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## Finally Got the News

### *Urban Insurgency, Counterinsurgency, and the Crisis of Hegemony in Detroit*

The actual fact of the matter is the movement of Black workers is a class movement that is calling for a total change in the relationship between workers and owners all together.

—John Watson in *Finally Got the News*, 1970

Money, we make it  
Fore we see it you take it. . . .  
Bills pile sky high  
Send that boy off to die. . . .  
Trigger happy policing  
Panic is spreading  
God knows where we're heading  
Oh, make me wanna holler

—Marvin Gaye, “Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler),” from  
the 1971 album *What's Going On?*

*What's Going On?* was Marvin Gaye's first self-composed album. The songs fused Gaye's political concerns with the perspectives of the social struggles being waged against racism, class exploitation, police repression, and the U.S. imperialist war in Vietnam. As Detroit's Black freedom and working-class struggles protested against racial capitalism and for economic justice while playing bongo drums, Gaye's music dramatized these struggles to its own bongo drum beat.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, it articulated the social visions of the masses in motion.<sup>2</sup>

In the late 1960s Detroit was an epicenter of Black freedom, radical labor, and student movements. In December 1968, John Watson, a

twenty-four-year-old Wayne State University student, newspaper editor, Black radical, socialist, and member of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) in Detroit traveled to Italy for an international anti-imperialist conference, where he was an invited speaker. The conference had grown out of the political struggles of students and workers in Italy and France. Watson, with overlapping membership in both the Panthers and DRUM, was an especially compelling speaker. At the conference he delivered a dynamic presentation on Black, working-class, and student struggles that had coalesced in the moment. Watson was so well received, he was invited to return in 1970 to distribute the film about the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit, *Finally Got the News*, amid a new wave of struggle in Italian factories and campuses. The film represented the League's vision of social change in the wake of the Detroit rebellion of 1967 and the May 1968 wildcat strikes in the Chrysler Corporation's Hamtramck Assembly plant, formerly known as the Dodge Main. In its depiction of struggle, the film offers an excellent point of departure for understanding the social visions articulated by the Black urban labor movement during this decisive historical moment.<sup>3</sup>

While much has been written about the events of 1968 in Paris, Prague, and Mexico City, less attention has been paid to the global significance of class struggles in Detroit during the period.<sup>4</sup> After all, as Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts observed in *Policing the Crisis*, the world revolution of 1968 was "an act of collective will, the breaks and ruptures stemming from the rapid expansion in the ideology, culture and civil structures of the new capitalism." This revolutionary moment constituted a crisis of hegemony. In Detroit, this crisis was expressed in the form of popular mobilizations against racism, capitalism, and imperialism in the industrial city.<sup>5</sup>

What was the relationship between the crisis of hegemony and mass antiracist and class struggle in the period? How did organic intellectuals resist and alter counterinsurgent narratives of events? What lessons do they suggest about the struggle for hegemony, even where these revolutionaries failed to achieve their goals? According to movement intellectuals and activists, the Detroit rebellion of July 1967, then the largest urban uprising in U.S. history, was essentially a working-class rebellion. The revolt was met with deadly force once state officials deployed National Guard troops, federal soldiers, and police officers to contain the insurrection. As a result, more than forty people were killed. While the events

demonstrated the repressive power of the state, the rebellion also exposed the vulnerability of the auto corporations to the pressure of class struggle at the point of production. Nine months after the July rebellion in May 1968, more than four thousand workers shut down the Dodge Main auto plants that contained the lowest paying and most dangerous jobs. These events led to the formation of DRUM, the Eldon Avenue Revolutionary Movement, and the Ford Revolutionary Union Movement, which later became the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.<sup>6</sup>

