Introduction: The War on U.S. Blacks

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The hunt is on and brother you’re the prey.
Curtis Mayfield, “New World Order,” 1996

We live in a time in which the language of war pervades public discourse. Since the 2010 midterm elections it has become fashionable among liberal and progressive pundits to charge that U.S. conservatives are waging a war against women. Certainly, the extent and intensity of Republican Party efforts to restrict women’s health and reproductive rights, the Right’s opposition to the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009 and the Violence Against Women Act of 2013, and the movement to defund Planned Parenthood provide tangible evidence of the Right’s aggressions against women.

Conservatives’ monetary policies—abolition of the estate tax, opposition to renewing unemployment benefits, opposition to the Fair Minimum Wage Act of 2013, refusal to raise taxes against households making more than $250,000, their obstruction of living wage legislation—and the thirty-year decline in the living standards of the middle and working classes confirm that class struggle is at the heart of the conservative agenda. Corporate America, the U.S. capitalist class, is pursuing a strategy of aggression and assault against women and the middle and working classes across race. This is not, however, evidence of “postracial politics.” Race still matters—black women and women of color, and the middle and working classes of black people and people of color are differently targeted and compose the greatest proportion of casualties in the corporate attack on U.S. women and the middle and working classes.

Several black commentators have discussed the “war on drugs” as a war against black people, but few have addressed the more general conflict. Even so, these observations occur at the margins, because somehow the hottest conflict, the clash that has produced the most casualties, has not merited the appellation of war. How do we explain liberal and Left pundits’ failure to use the war metaphor to describe the multi-pronged assault on Afro-America?

Why do they find the metaphor appropriately describes the situation of women and workers across color and race but not African Americans? Despite mainstream liberal and Left pundits’ trepidation the facts overwhelmingly demonstrate that the paramount domestic war being waged in the U.S. is against the African American people.

The war on black people seeks to push them back to a role, status, position, and representation more akin to the 1950s, if not the 1890s. There are several fronts in the war on Afro-America. These fronts take the particular form of the social categories of class, gender, and generation. The marginalization of blacks from the labor force, nullification of hard-won civil rights protections, mass race-based incarceration, and the growing resurgence in white supremacy evidenced partly by the mass arming of the U.S. white population signal the existence of a war on black America.
In November 2013, blacks’ participation in the labor force occurred at a rate of 60.6 percent, well below the 65.8 percent figure in 2000. Meanwhile, the unemployment rate for blacks was more than double whites’, 12.5 percent to 6.2 percent, and about a third higher than Latino/as at 8.7 percent. The unemployment rate of black women and men respectively was 11.1 percent and 12.3 percent compared to white women, 5.3 percent, and men, 6.0 percent, and Latino/a women and men, 8.2 percent and 7.7 percent, respectively.

Contemporary voter suppression legislation accelerated after President Barack Obama’s two electoral victories. Thirty states have passed or have pending voter suppression laws—voter ID laws, proof of citizenship requirements, voter registration limits, early voting and absentee voting restrictions, and limitations on felons’ voting rights—and those are more likely to be enacted in states with large African American turnout. Former Confederate states compose seven of the seventeen states that have already passed voter suppression laws. These laws serve the same purpose as the nadir-era disfranchisement acts—poll tax, property legislation, and literacy tests—to drive African Americans out of the polity, to eliminate their capacity to use government to protect themselves from racist attacks.

Policing and mass racialized incarceration represent perhaps the most important front in the war on black America. Racial profiling, invasive policing, use of excessive and deadly force, constant surveillance, racially discriminatory sentencing policies like mandatory minimums, “three strikes” and zero-tolerance legislation all point to a strategy of containment and repression. In 2009, the 841,000 black men and 64,800 black women incarcerated represented about 40 percent of the more than 2 million prisoners. What Jacqueline Johnson has called the “invisible punishments” of the carceral system—exclusion from the labor force, disfranchisement, and banning from public housing—has come to affect millions of black people. In one of the more shocking statistics indexing the war against black people, the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement discovered that in 2012 a black person was killed by police or security guards every thirty-six hours.

The racialized violence and murder by police and corporate security are supplemented by a growing vigilantism and terrorism by private citizens. Oscar Grant, Trayvon Martin, and Renisha Marie McBride are just the most recognizable victims of the war against black people. According to The Hate Crime Victimization, 2003–2011 report, between 2007 and 2011, Americans committed 260,000 hate crimes. During the latter period, racial bias constituted 54 percent of all hate crimes and, revealingly, whites’ percentage as committers of hate crimes increased from 37 percent to 53 percent. That is, since the “Great Recession” and President Obama’s election, whites’ percentage as hate crime offenders has increased by 16 percentage points. Moreover, by the time of President Obama’s second inauguration, 67 million guns had been purchased, a 400 percent increase over the previous seven years.

Marginalization from work, new forms of disfranchisement, racialized policing and mass incarceration, hate crimes, and especially the mass arming of the U.S. white
population indicate that a war on black America exists.

