The Origins of American Antiracism

August 11, 2017, shocked many Americans. Hundreds of white supremacists gathered in the university town of Charlottesville, Virginia, screaming, “Jews will not replace us!” and the Nazi slogan “Blood and Soil!” under the banner of “Unite the Right.” What were once Klan hoods were replaced with khakis and polo shirts. Nazi swastikas were abandoned in favor of Confederate flags. But the message was clear to anyone who paid attention. These white nationalists felt emboldened to go public, especially after the shock of 2016: the election of the Republican president Donald Trump, who ran a campaign dubbed “Make America Great Again!,” which played on the fantasy that certain parts of America had been taken away, besmirched, denigrated, and abused after eight years of the first black president, Barack Obama. Trump’s campaign embraced the racist far right, the so-called alt-right, which calls for reclaiming European American civilization and warns of a “white genocide,” a supposed conspiracy that lax immigration standards, combined with progressive social welfare initiatives, are secretly designed to eliminate the white American majority and make America into a majority-minority nation. What was even more disturbing for many people, however, was that just a week after the Charlottesville rally, which concluded with one of the white supremacists
driving over and killing a nonviolent white protestor, Trump delivered a press conference in which he equated white supremacists with the counterprotestors. Both sides were wrong and had bad people, he said. As he put it, “And you had, you had a group on one side that was bad. And you had a group on the other side that was also very violent. And nobody wants to say that, but I’ll say it right now. You had a group—you had a group on the other side that comes charging in without a permit, and they were very, very violent.”

Charlottesville was a reminder that racism has always been indigenous to US history. But it also revealed racism’s greatest existential threat. Charlottesville counterprotestors were part of a long US tradition of citizens who were not shocked by but expected racism. These citizens countered racist ideas, attacked racial inequality, and threatened racism’s grip on power. They constitute the antiracist American political tradition on which American democracy’s future depends. *Antiracism* tells their story.

Racism and Antiracism

In order for racism to make sense, it has been based in a philosophy of hierarchy, identity, and difference. Before the seventeenth century, it was justified theologically and biblically. A passage from the book of Genesis, which describes the “Curse of Ham”—whose descendents were condemned to bondage for his mistreatment of his father, Noah—was used to justify the subjugation of people with darker skin. But soon this theological explanation morphed into something more scientific.
From the moment the word appeared in a Spanish dictionary in 1611, as *raza*, a kind of authentic, well-bred horse, race has been associated with subhuman characteristics. The modern idea of racism was born out of the eighteenth-century wish to scientifically categorize humanity’s essential hereditary traits—what was known as racial identity. Among the most important figures in this regard was the Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus, who in 1735 tried to categorize the various races—Europeans, Asians, Indians, Africans. Europeans had traits associated with upstanding citizenship, deference to the law, and rationality, while Africans were perceived as lazy and fickle. Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, for his part, did not impute normative value to race in the same way as Linnaeus and, unlike him, believed all humanity descended from a common source. But his *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind* (1775) nonetheless connected white people to the “Caucasus” and depicted them as the most beautiful and aesthetically pleasing.\(^2\)

Despite these naturalist arguments’ claim to scientific objectivity and value neutrality, they became the perfect way to endow moral value to skin color and, therefore, to justify the enslavement and economic, political, and cultural exploitation of nonwhite people throughout the globe. Although racism contradicted the Enlightenment idea that all people are born equal with inalienable rights such as freedom and human dignity, it became a total ecosystem that created obscene differences in people’s life chances. White people got political rights and physical safety. What nonwhite people got instead was something brutal: enslavement of their bodies,
imperialist exploitation of their natural resources, and dehumanization of their spirit.³

But racism did not go unopposed in the US; it created the antiracist. The first antiracists, antislavery abolitionists from the American founding in the late eighteenth century until emancipation after the end of the Civil War in 1865, struggled against the systematic exploitation of black labor under slavery. The next major wave came after the end of the Reconstruction period (1865–1877) and during the Jim Crow era in the 1890s through the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, when antiracists challenged the destruction of black bodies under lynching and the dehumanizing second-class citizenship of “separate but equal” public facilities that was formalized by the infamous Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). Ever since the 1960s, in what has been described as the “post-civil-rights era,” antiracists have challenged de facto segregation, a condition in which racial equality is formalized within antidiscrimination law. But a long history of racial inequality and its aftereffects has led to the clustering of black citizens in eviscerated segregated neighborhoods and disparities in income, wealth, education, mass incarceration, and rates of police brutality.