The League represented a radical form of self-organization among Black industrial workers. Mike Hamlin, Ken Cockrel, John Watson, and General Gordon Baker were the initial members. Like many members of Detroit's African American working class, the leadership of the League's central committee had its roots in Black freedom-movement organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), while also sharing membership in trade unions such as the United Auto Workers (UAW). The League's organic intellectuals had honed their skills in Marxist theory through a study group on Karl Marx's *Capital* with Martin Glaberman, himself a member of a number of socialist groups in the city, including the Johnson-Forest Tendency associated with C. L. R. James, Raya Dunayevskaya, and James and Grace Lee Boggs. Glaberman had also been an organic intellectual working in the auto plants for two decades before teaching at Wayne State University. He first met young future League members such as John Watson in a class taught by the Marxist historian and sociologist George Rawick at Monteith College of Wayne State University.<sup>7</sup>

The League proposed a dialectical and materialist critique of material conditions in a vernacular style. It articulated a kind of radical social theory that engaged the self-activity of the working class involved in forms of social struggle such as urban rebellions and wildcat strikes—activities that had been roundly criminalized.<sup>8</sup> They questioned the legitimacy of capitalist hegemony and challenged the racist common sense. They presented a Marxist framework designed to explain the roots of class exploitation, poverty, and police brutality. They meshed Black working-class expressive culture with socialist visions of class struggle to contribute to the philosophy of praxis. In doing so they provided a counterpoint to dominant ideologies of race, class, gender, and sexuality in the midst of urban rebellions, the Moynihan Report, the Kerner Commission, and the televised representations of uprisings and



FIGURE 5. John Watson presents a lecture on the relationship between race and class in the United States against a backdrop of posters from the events of 1968 in a scene from the film *Finally Got the News* (1970) by Stewart Bird, Rene Lichtman, and Peter Gessner. Produced in association with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

social movements. They produced the radical film *Finally Got the News* as well as the newspaper *Inner City Voice* and distributed the Wayne State University paper the *South End* to provide ways of seeing how the urban uprisings in the streets and strikes in the auto factories were perceived and fought out. Their cultural productions declared that the Black working class represented the vanguard of socialist transformation. They theorized strategies and tactics relevant to the workers' struggle at the point of production in the context of an entire community fighting for liberation. They demanded an end to racism in the plants as well as in the unions and were willing to call strikes on their own behalf.<sup>9</sup>

The years between 1967 and 1971 saw the highest number of strikes in the postwar period, except 1946. Most of them were wildcats. These strikes represented one of the largest work stoppages in North American history, and a high tide in the history of the class struggle.<sup>10</sup> The League consciously drew on collective memories of what W.E.B. Du Bois called

the “general strike” of 1863–65, when one million Black workers freed themselves through a general strike and sparked one of the most successful interracial working-class movements in U.S. history. In that period workers ruptured a racial and labor regime that had been centuries in the making, and initiated the most dramatic effort at democracy, waged by the poor and *for* “the working millions[,] that this world had ever seen.”<sup>11</sup> These episodes of working-class self-emancipation in the 1860s and the 1960s were, as C. L. R. James put it, “historical events of the first importance in the history of Black people at any time and today.”<sup>12</sup>

Black radicals and socialists in Detroit deployed cultural productions to counter dominant narratives of events, and used them to illuminate the importance of collective memory for radical social movements. They therefore provide particularly compelling examples of “*conjunctural interventionist* work.”<sup>13</sup> The production of meaning through cultural expression was a practical activity by the most strategically located sector of the North American working class at the time. Their cultural products suggested how the rebellions in the streets and factories were part of Black freedom and radical working-class movements rather than instances of criminality and violence that betrayed the vision of the civil rights movement. In this chapter, I argue that the counterinsurgent response to the events in Detroit sustained and naturalized the state’s strategy of incarcerating the crisis.<sup>14</sup>

#### THE COLD WAR AND THE CRISIS OF FORDISM IN DETROIT

The risks were great, the pressure enormous, but it was exhilarating, and the success impacted black workers not only at Chrysler but throughout the auto industry and workplaces of all types. It also brought back militancy to the working class and broke the shackles that had suppressed the class struggle during the McCarthy period.

