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Social Movements and Radical Imaginations

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SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND RADICAL IMAGINATIONS

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Millions of protestors took to the streets in the summer of 2020 after the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted vulnerable communities. According to Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM) and COVID-19 pandemic “gave renewed validity to the notion of racism as systemic, structural, and ubiquitous in US society.” This reckoning, in turn, opened space for new ways of imagining our society.² Today, we are witnessing the fruits of this radical imagining. Teenagers are walking out of school to demand gun control legislation; youth activists are pressing for climate justice; and a reignited labor movement has Amazon workers, Starbucks baristas, UPS drivers, and Hollywood writers organizing for better working conditions.

The response from the Right has been swift and dismantled many of the political gains discussed in this *Oracle* volume. In the past three years, we have witnessed a rise in violence toward Asians, efforts to disenfranchise Black and Brown voters, and new legislation that limits how teachers can discuss racism and sexism. Since January 2021, forty-four states have introduced bills that restrict the use of critical race theory in classrooms and limit how individuals teach, learn, and engage with history.³ At this crossroads, we must examine the evolution of 1960s and 1970s social movements and ask what lessons we can learn about our present and future.

Attacks on the teaching of history prevent younger generations from learning about the people before them who took on oppressive structures and institutions. Historian Donna Murch notes there are challenges when writing contemporary history because the past and present are locked in a political dialectic in which the “urgency of the moment always informs our

¹ Eddie Bonilla is the newest member of Boston College’s History Department. His article, “Latina/o Communists, Activism, and the FBI During the Chicana/o and New Communist Movements,” on which this symposium was based, can be found here; <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/850746/pdf>.

² Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, “Black Studies is Political, Radical, Indispensable, and Insurgent” in Colin Kaepernick, Robin D. G. Kelley, and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, eds., *Our History has Always Been Contraband: In Defense of Black Studies* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2023), 20.

³ Taylor, “Black Studies is Political, Radical, Indispensable, and Insurgent,” 18.

chronicling of past events.”⁴ Social movements are hard to periodize as activists become long-distance runners in the fight for social justice and move from one struggle to another, move between and on the margins of multiple movements, or move across decades. Social movements are messy and do not fit into neat boxes.

Historian and scholar of social movements Robin D. G. Kelley reflected in 2022 on the twenty-year anniversary of his foundational text, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. In a radical departure from the historiography of social movements, Kelley foregrounds optimism when thinking about Black-led movements. He ponders what success means for movements committed to fundamentally transforming society. He asks what it means to win and why. And above all, he asks what it means to dream radically. We must ask these questions when analyzing social movements where activists are taking on racial capitalism, government institutions, policing agencies, and university administrations. By examining social movements, we begin to see not only the “mechanisms of oppression” but also the “conditions and requirements for new modes of analysis, new ways of being together.”⁵ The study of social movements is not limited to the people who mobilize; it extends to the very mechanisms that make exploitation and oppression ordinary and quotidian.

This *Oracle* volume provides the perfect moment to see what strategies, tactics, and ideologies activists from previous generations used to change their worlds. The authors collectively teach us that we must engage these stories to dream a better future. They stress what solidarity can achieve even in the face of obstacles such as police surveillance and violence. Alyssa Lego explores how women in the Black Panther Party created the Oakland Community School to transform how African American children learned inside and outside the classroom after public school districts left them behind. Brendan Mahoney pivots to higher education as a site of struggle. He traces the development of the Students for Democratic Society at Boston College to examine how leftist activists challenged the Vietnam War and campus administration. Rongwei Zhu further explores student activism through the origins of the Student Nonviolent

⁴ Donna Murch, *Assata Taught Me: State Violence, Racial Capitalism, and the Movement for Black Lives* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022).

⁵ Robin D. G. Kelley, “Twenty Years of Freedom Dreams,” *Boston Review*, August 1, 2022; <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/twenty-years-of-freedom-dreams/> last accessed August 3, 2023; Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).

Coordinating Committee and their challenges to segregation in the 1960s after African American students staged a sit-down strike in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960.

The final two authors, Kate Nuechterlein and Shruthi Sriram, pivot to international movements and the influence of Third World ideologies from Latin American, African, and Asian revolutionaries. Nuechterlein offers a nuanced examination of how Jim Jones and the People's Temple in Guyana used the milieu of the New Left to convince people to move to South America. Sriram similarly uses an internationalist lens to explore how the writings of leftist activists spread information from the Third World through newspapers. This underground press also served as material for government policing agencies to use in their battles to squash any revolutionary movements.

In these essays, we see the importance of collective struggle and radical imagination in the face of oppression, COVID-19, and efforts to dismantle civil rights legislation of the 1960s. Organizers Kelly Hayes and Mariame Kaba remind us that we must have the will to survive in collectivity as people who are willing to “seize, defy, and upend whatever they must for the sake of life, dignity, and decency—and for the sake of each other.”⁶ Much like the authors in this volume, Hayes and Kaba teach us that the study of social movements must move beyond success or failure. We should instead learn from the lessons of collectivity, solidarity, care, and dreaming if we hope to build a better world for tomorrow.

⁶ Kelly Hayes and Mariame Kaba, *Let This Radicalize You: Organizing and the Revolution of Reciprocal Care* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2023), 59.