Throughout history, antiracists have engaged in various strategies of resistance, some of which were successful and others of which were not. They have championed the idea of liberation but sometimes have been blind to their own exclusionary commitments when it came to gender, class, sexuality, and even race. But their overarching focus has been on challenging racism. Many of their counterarguments and
direct actions assaulted racism’s public face, its most visible enforcer: the unmistakable American racist—the slaveholder, lynch, Ku Klux Klansman, social Darwinist, eugenicist, southern Democrat, and neo-Nazi. But antiracists have also, and perhaps even more importantly, unmasked racism’s secret weapon: the ordinary white American who has sometimes tepidly, conditionally, equivocally, or even shamefully agreed with the unmistakable racist.

Some antiracists have called out racists’ bad faith and malicious fantasy of a white utopia in segregated, enclosed communities free from the burden of black thoughts. Some have rejected as dubious the demands for empirical evidence before believing that the first black US president, Barack Obama, is truly an American citizen, rather than an anticolonial radical Kenyan. Others have debunked the myth that single black mothers, so-called welfare queens, exploit Social Security and Medicaid benefits. Some have rendered absurd the idea that black culture has no interest in educating its youth. And still others have attacked the instruments used to secure racial inequality: voting-booth intimidation, the separation of powers, checks and balances, murder, rape, terrorism, sterilization, redlining, redistricting, jails, prisons, and the police.4

Antiracist Thought and Politics in History

Antiracism has had an extensive intellectual and political history in the US. Colloquially, the term antiracist captures a wide range of meaning—from those who simply claim that
they are not racist or oppose racism to those who see it as an injustice inconsistent with American values or try to excise it from their lives and society. From this understanding, almost every American today might call themselves antiracist. Since the gains of the civil rights movement, the end of Jim Crow, and the election of Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012, antiracism has become a public kind of aspiration, even if only in word and rhetoric. This idea stems from the belief that Americans live (or should aspire to live) in a “color-blind” society, that is, a society in which skin color or racial identity no longer matters. Consequently, antiracism has become both ubiquitous and often defanged of its critical and transformative social potential.

For instance, Black Lives Matter activists struggling against police brutality claim the title. But so too do major American corporations through their diversity-training initiatives and hiring of nonwhite CEOs. Educators call for developing an antiracist education by challenging dominant narratives of American progress. Yet opponents of racial equality use Martin Luther King Jr.’s argument that citizens should judge people by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin to argue against affirmative-action measures meant to level the playing field for black schoolchildren after a legacy of racism. The malleability of contemporary antiracist talk is perhaps most striking when Trump can claim that he is the least racist person in the world. Relying on the idea that racism is simply a matter of despising black people, he claims that he loves “blacks” and wants nothing more than for them to succeed.
Treating antiracism simply as an abstract philosophical orientation that names an honest refusal to be racist gives validity to all these expressions of antiracism. But rhetorical antiracism cheapens its historical meaning and specific political ideas. Without question, antiracism can be many things because it has no singular political ideology. But never has antiracist thought and action been entirely abstract and devoid of context for its practitioners who have held its banner in the struggle for racial liberation in US history. Antiracism’s meaning, I argue, is found in this history. And my use of antiracism has a far more radical meaning than is appreciated today. Few Americans who today claim antiracism have even dared to accept such a radical vision because doing so would fundamentally change American politics.

I argue that the antiracist political tradition is defined by a rigorous political philosophy and mode of direct political engagement that provides an exemplary model for tackling racism in all forms. Essential to the tradition is a direct and ongoing confrontation with the philosophy of racism, the individuals who embrace its ideas, and the structures and institutions that perpetuate it. Neglecting this history is politically misguided for those who claim to continue its struggle.

Antiblack racism has always been antiracism’s central focus—not because it is more morally salient than other forms of racial oppression, such as anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and anti-Latino racism, but because it has been the most expansive, historically durable, and salient form in America dating back almost four hundred years, since the first enslaved Africans arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, in
1619. In fact, adopting antiblack racism has become one way that many nonblack immigrants have tried to assimilate as white (in the nineteenth century, it was the Irish, Jews, Poles, Italians, and Germans, and today it is Latinos and Arab Americans).  