—Mike Hamlin, foreword to *Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt from Below During the Long 1970s*, 2010

Perhaps more than any other industrial city in North America, Detroit symbolized the contradictions of Fordism during the twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> Deployed by Antonio Gramsci, the concept of Fordism described the ways in which this mode of production created “complications, absurd positions, and moral and economic crises often tending toward catastrophe.” In doing so, it sought to explain the system of mass production typified by the introduction of the assembly line by Henry Ford

before World War I. Fordism was inaugurated with Ford's introduction of the five-dollar, eight-hour day for workers who passed the company's sociology exam. While workers soon discovered that this wage was a fiction, as Martin Glaberman observed, Fordism's combination of so-called high wages with an intensification of exploitation in the auto industry provided a crucial turning point in the history of capitalist development, as did Fordism's decline in the last half of the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup>

Ford, Chrysler, and General Motors located their headquarters and plant operations in and around Detroit. Their wealth depended on the extraction of surplus value from an industrial working class that continually struggled over the conditions of its labor. Thus, Detroit was an epicenter of class struggle. The owners of the auto plants in the city sought to consolidate their class power through the importation of uprooted migrants and the exploitation of their labor. Since World War II required higher production, the auto industry followed Henry Ford's lead in transforming assembly lines to produce military equipment such as airplanes, tanks, and vehicles for the warfare state. Indeed, the city was an epicenter of the military-industrial complex. This shift in production absorbed surpluses of capital and labor by forcing millions of dispossessed migrants to move from rural areas in the South to the war-industry city of Detroit. Fordist economics, politics, and culture fundamentally shifted the social relations of production. As part of their effort to regulate the contradictions these changes unleashed, capitalists drew on a U.S. tradition of counterinsurgency in the factories to maintain a divided proletariat by segregating different "races" into different places. This strategy of racial and spatial discipline provided a primary mechanism of social control for U.S. industrial capitalism.<sup>17</sup>

Black workers who had been critical in the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) were at the forefront of the freedom movement to abolish Jim Crow. Since the 1930s and 1940s the Black industrial working class had engaged in struggles that gave a "moral impetus" to the efforts to complete the Second Reconstruction.<sup>18</sup> At the end of World War II, at least 1.25 million Black organized workers were in industrial unions. African American workers in unions provided key leadership in the movement to overturn Jim Crow and achieve full citizenship. Indeed, it was the CIO's commitment to the struggle for civil rights that earned it widespread support among workers of color. At the same time, however, the CIO failed to put Black workers in the leadership of the organization, and did not organize extensively among

domestic and agricultural workers who had been excluded from the New Deal. They also agreed to a no-strike pledge during the war that undermined their organizing among Black workers in the plants. But the most decisive turning point came in the wake of the strike wave in 1945 and 1946, the largest in U.S. labor history, when the CIO expelled eleven unions led by the Left, who had “the best record in promoting antiracism and defending the civil and legal rights of workers of color.”<sup>19</sup>

By the late 1940s anticommunism had become the primary tool of countersubversives for suppressing dissent in domestic spaces, and for legitimating the geographical expansion of U.S. capital internationally. Moral panics about communism were invoked in order to win consent to the imperatives of capital. By exaggerating communist threats to national security, these panics created a sense of crisis among working people. In turn, these security narratives provided justification for the promotion of Cold War policies. In the face of increasing militancy among Black workers, most powerfully represented by the 1945 and 1946 strike wave, this postwar red baiting was accompanied by the promotion of a pro-segregationist ideology. Such Cold War security narratives legitimated the criminalization of dissent. By demonizing groups depicted as internal enemies or agents of foreign powers, the practices and policies of countersubversion became institutionalized within a national security state, especially through President Harry S. Truman’s ascent to the White House. Such moves put the security state on the path of permanent warfare. Significantly, this militarization of the political economy during the Cold War launched an age of U.S. hegemony in the world capitalist system.<sup>20</sup>