This issue of *The Black Scholar* details several fronts in the war against U.S. blacks and chronicles some of the resistance to that repression. Our lead article by Safiya Umoja Noble explores the media coverage of the seminal act of racial terrorism for the black millennial generation, the murder of Trayvon Martin. Noble uses Marxist critical theorist Guy Debord’s theory of the *spectrum* to discuss the ways in which the media erased the authentic personages of Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman and replaced them with commodified dominant narratives framed by race, class, and generation. In the spectacle of the trial of George Zimmerman and media analysis of his killing, Trayvon Martin is reconstructed into the out-of-place black male criminal and Zimmerman into the middle-class white male protector of property, white women, and the social/racial order. The spectacle works to rationalize and re-create the existing social relations of racial oppression. The spectacle masks the real material relationship between “the construction of images of black criminality and the prison-industrial complex.” Noble specifically refers to the relationship between “six major media conglomerates” that “construct and circulate Black male criminality narratives in popular rap music culture” and the “Vanguard Group Inc., the largest institutional investor in Viacom Inc.,” which “is heavily invested in the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), the largest U.S. private prison corporation.” Noble urges us to peer through the veil and see what the spectacle has reframed through its distortions of the properties of whiteness and blackness, via what she describes as a “globally racialized and gendered capitalist economy.”

Lou Turner continues the critical exploration of the relationship between blackness and capitalism. For Turner, the center of gravity in evaluating the veracity of U.S. democracy has always been the status of the African American people. Building on this premise, in “American Corporate Coup D’État” he argues the frightening reality behind the assault on black voter rights is not simply a matter of suppressing the black vote, or swimming against the tide of historical demographic change, or merely the culmination of a generation of class warfare. But rather the meaning behind Citizens United, the government shutdown and recurrent threats to do so, sequestration, and abolition of section 4 of the 1965 Voting Rights Act is that the Tea Party–led right wing is using “the state to abolish the state.” Blacks bear the brunt of the antistatist assault, the construction of a “new authoritarianism,” because African Americans have historically been society’s most ardent strugglers for democracy. The war on black America makes possible what Turner describes as “a host of corporatist coup d’états” at the state level.

In “A New Apartheid: Media Consolidation and Black America,” Jared A. Ball reminds us that the laws of racial capitalism apply to the new media. According to him, the old social relations have been “relocate[d], not fundamentally change[d],” thus, the historic “war of images” against U.S. blacks continues uninterrupted on the Internet and in social media. The difference between the past and the present regarding media consolidation, Ball argues, is that contemporary oligopoly is being con-
structed through the rhetoric of democra-
tization. “Net neutrality” is the language
used to bolster monopolization, greater
surveillance, and the digital equivalent of
“bread and circuses.” Corporatization of the
Internet and social media has produced a
“new digital divide,” one in which the di-
viding line is not so much about access as it
is about usage. News and politics represent
only about 5 percent of Internet use. It is in
this context—monopolization, surveillance,
and the continuation of the war on the
black image—that Ball asks a provocative
question: “How do we get to Cornish and
Russwurm?” Here he is referring to Samuel
Cornish and John Russwurm, the founders
of Freedom’s Journal, the first black news-
paper in the U.S. However, Ball is aiming
at a deeper meaning. For as he reminds us,
black-oriented media does not necessarily
mean black-owned. In fact, it often does
not. Ball ends with a challenge to update
Cornish and Russwurm, to develop an inde-
pendent black radical new media.

Meanwhile Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua ana-
lyzes a local black community response to
white America’s antiblack war. Using the
concepts of critical social capital and trans-
formative resistant capital, he explores how
in the wake of what they believed was the
police murder of fifteen-year-old Kiwane
Carrington a group of black men diverse
in class and in ideology politically orga-
nized the North End Men’s Breakfast Club
(NEMBC) to struggle for justice and an end
to police repression. He examines how the
new organization built trust and established
norms to unite the men into a new militant
racial justice formation, as well as how they
mobilized the community’s traditions of
resistance, utilized the black community’s
historic institutions, and created new ones
to organize opposition to the local war on
black people. Using participant observation,
Cha-Jua chronicles how over two and a half
years the NEMBC led demonstrations, orga-
nized town hall meetings, testified before the
city council, defeated a Tea Party-affiliated
mayor, elected a young African American
man to the school board, forced the early re-
tirement of a particularly brutal police chief
involved in the killing of Kiwane Carrington,
forced the city to hire a local African Ameri-
can man in his place, and forced a hostile
city manager to take early retirement.

The final article in this issue, by Bill
Fletcher Jr. and Jamala Rogers, analyzes the
rise, demise, and legacy of the Black Radia-
cal Congress. In “No One Said That It Would
Be Easy,” Fletcher and Rogers do more than
simply sum up the history of the BRC; they
seek to “identify lessons learned from the
BRC experience” that can “help us think
through the process of building a cohesive,
viable Black Left,” hopefully in the near fu-
ture. Among the more important of the nine
lessons discussed by Fletcher and Rogers is
their rethinking of organizational structure.
In a sharp critique of the hierarchical pyra-
did structure inherited from Leninism, they
advocate “an organization as a series of con-
centric circles” composed of a core of the
activists who are doing the work and three
other layers determined by individuals’ com-
mitment—dedication of time and work to
the organizations’ projects. For Fletcher and
Rogers any truly radical future black libera-
tion project must build on the BRC’s legacy
of inclusiveness—gender equality, inclusion
of the black LGBT community, international-
ism—and embed itself in the struggles of the black working class.

Collectively, this special issue of *The Black Scholar* explores the new forms of antiblack racial oppression emerging from the transformation of U.S. society by financialized global racial capitalism, the looming threat of fascism, the necessity to build future movements on the foundation of analyses of past struggles, and local grassroots resistance to the war on black America.