Strikingly, prevailing cultural and academic understandings of antiracism typically focus on white Americans at the expense of those who have offered the most sustained critique and vision of what racism is and how to dismantle it: black Americans. Notwithstanding the recent burgeoning interest in African American political thought and the desire to expand the meaning of the American political tradition beyond its canonical white figures over the past few decades, black antiracist thought has not been given its full due.

Antiracism recalls figures such as the militant white abolitionist John Brown, whose failed raid of Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, in 1859 to liberate enslaved people was one of the major catalysts for the Civil War. Largely ignored, however, is the radical abolitionist David Walker, whose Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World (1829) called for direct struggle against racism by any means necessary; such statements placed a bounty on his head. Scholars have spent a great deal of energy examining the significance of Henry David Thoreau’s refusal to pay taxes as a protest against slavery and the Mexican-American War of 1846. But they have insufficiently explored Anna Julia Cooper, who in A Voice from the South (1892) argued for the importance of black women’s equality when doing so ran against all forms of male domination. Ralph Waldo Emerson, who claimed that slavery was
inconsistent with democracy, is the subject of many critical studies in various academic fields, but marginalized is Malcolm X, who argued in the 1960s that racism was deeply entrenched in American hearts and minds when doing so made him public enemy number one. In many documentaries and high-school history textbooks, white Freedom Riders and white civil rights protestors are celebrated for joining hands with the black leaders of the civil rights movement, but save for the most notable figures such as King and Rosa Parks, too often overlooked are the hundreds of thousands of ordinary black people who marched in the streets. Today, white allies who have “Black Lives Matter!” posters on their front yards are heralded as exemplary patriots by other white people. But neglected are the young black men and women who take to the streets when their lives are existentially threatened by the possibility of police brutality and white terrorism.

Focusing on white antiracism is understandable because committed allies from the majority have always been crucial symbolically and politically to facilitate political change. But overlooking the political and philosophical contributions of the black antiracist tradition is a serious mistake. Black antiracists have had the most to gain and the most to lose and, time and time and time again, have demonstrated how to successfully challenge racism and racial inequality.

In this book, I provide an introduction to the antiracist intellectual legacy and its political movements in the US. Antiracist critique, citizenship, and action are my sites of analysis. Intellectual history is my method. Contemporary political relevance is placed over abstract philosophical argu-
ment. Unifying principles across the tradition are highlighted above incommensurable differences. Major intellectual figures, movements, and core themes are placed above a comprehensive analysis of antiracism’s everyday manifestations. This book is not a comprehensive systematic interpretation of the link between various black political ideologies and the antiracist tradition. A book like that remains to be written, but this book is more concerned with acquainting contemporary readers with a political theoretical tradition whose political legacy still remains obscured, if not forgotten.

I hope in this short book to go a small way toward recovering the antiracist imagination for all to appreciate. My argument is that by remembering antiracism historically, we can help refresh antiracist politics today. Regrettably, few political endeavors are timelier or more necessary.¹²

Strategies of Political Confrontation

For antiracists, abstract metaphysical arguments mattered less than political ones that could move people to action. Confronting arbitrary power mattered more than simply theorizing it, even though the two went hand in hand. A sense of history and a realistic interpretation of limitation and possibility mattered more than ideological purity, although antiracist idealistic claims themselves usually exceeded what seemed possible or even practical at the time. Antiracists expanded the meaning of politics—from compromise and realistic concessions meant to advance an agenda to the
power struggle about what compromise obscures and what is, in fact, realistic.

Antiracists made their arguments in a wide range of ways. Fiction helped give vivid expression to theoretical truths. Film gave visceral texture, while painting and visual art evoked powerful thoughts and ideas. Poetry and song crystallized core philosophical maxims. Political treatises deduced arguments, while emotional speeches moved publics from passivity to action. Some antiracists were activists, others writers—some both, while others neither. Women were as prevalent as men, although their contributions were often unacknowledged because of patriarchal commitments found in some important male antiracists. For many antiracists, politics and aesthetics were fused. Antiracist art dramatized political ideas. But antiracist politics were a kind of art. Public marches, symbolic protests, sit-ins, signs, chants, turns of phrase, metaphors, and narratives became creative strategies to make political arguments register broadly.\textsuperscript{13}