While the living standards of U.S. workers increased during the post-war period, these higher wages were combined with a political assault on radical organizations that undermined working-class power in the long run. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this repression was the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, which suppressed the right of Communists to organize in the unions. In Detroit, former radical Walter Reuther opportunistically joined the Alliance of Catholic Trade Unionists and other anticommunists to solidify his power over the UAW. The rise of Reuther to the presidency of the union led to a withdrawal of support for Black leadership in trade unionism, despite his commitment to funding civil rights initiatives.<sup>21</sup>

During the early Cold War, Reuther forged an alliance among liberals that ultimately directed the union away from militant Black freedom



struggles and toward a tacit acceptance of the segregationist politics promoted by capitalist forces in the city.<sup>22</sup> Trade union membership declined from 5.2 million at the end of the war to 3.7 million in 1950 as the countersubversive bloc within labor collaborated with capital and the Cold War national security state. The UAW's direction of the labor movement away from radicalism and toward Cold War racial liberalism under Reuther continued for the next two decades, a fact that suggests the ideological basis of the postwar settlement of organized labor with big capital.<sup>23</sup>

Capitalists in the postwar era likewise deployed anticommunist narratives to legitimate their class power. Their countersubversive ideology helped maintain and justify a racial division of labor and structured the social relations of production. Such racist practices at the point of production were combined with other federal programs and incentives toward similar ends. For example, massive federal subsidies were offered to whites to build houses in suburbs in the postwar period. In the absence of such policies, the Black poor were relegated to overcrowded housing in urban ghettos. The Black urban poor were displaced from inner-city neighborhoods as a result of urban renewal programs in Detroit. This uneven development facilitated capital's move away from investments in industrial production and toward speculative investments in office construction, luxury housing, art museums, and other real estate projects. These urban policies contributed to a distinct pattern of racial and class formation in the city, and encouraged whites to invest in their whiteness rather than in a multiracial class struggle for better wages and working conditions.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, increasingly politicized confrontations between the Black poor and the almost all-white Detroit police department occurred in the context of broad-based and increasingly violent white resistance to civil rights protests. The aggressive organizing of white homeowners alongside the repressive policing and the discriminatory practices of banks and real estate brokers maintained the segregation of Detroit. This repression of struggles for access to housing, busing to integrate public schools, and other key aspects of the social wage was an essential aspect of the era. These conflicts occurred in a context where racial segregation left Black workers spatially and economically "trapped" in overcrowded neighborhoods where they endured a fatal link between poverty and police repression. They also experienced an intensification of the rate of exploitation because of the articulation between increasing rates of production and strategies of racial management.<sup>25</sup>

During the late 1960s Black workers became the majority of laborers in Detroit auto plants for the first time. Many of these workers were young and politicized by participating in the long civil rights movement. For example, League members John Watson and Mike Hamlin had worked with both CORE and the NAACP. Hamlin and Watson also admired the commitment to the class struggle of Communists and socialists they encountered through their speeches and organizing in the city. These young militants therefore sought to blend the Black freedom struggle's approach to antiracism with a Marxist focus on organizing the working class for fundamental social change, a commitment that ruptured the appearance of consensus under Cold War liberalism.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the historical example of the League directs our attention to the central role of workers in the social movements of the 1960s.<sup>27</sup>

As these Black radicals took the lead in struggles for social change, unwaged Black workers once again disproportionately filled the ranks of the relative surplus population having been the last hired and first fired.<sup>28</sup> The auto corporations saw the changing demographics in the factory and presence of a reserve army of labor as an opportunity to increase the rate of exploitation on the shop floor through unprecedented production levels. These speed-ups also sparked increased militancy in the plants. As John Watson explained, Black workers protested vigorously against speed-ups that required them to produce at levels “previously done by three white men.” In so doing they confronted a racial division of labor where more than 90 percent of the foremen, superintendents, skilled tradesmen, and skilled apprentices were white. This racist hierarchy at the point of production produced a situation where safety conditions were systematically ignored. These race and class dynamics on the shop floor were sure to produce their own negation. Black workers not only struggled for control at the point of production, but also engaged in grassroots social protests against police brutality, second-class houses, and second-class schools. In these ways they contributed to the self-organization of an entire community fighting for liberation.<sup>29</sup>

#### URBAN INSURGENCY IN DETROIT

First—let there be no mistake about it—the looting, arson, plunder and pillage which have occurred are not part of the civil rights protest. . . That is crime—and crime must be dealt with forcefully, and swiftly, and certainly.

