of governments, courts, and leaders, and test out their views and differences.

Toni Morrison movingly renders such "crisscrossed conversations" in *Song of Solomon.* The time is 1953, the site is Tommy's Barbershop in the segregated section of a small northern industrial city, the topic is the murder of Emmett Till. The regulars burst out in rage at the radio report. They argue over what the young man might have done to bring such a fate upon himself; they dispute with one another the prospect of justice being done.

In the end, the news of the day provokes a raucous self-reflection on their own place in the scheme of things:

> *The men began to trade tales of atrocities, first stories they had heard, then those they'd witnessed, and finally the things that had happened to themselves. A litany of personal humiliation, outrage, and anger turned sicklelike back to themselves as humor. They laughed then, uproariously, about the speed with which they had run, the pose they had assumed, the ruse they had invented to escape or decrease some threat to their manliness, their humanness.*

There is also a sinister side to these men's responses, for they secretly carry out revenge killings against anonymous whites in answer to unpunished crimes committed by whites against blacks. The story of the Seven Days dramatizes the double-edged tragedy invited by a society's failure to make its public sphere genuinely open. The unremedied injuries of race inevitably fuel hatred and desperation, yet at the

Regulars at the Valois "See Your Food" cafeteria, Chicago
Ovie Davis

same time Morrison's tale exposes the futility of actions that remain unknown—unpublicized—and therefore fail to issue in any demand for justice.

Finally, consider the chronotope that anchors Mitchell Duneier's *Slim's Table,* his ethnography of a group of retired black men who frequent a restaurant called Valois (pronounced like Illinois) on the South Side of Chicago. Situated in Hyde Park, near that integrated, University of Chicago neighborhood's boundary with the city's massive black ghetto, Valois is a genuinely "class-mixing" public space. The black regulars on whom Duneier focuses are "poor and solidly working-class men" who live in the ghetto and "are notably different than the prevailing stereotypes about them. Despite the contradictory ways they are treated by their society, they are consistently directed by standards within themselves."

These men—all of whom have had meaningful working lives as mechanics, crane-operators, newsstand attendants, butchers—build their own identity through the value they place on leading respectable and independent lives. Yet their ethos of respectability cannot be attributed to middle-class status or to church-going. It derives, instead, from their own work ethic and their sense of civic virtue:

> *openness, sociability, and the desire to be part of the larger society are important dimensions of the conduct of cafeteria life. Respectability did not assume its highest form in stereotypes and contrasts with those who could somehow be deemed inferior to those making the comparisons. The public cafeteria was a locale where barriers that normally divided and isolated people could sometimes break down.*

Slim and his acquaintances frequent Valois in order to give their lives the kind

of routine they had when they worked, and in order to find contact with wider society in the liminal space of the restaurant. The poignancy of the black regulars' experience lies precisely in the fact that the "race-transcending" space they seek doesn't exist in the "wider society" at all, but only in this liminal, marginal space. The cafeteria is more refuge than public square. What Valois offers is no more than a hint, a glimpse, a daily dose, of a "race-transcending" form of publicness. The regulars savor the gift they receive within Valois's walls and at Slim's table, the rare gift of participating in interracial society and yet being able to be themselves.

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As multiracial, multicultural cities like New York and Los Angeles lurch toward the coming century, they stagger between two possibilities: the invention of new cosmopolitanisms and the eruption of racial cataclysms. Despite Civic Liberals' proclamations on behalf of civility in urban life and politics, they contribute almost nothing to the most urgently needed cosmopolitan values: plurality, inclusion, tolerance. Race and poverty are stumbling-blocks in the Civic Liberal thinking about urban life.

Mickey Kaus offers a gentrified social theory that makes a dichotomy between "'ghetto poor' culture" and "mainstream working culture." His interpretation of the role of race in the everyday experience of urban space is so coarse as to make white anxiety rather than injustice the motivation for social change: "I may want to live in a society where there is no alienated race and no racism, where I need not feel uncomfortable walking down the street because I'm white." This sensibility is projected into social policy when Kaus seeks to motivate welfare reform by translating whites' racial animosities and fears into a program of shock therapy for impoverished inner-city blacks and Hispanics.