How antiracists made their arguments is equally important. Rhetoric was a powerful weapon. Narratives sometimes juxtaposed opposing perspectives, sometimes blurred the lines between them, and sometimes textured what was implied or disavowed within them. The genre of romance, which stressed the themes of painless reconciliation and eventual triumph over tension and incommensurable differences, was often rejected by antiracists. But irony, and even comedy, helped dramatize inconsistencies, while tragedy revealed painful outcomes of seemingly innocuous
choices. Autobiography helped give political authority. Moral conviction—whether founded in religion or humanism—provided a standpoint from which to vigorously criticize social injustice. Rarely did antiracists address hardened racists, but many nonetheless acted against violent and coercive racist institutions. Most addressed potentially sympathetic white allies but often sought to primarily politicize black citizens.\textsuperscript{14}

Few antiracists consistently maintained the same positions over the course of their lives, and some even abandoned the project. Others supported many of the tradition’s most important arguments, while some only took them in small doses at certain times. Nonetheless, black American antiracists had the most to say about the stakes for dismantling racism because they thought long and hard about it. Racism was part of the fabric of their lives. Black people were therefore often antiracism’s central audience, but never did the vast majority of antiracists argue that their ideas were only essentially accessible to black people or that whites could not listen in. To the contrary, the overarching goal for many antiracists was that the white majority should internalize and embody their most powerful arguments politically.

Philosophical Roots

Antiracist political thought did not emerge ex nihilo. Philosophically, it took intellectual sustenance from, but ultimately pushed against, the modern political theoretical tradition alongside which it developed. Political modernity is generally associated with white, western European figures such as
Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Karl Marx, G. W. F. Hegel, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, all of whom embraced universal reason, called for historical progress, and defended the ideals of equality and freedom. Antiracists thus exemplified what some scholars call an “Afro-modern” tradition, which was born out of the black diaspora struggle against enslavement worldwide. Afro-modernity challenged singular narratives of modernity while exposing as partial the invention of Euro-modernity. Social identity for antiracists was understood to be constructed in ways that Euro-modernity did not fully appreciate—through myths and narratives about human value, about who counted and did not—rather than simply through political institutions. Antiracists believed that the construction of social identity also happened in ways more broadly than Euro-moderns did: not simply a rational process but an emotional, unconscious, and sometimes unintentional one. History for antiracists also became a crucial source of political change but was retold in more complex ways than Euro-moderns appreciated: as moving in ebbs and flows, in cycles that challenged easy notions of progress and linear time.

Various liberal political ideas associated with the American tradition were often put in the service of making antiracist arguments. But the meaning of these ideas was usually radicalized or reimagined. Rarely did antiracists begin their analysis with the so-called state of nature, a prepolitical state free from identity, hierarchy, and defined by perfect freedom. State-of-nature arguments gave liberal thinkers such as John Locke and later John Rawls, who defended what he called the
“original position,” as a way to legitimize political institutions and to think about justice. But antiracist thought was much more grounded in lived experience. Inequality and domination became conditions from which antiracists theorized emancipation. And structural constraint was placed above celebrating individual willpower and freedom. This is why many antiracists thought that political rights required active protection from government and that equality demanded socioeconomic resources. Freedom was not about protection from government interference but the right to flourish, to love, to enjoy, and to live a good life. Democracy depended on spaces that allowed for self-governance in many spheres of life, rather than simply the right to vote and free and fair elections.

Antiracism emerged from black American political thought but never expressed a singular political ideology. Nonetheless, a shared set of ideas existed throughout the tradition. More liberal antiracists such as Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, and Martin Luther King defended antiracist self-determination within their broader claims of preserving freedom through rights and dignity through law. Socialists such as T. Thomas Fortune, Hubert Harrison, and Fred Hampton defended the antiracist cultivation of networks of resistance around shared interests as part of their class-based arguments about confronting exploitative capitalism. Feminists such as Maria Stewart, Anna Julia Cooper, and Michele Wallace tethered black liberation to an end to violent and repressive patriarchy. But doing this extended the antiracist call for dismantling exploitative hierarchies and granted le-
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city to marginalized voices and perspectives. Although
nationalists such as Martin R. Delany, Amiri Baraka, and
Malcolm X believed black freedom could be best achieved
through self-governing black-led communities, they contin-
ued the antiracist tradition by highlighting the way racism
structured American society extensively. Participatory dem-
ocrats such as the members of the Student Nonviolent Coor-
dinating Committee (SNCC), Fannie Lou Hamer, and Ella
Baker defended an antiracist theory of equality when arguing
that black citizenship would be best expressed through direct,
popular participation. Queer theorists such as James Baldwin
and Audre Lorde, who defended LGBT liberation, troubled
the meaning of what was socially normal and acceptable—
within the larger antiracist framework of understanding that
equality was always an unfinished project, demanding vigi-
lance and constant struggle.