—President Lyndon B. Johnson, address to the nation, July 27, 1967

Political and expressive cultures were perhaps more interwoven in Detroit than in any other North American industrial city. Berry Gordy, the founder of Motown records, was a former autoworker, and many musicians came from Detroit's Black working-class neighborhoods, including Diana Ross and the Supremes, Florence Ballard, and Mary Milson. Dance halls and nightclubs provided spaces of leisure for industrial workers subjected to backbreaking labor as a workforce. On July 23, 1967, the then-largest insurrection in U.S. history began in a downtown Detroit club.<sup>30</sup>

The Detroit rebellion began as city residents witnessed police harassment of a homecoming party for two Black soldiers returning from service in the U.S. war in Vietnam. The party occurred at a bar called the United Community and Civil League on Twelfth Street. On July 22, the Detroit police raided a series of so-called blind pigs (after-hours clubs), with the fifth and final raid being the venue that hosted the party. Only a few blocks away from the club, twenty-seven-year-old Army veteran Danny Thomas had recently been murdered by a gang of white youths. Community members were still reeling. While harassment for after-hours drinking was a persistent practice in Detroit, the police usually forced people to disperse and arrested just a few. But that night they arrested all eighty-five people at the party.<sup>31</sup> It did not take long for the aggrieved people of Detroit's slums and nightclubs to resist this criminalization "on their own terms."<sup>32</sup>

As Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin show in their indispensable book *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, photos of the revolt documented "systematic and integrated looting" among Black and poor white working-class participants "shopping for free."<sup>33</sup> Yet it was described in mass-mediated cultural outlets such as the *New York Times* as a riot waged by "Negroes in Detroit," which they asserted created a rampage of crime, violence, and chaos. A curfew was issued to suppress the insurrection. Soon after the uprising, U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark was contacted by Michigan Governor George Romney in order to request federal troops be sent in to crush the rebellion. On July 27 Johnson addressed the nation as part of an effort to ensure that order would be restored. He appealed to the Insurrection Act of 1807 as the legal basis for the deployment of troops in domestic territory. Johnson's attempt to distinguish between a legitimate civil rights protest and crime while calling on the Insurrection Act should compel us to reconsider the crisis of hegemony. By defining the ghetto revolt against joblessness, police brutality, and exploitation at the point of production as a riot,

the narrative of counterinsurgency endorsed the expansion of militarized-carceral solutions to the crisis.<sup>34</sup>

The prose of counterinsurgency depicted the event as an instance of crime, violence, and chaos. In fact, it purported that the revolt was not about civil rights violations or motivated by working-class grievances, but rather as an outburst of criminality. This definition of the situation provided a distorted image.<sup>35</sup> This distortion has had material consequences, ones that are particularly critical for understanding the historically specific and contingent relationships between racial ordering, capitalist restructuring, and the formation of the carceral state. Such narratives depicted resistance as violent, irrational, and futile expressions that justified violent reactions by the state apparatus to impose the rule of law and restore order. The capitalist state's expansion of counterinsurgency in cities can therefore be understood as a reaction to the crisis of hegemony for capital and the state represented by the overturning of Jim Crow racial regimes.<sup>36</sup>

Counterinsurgency and uneven capitalist development had been articulated as part of U.S. political and economic policy throughout W. W. Rostow's tenure as the U.S. national security advisor under President Johnson between 1964 and 1968. Rostow's stage theory of economic development purported that capitalist development first required security forces to impose order. In the wake of the Detroit rebellion, Rostow wrote to President Johnson: "At home your appeal is for law and order as the framework for economic and social progress. Abroad we fight in Vietnam to make aggression unprofitable . . . [to] build a future of economic and social progress." In Rostow's words, national security counterinsurgency policies had a direct impact on the policing of the urban crisis.<sup>37</sup>