He treats the underclass as a blight on the public sphere rather than as participants in it: "Why are neighborhoods, schools, and public spaces so difficult to make part of a class-mixing public sphere? There are reasons peculiar to each institution. . . . But there is one fact common to all: fear of the 'ghetto poor' underclass." Many interesting reforms proposed by Kaus—a draft in place of the volunteer army, compulsory national service for eighteen-year-olds, public financing of political campaigns, national health care, communal day care centers near workplaces to attract children of all classes—are overshadowed by his belief that any effort to revitalize the public realm must begin by forcing welfare recipients to work.

Under his reforms, "Work becomes . . . the common test of full citizenship." It is here that Civic Liberalism bares its undemocratic teeth. For if the underclass—the vast majority of whom are racial minorities—do not have and do not yet deserve full citizenship, then nothing of their experiences or culture needs be granted a hearing in the public realm. Civility is Civic Liberalism's mask for this exclusion and intolerance.

A similar gesture of delegitimizing black political participation animates Sleeper's critique of urban black politics. He favors black politicians who are pragmatic rather than charismatic, technocratic rather than radical, builders of elec-

"Race-transcending" publicness at the Valois
Ovie Davis

toral alliances rather than nationalist constituencies; among grass-roots organizations he favors multi-denominational, interracial church groups that initiate major projects of neighborhood renewal. There is much to be said for both types of political organization. But Sleeper proceeds to disqualify virtually every other political trend among African Americans as uncivil and chauvinistic.

Rather than envisioning a more inclusive public sphere and a more variegated body politic, he mounts a continuous attack on black nationalism. Refusing to make distinctions among various nationalist trends, he obscures the meaning of nationalism for black thought, culture, and politics. It seems to me that the ultimate aim of such gestures is to repudiate or preempt the protest tradition of black *civitas.* Forgetting that the civil rights movement enriched our national civic life precisely by means of civil disobedience and denying that various black nationalisms have

given expression to grievances and experiences otherwise left mute in American political life, the Civic Liberals have rewritten liberal attitudes toward race in the pen and ink of the New Right. Using civility as an obstacle to cosmopolitanism, they are fabricating new principles of political exclusion and conformity for a multicultural age.

Civic Liberals ultimately yearn for a "universal culture" that will miraculously promote just those values and beliefs that they themselves hold dear in contemporary American society. Kaus forecasts the possibility, the ideal, of "a single cross-class culture," but only if the predominantly black urban culture of the underclass disappears. Sleeper is befuddled about the nature of black culture. While acknowledging that the destruction of slaves' ties to their African cultures gives "African-American students . . . a special claim on public schools to teach them about themselves," Sleeper nevertheless reduces the African elements of African American culture to something merely lost. He then declares that everything of true value in the cultural creations of African Americans has already been fully assimilated into American culture as a whole—like jazz. The appropriation of black cultural forms by whites becomes the tacit measure of their value and validity. No wonder he can conclude that there are no legitimately distinct black cultural forms, traditions, or public spheres. All that was African was lost, all that was African American has been mainstreamed. Such blindness is a high price to pay for the illusion of being the possessor of a universal culture.

The United States today faces the task of maintaining the integrity of its democratic polity while absorbing new generations of immigrants from around the globe, and it still, tragically, faces the task of ensuring that African Americans determine the shape of their own *civitas.* To share in these tasks, our intellectuals have to relinquish this myth of a universal culture in common and help, instead, to envision how we are going to achieve a *polis* in common. The values that multiracial, multicultural democracy requires from our political culture—commitments to participation, open forums for debating the common good and determining communal provisions, equal rights and tolerance—can only be preserved by being risked on the inclusion of ever more, ever more varied social groups.