Against Conservatism

From a historical perspective, antiracist struggles were
always waged somewhere within, or to the left of, politi-
cal liberalism—socialism, communism, feminism, radical
democracy, black power, pan-Africanism. To put it differ-
ently, rarely did antiracists wage their arguments or struggles
in the name of conservatism. And why would they? Con-
servatism had been central for justifying racism—think of
slaveholders who said it was better to keep things the way
they were because at least black people had food and shelter
under slavery, or Jim Crow segregationists who said black
people actually enjoyed and benefited from their racially segregated institutions.

Such conservative calls for the preservation of the status quo were always beneficial for the ruling class to keep its position—regardless of how and on whose backs and whose unpaid labor they gained it. Not surprisingly, antiracist arguments about liberation opposed conservative ideals of gradual reform, established hierarchy, tradition, a return to the status quo, and nostalgia for the past. Even more, antiracist commitments often opposed some conservative positions held by antiracists themselves. Frederick Douglass’s support of federally led Reconstruction efforts suggested a much more forceful account of government intervention than his defense of a narrow version of black economic and political self-reliance. From the 1850s to the 1870s, Martin Delany’s pragmatic attitude toward politics—by converting from a defender of black emigration to Canada and Central and South America after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act (1850) to a major in the Union army during the Civil War and defender of the Reconstruction effort in the South—suggested the intellectual orientation for reconsidering his own masculinist faith in the virtues of benevolent male rule. Even Barack Obama’s theory of history, which testified to the effect of racism on black socioeconomic opportunities, undercut his conservative claim that black people were culturally responsible for uplifting themselves from poverty. He said that black people need to take “full responsibility for our own lives—by demanding more from our fathers, and spending more time with our children. . . . They must never
succumb to despair or cynicism; they must always believe that they can write their own destiny,” at the same time that he stressed that “a lack of economic opportunity . . . and the lack of basic services . . . all helped create a cycle of violence, blight and neglect that continue to haunt us.”

One could find kernels of antiracist thought buried within a generally conservative framework. A critique of white supremacy as morally and politically degrading existed alongside Booker T. Washington’s view of black self-help and racial accommodation. An antiracist vision could be found in the fiction and essays of George Schuyler, who, before becoming an arch anticommunist in the postwar period and authoring *Black and Conservative* (1966), was a devout socialist in the 1920s and 1930s.

But not only has conservatism never focused its attention on combating racism politically. More often than not, it has promulgated arguments conducive to perpetuating racial inequality. The onetime black civil rights activist James Meredith exhibited antiracist action by walking among a sea of white faces to desegregate the University of Mississippi in 1962. But there was nothing antiracist about Meredith eventually supporting the white supremacist David Duke’s failed run for Louisiana governor in 1991. In Meredith’s words, Duke’s ultraconservative agenda—of cutting social welfare, advocating for white separatism, and speaking of black cultural inferiority—was refreshing because, at least, it was honest. “Whatever he said in years past,” Meredith said, “he didn’t say it behind our backs. And what he says today, we need to hear it. We all need to hear it. The liberals will be
surprised how much of the black vote he receives.” Moreover, the black neurosurgeon and current secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Ben Carson, repeated a classic racist trope by describing the horrific slave journey across the Middle Passage as similar to the waves of European immigrants arriving on American shores in search of economic opportunity. Carson supports Trump’s policy of eliminating affordable housing, on which many black citizens depend, and this change has been evinced through HUD’s striking out of “inclusive” and “free from discrimination” from its mission statement. But Carson’s argument is that black people today are descendants of earlier black dreamers, who were driven by a deep American patriotism centered around hard work. “That’s what America is about, a land of dreams and opportunity,” Carson said. “There were other immigrants who came here in the bottom of slave ships, worked even longer, even harder for less. But they too had a dream that one day . . . [their families] might pursue prosperity and happiness in this land.”