Journalistic narratives often reproduced the state's counterinsurgent definitions of crisis. Consider for example *Newsweek's* take on the events in the earliest hours of July 23: "The trouble burst on Detroit like a firestorm and turned the nation's fifth largest city into a theater of war. Whole streets lay ravaged by looters, whole blocks immolated by flames. Federal troops—the first sent into racial battle outside the South in a quarter of a century—occupied American streets at bayonet point."<sup>38</sup> Such narratives of burning and looting sought to legitimate the military occupation of domestic space. "If there is one point that has been proved repeatedly over four summers of ghetto riots," *Time* magazine suggested, "it is that when the police abandon the street, the crowd takes it over, and the crowd can swiftly become a mob. It happened in

Watts, in Boston's Roxbury district, in Newark and in blood and fire in Detroit." Magazine audiences were led to believe that the police and military merely helped restore order. The *Time* narrative continued, "Typically enough, Detroit's upheaval started with a routine police action. Seven weeks ago, in the Virginia Park section of the West Side, a 'blind pig' (after-hours club) opened for business on Twelfth Street, styling itself the 'United Community League for Civic Action.' Along with the after hours booze that it offered to minors, the 'League' served up Black-power harangues and curses against Whitey's exploitation. It was at the blind pig, on a sleazy strip of pawnshops and bars, rats and pimps, junkies and gamblers, that the agony began."<sup>39</sup>

Profound anxieties are represented in this narrative. Fears of urban revolt certainly shape this description, but tellingly, it is replete with moral panics over the proletarian pursuit of pleasure. Detroit's dance halls and nightclubs were targeted as sites of criminality. The *Time* and *Newsweek* narratives did not define the events as being motivated by structural racism and class exploitation, but rather as resulting from the behavior of Black power activists and poor inner-city residents. The logic of such representations suggested that proletarian bodies needed discipline by the state that was not otherwise being provided by the sheer "force of circumstance." This definition of the situation implied that the police raid of the club was as much about policing the purported immorality of Black workers as it was about preventing alcohol from being served after hours.<sup>40</sup>

According to General Gordon Baker, cofounder of DRUM and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, such taken-for-granted narratives should be read against the grain, since blind pigs were "part of the culture of Detroit." Black workers engaged in these cultural practices to turn segregated places into spaces of congregation. Because of the racist allocation of shifts by management, Black workers on the infamous second and third shifts would work until as late as three in the morning while bars officially closed at two. Baker recounts how on the weekends young workers would go to the blind pigs after work to have drinks. Given the commonality of the practice, the police attack on this cherished custom was a clear insult to the working people of Detroit, all the more so since this particular blind pig was hosting a party for returning soldiers from Vietnam. Baker remembers, "To attack a blind pig was just ridiculous." This type of policing was a key factor that motivated the aggrieved and insurgent residents of Detroit's nightclubs and ghettos to risk life and limb to participate in the then-largest urban revolt in U.S. history.<sup>41</sup>

The revolt turned the world upside down. In an atmosphere akin to the carnivalesque, the poor and working people of Detroit directly appropriated the social wealth. Residents of the industrial slum took food from grocery stores and seized property such as electric guitars, amps, albums, and other items from the many pawnshops in the Twelfth Street neighborhood that was the epicenter of the uprising.<sup>42</sup> As a former resident, Baker explains, “I mean hell, everybody lived on the pawnshop. . . . And on the back of pawnshop slip it says in great big letters and it is still there today ‘not responsible for fire, theft, and other unavoidable accidents.’ So the pawnshops got tore open and everybody broke into the pawnshops and then it just spread.” As the insurgent ghetto residents engaged in the appropriation and burning of property, fire quickly engulfed the city because, as Rawick observed, Detroit’s ghettos were “fire traps,” with as “bad a housing as any industrial country in the world.”<sup>43</sup>