Historically, antiracist opposition was centered on racist ideas of the ruling class, whether it was rabid white supremacists such as the Ku Klux Klan after the Civil War or some racist white abolitionists before them, the political elite such as president Andrew Johnson in the 1860s or ordinary lynchers in the 1890s, self-described nonracist moderates who silently abetted the system in the 1960s during the civil rights movement, or radical communists or sympathetic liberals throughout the twentieth century who intentionally put the issue on the backburner. Antiracists also never shied away
from attacking ostensibly progressive political ideas that claimed to support black freedom but did the opposite. Consider nineteenth-century calls for black emigration to Liberia and post-civil-rights talk of “color blindness,” of not considering racial identity as a salient feature in addressing racial inequality.

Antiracism thus consistently countered the reactionary racist backlash it encountered—whether slaveholders’ assault on abolitionism, white terrorism after Reconstruction, the recent assault on black freedom through talk of “reverse discrimination,” or the view that postracialism has been achieved in the post-civil-rights era. But antiracists knew that backlash was something that required new strategies and coalitions, which needed to be refreshed through new thoughts within changing historical circumstances. Antiracists were thus closer to pragmatists than absolutists in responding to shifting realities, changing demographics, and new political coalitions. They were closer to realists in assessing and engaging the nature of political power, even though their idealism determined what counted as valuable and meaningful in politics. Solidifying this position meant engaging in public acts of protest—which meant adopting discomfort and vulnerability and appealing to fellow citizens.

Antiracist Thought and Resistance

New visions of citizenship that challenged racism were crucial too. Probing self-examination to eliminate one’s complicity in promoting injustice was the antiracist response
to the prevailing American innocence and disavowal that allowed racism to continue. Attentiveness to social construction overturned the racist embrace of essentialism—that black inequality was naturally supported by biology and culture. A vision of equality that was centered on promoting freedom in as many spheres as possible in both national and global contexts offered antiracists a way to oppose the limited definition advanced by racists and nationalists—as something only for whites, where justice meant “just us.”

From abolitionism to the contemporary Movement for Black Lives, collective political movements became the central way antiracists demanded concessions from existing political power. Disruptive collective action became its most effective tactic. Exploiting divisions within political elites and party coalitions, while ensuring that emancipatory arguments were not made stale through intellectual stagnation and top-down leadership, was its most effective strategy. Transforming failure into rejuvenation and recognizing the failures within rejuvenation was its crucial philosophical orientation.

To be sure, not all antiracists were small-\(d\) democrats, but their ideas often aligned with the sensibility behind democracy (rule by the people) of self-determination and popular power. Most believed that people should be given freedom to make autonomous choices about the fate of their lives, that this project could not be easily settled through laws, and that elite power was often suspect and sometimes a bad substitute for the knowledge of ordinary people.\(^{29}\) In this way, the antiracist sensibility was also closer to antiauthoritarianism be-
cause unchecked authority and arbitrary power are the first steps toward violence against the most vulnerable. Antiracists were also closer to social democrats than to libertarians because they knew that the idea of unfettered choice unconstrained by social reality propagated unsustainable dreams of social and economic competition, which fractured solidarity between potential allies.30

An Antiracist Sensibility

Antiracism always depends on asking several questions. Does it give power to those who have been the object of racism? Does it diminish unnecessary suffering in terms acceptable to those who are seeking dignity and emancipation, rather than those who benefit from the status quo? Is it done through collaboration rather than decree? Does it consider the plurality of experiences, identities, and needs and the way they can be overlooked? Is it flexible and receptive to contingency or closed off from it? Is it attentive to its own vulnerabilities?

Political strategy is important to antiracists. Some of the questions they asked were, Should we boycott now or later? Do we make coalitions with autoworkers, farmers, and prison guards? Should we advocate for greater regulation, more rights in the workplace, or autonomous, self-sustaining communities? Should we advocate for racial separatism or integration? But antiracists never sacrificed antiracism for larger political movements that adherents claimed were more pressing and required action more immediately.
A historical sensibility about antiracist political thought clarifies what is and is not a closer approximation of its practice. Certain forms of political engagement embody its spirit much more fully than others. Movement for Black Lives activists better exemplify it through calling for an end to police brutality than do American corporations whose corporate diversity programs focus on hiring black managers, while ignoring the economic well-being of the vast majority of their workforce. Making antiracist statements matters, but infinitely less than supporting antiracist policies that change structures. Teachers constructing curriculums stressing the formative role of racial inequality in American history do important antiracist work. But conservatives who call for cutting social programs because of their desire to end black dependency on them are as “antiracist” as slaveholders who said that keeping black people enslaved comes from their deep compassion for black people’s health. Nothing is antiracist about action that keeps black people in a state of precariousness and domination. For this reason, Trump’s self-professed antiracist intentions are belied by his embrace of white nationalism and moral equivalency between neo-Nazis and counterprotestors in Charlottesville—not to mention his doubling down on “law and order” talk, his executive order banning people from majority-Muslim countries, and much, much more.

From the antiracist perspective, denouncing Trump’s racism is better than staying silent. But it pales in comparison to agitating for legislation and public policies that realize an-
Antiracist dreams of freedom. Focusing on structural changes is more important than individual or interpersonal transformations. Ending mass incarceration and police brutality is better than efforts at racial reconciliation. Addressing racial disparities in wealth through policies of socioeconomic redistribution is better than shopping in black-owned businesses. Eliminating the education gap through more public funding of segregated schools is better than white people moving into all-black neighborhoods. Never are these activities mutually exclusive, but those that address structures are better—not for philosophical or moral reasons but because history shows that they have worked in the past and broadly affect more people.31

Antiracists who support these policies globally and understand the interconnection between racial liberation at home and abroad embody more elements of the tradition than those who harbor latent sexism and homophobia and have sheer contempt for ordinary people. Equally crucial is being mindful of contradiction. Good intentions can have unintended consequences—white people gentrifying black neighborhoods can lead to exploding home prices that push the most vulnerable black citizens out. Ongoing reevaluation should be embraced over ideological purity and perfect results. Nothing has been treated with more suspicion in the tradition than the view that antiracism is easy to achieve. More so than anything else, antiracism has imagined itself as a horizon for thinking politically. Politics exists in a nonideal world. An improvisatory attitude is necessary.
Antiracism and Its Critics

In response to conservatives who say that antiracism is too shrill in its assertions, too oppositional in its worldview, and too dangerous in its insistence on widespread equality, antiracists issue a simple answer. Moderation means suffering, if not death, for the losers of the status quo. Time is something racism’s beneficiaries can waste or stretch out ad infinitum but its victims want to condense as quickly as possible. Black people could not afford to wait when their lives were consumed by the ever-present threat of white terrorism in places such as Montgomery, Selma, and Birmingham and throughout much of the Deep South during Jim Crow or the devastating economic inequality and de facto segregation up north.

Anticipated within antiracist thought too is the left-wing critique. Radicals argue that focusing on racism is nothing more than an exclusionary form of identity politics, which sacrifices the economic liberation of all working-class people throughout the world for the immediate, feel-good, but shallow claims of recognition from victimized groups. From the antiracist perspective, not only is this a misdiagnosis of the problem and a false choice politically, but it also comes from mutually exclusive reasoning. Economic inequality and capitalism certainly perpetuate racism, but racism relies on so much more beyond class—fantasy, myth, narrative, and unconscious emotion and social definition. A class-conscious utopia offers no magic fix for racism. To the contrary, dismantling racism and economic inequality go hand in hand. Opposing instrumentalism and dehumanization, on which
both racism and exploitative capitalism depend, was always central to antiracism. Ignoring this link means engaging in reasoning that sustains exploitation in all forms—a reasoning that sees struggle as based in singular choices against some order that will persist forever. Antiracists know that exploitative orders have histories, so their futures are far from certain. What matters is the will to challenge them.

The Urgency of Antiracism

Antiracism is important now. The question is not what can be done but who will be willing to do it. Racism is alive and well today. Trump’s election in 2016 was emblematic of this fact. Since his campaign began in 2015, racist hate crimes have been on the rise and growing, creating even more precariousness for people of color. Anti-immigrant racism has had a new lease on life. Those who are perceived to be Arab American, even when they are not, are deemed de facto terrorists. For many white Americans, beards, turbans, hijabs, and burkas reflect an uncontrollable submission to a violent philosophy of jihadism. Trump’s administration is more persistent in its Islamophobia than those before it—as was evident through his travel ban on citizens of seven majority-Muslim nations, which, before suffering defeats in public opinion, on the streets, and in the lower courts, was recently upheld by a slim five-to-four conservative majority in the US Supreme Court. Also, Latinos are seen as the source of the US opioid epidemic—bringing crate loads of drugs illegally across the US-Mexico border to poison innocent white
The Origins of American Antiracism

Americans—and as forcing white people to adopt Spanish as a second language. Further indication that Trump’s nativism is here to stay comes from his recent reversal of the popular Obama-era program DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), which protects young, undocumented migrants from deportation and gives them the opportunity to go to school and earn a living.

A narrow focus on Trump’s victory, however, obscures that for black Americans there has been much of the same since the end of the civil rights movement and the dismantling of Jim Crow segregation—even after the election of the first black president, twice. Racist arguments persist to justify racist structures. Mass incarceration and police brutality, which disproportionately affect black Americans, are described as a consequence of black delinquency. Black educational inequality is seen as a product of black irreverence toward adopting upstanding norms of citizenship. Black poverty is seen as a consequence of bad personal choices—of having children out of wedlock, doing drugs, being careless toward one’s neighborhood, and living off government social benefits. What this view implies is that black citizens occupy a lower rung on the normative social order; they are just not that good and not deserving of being taken seriously.

This condition seems dire. But antiracism provides political hope today. Remembering the longevity and persistence of antiracism in America should encourage those who are struggling with profound pessimism, who are hopeless about a nonracist future. Antiracists tell us that struggle matters. Remembering that American antiracism emerged on US
shores challenges the view that America exists only in the hands of those who dominate, who oppress, who have no problem inflicting suffering. The powerful are powerful for a reason, but they are not invincible. When power is tested, it becomes less self-assured. Inequality will not easily disappear, but it can be diminished. Remembering antiracism is ultimately about reclaiming a new future in which a multiracial democracy is possible, in which racism does not promote war, genocide, environmental collapse, economic inequality, and sexual violence.

Racism has evolved in new ways, but so too have our times. Demographic shifts, which show that white Americans will soon be just one—albeit powerful—minority among many, are re-creating the meaning of American identity. Younger people are becoming less overtly racist and more willing to accept multicultural democracy. Socialist ideas about economic equality, which even a decade ago would have seemed pipe dreams, if not overtly anti-American, have been revived and embraced by millions of people. Nothing demonstrated this more than the insurgent 2016 presidential campaign of Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, who won 43 percent of the popular vote in the Democratic primaries. Social media is connecting people in faster and more significant ways, while activist groups are sprouting throughout the globe.

Rapid political changes, long in the making, seem to be happening before our eyes. Most obvious is the fracturing of the Republican Party coalition—the network of religious conservatives, free-market libertarians, and war-hawk neoconservatives—that has been held together since Ronald
Reagan’s presidency in the 1980s and saw its high-water mark during the presidency of George W. Bush. Never was there any truth to Trump’s populist campaign pledge to maintain what little was left of the social welfare state in the Social Security, Medicaid, and Medicare programs. But his shrewd argument was as much as anything else a product of the waning Republican influence on public opinion.

A similar political upheaval is under way in mainstream American liberalism. After Hillary Clinton’s stunning loss in the 2016 presidential election, Democrats find themselves with no fresh political vision—stuck between their fidelity to corporate interests and their fervent anti-Trumpism, which is, too often, less a political critique about undemocratic inequality and more a moralistic one about inadequate presidential etiquette. Not all of these transformations guarantee progressive change, nor are they intrinsically emancipatory without people to enact them. But as in the past, there is tremendous opportunity for antiracists to link their unique political vision with, and in ways that deepen, other liberation moments aiming to create a better future.

The structure of this book is as follows. Chapter 2 examines how antiracists reimagine the meaning, underpinnings, and persistence of, and thus oppose, American racism and racial inequality. Chapter 3 charts the antiracist freedom vision and theory of citizenship. Chapter 4 examines the way antiracist ideas created antiracist political movements, which entailed tactics and strategies to confront structural racial inequality. And chapter 5 argues that antiracist political thought and struggle can energize our politics today.