General Baker was one of the more than seven thousand people arrested and taken to the state prison in Ionia, Michigan, after the rebellion. “My cellblock looked like the damned assembly lines,” he remembers. “People had seen the naked role of the state and they hated these goddamned police.”<sup>44</sup> When the Detroit working class went back to the shop floor in the wake of the rebellion, Baker concludes, “they were different folks. They were not the same folks they were before the rebellion.” Baker reasons that the uprising quickened the step of the working class at the point of production by sparking a new consciousness of the ability they had to alter the relations of class power.<sup>45</sup>

The self-activity and collective struggles of urban proletarians led to an end “for the period of the revolt of the infamous second and third shifts, because they refused to work at night.”<sup>46</sup> The revolt also caused the “shutdown of three giants of American capitalism: Ford, Chrysler, and General Motors,” as Glaberman noted. The significance of Detroit’s autoworkers winning a temporary end to the infamous night shift in the factories is best understood when compared to Karl Marx’s analysis of the Paris Commune. Marx celebrated the abolition of night work for bakers and, as Friedrich Engels noted, “the closing of the pawnshops, on the ground that they were a private exploitation of labour, and were in contradiction with the right of the workers to their instruments of labour and to credit.”<sup>47</sup>

The Detroit rebellion of 1967 provides an important historical lesson: the refusal of mass criminalization by the working and wageless people of Detroit represented a crisis of hegemony.<sup>48</sup> While the uprising

in Detroit was one of hundreds of urban rebellions during the moment, it occurred in the context of a deeply politicized and concentrated Black working-class community in Detroit's ghetto and factories. The self-activity and collective struggles of the Black working class on the move led antiracists and socialists to theorize the revolt as a point of reference for the working class movement on both sides of the Atlantic. They argued that this direct challenge to the capitalist state opened up new possibilities for antiracist, feminist, and socialist movements during the age of liberation struggles.<sup>49</sup>

#### A CRISIS OF COLD WAR RACIAL LIBERALISM

The criminals who committed these acts of violence against the people deserve to be punished—and they must be punished.

—President Lyndon B. Johnson, address to the nation, July 27, 1967

The culture of poverty that results from unemployment and family breakup generates a system of ruthless, exploitative relationships within the ghetto. Prostitution, dope addiction, and crime create an environmental “jungle” characterized by personal insecurity and tension. Children growing up under such conditions are likely participants in civil disorder.

—*Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, 1968

Activists, grassroots artists, journalists, and intellectuals connected to Black freedom and socialist movements were not the only ones desiring an analysis of the rebellions in Detroit and other cities across the country. Indeed, the urban revolts drew increased political and scholarly attention to the themes of race, rebellion, crime, and law and order. For example, the sociologist and White House advisor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who had earlier asserted that Black resilience strategies constituted a “tangle of pathology,” weighed in: “What needs to be done is first garrison the central cities. We’ve got to prevent this kind of lack of authority.” He went on to call for creating employment opportunities for the Black poor and for an immediate rebuilding of the burned-out areas, but he prioritized the expansion of policing and security measures.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, social scientists asserted that the urban rebellions were caused by “outside agitators” and unemployed, unskilled criminals. Yet as attorney and journalist Frank Donner explains, “The crowd phobias of the past, the ‘riff-raff’ theories, lost credibility.”<sup>51</sup>

It was in the context of this crisis of authority that President Johnson gave a speech calling for the establishment of a commission to determine the causes of the events. He appointed Illinois governor Otto Kerner to lead the inquiry that would eventually be published as *The Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*. The Kerner Commission was instructed to determine the causes of the uprisings to prevent them from occurring again. Made up of representatives of political elites from industry, government, labor, police, and mainstream civil rights organizations, the commission was a critical force in the development of new strategies of crisis management. When the document was released in early 1968 with a foreword by *New York Times* columnist Tom Wicker, it was extremely well received and sold as many as two million copies of the paperback edition in the United States.<sup>52</sup>

Not since Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*, published in 1944, had an analysis of race been carried out at the scale of the Kerner Commission report. It became the defining statement of liberalism on race in the postwar period. It provided a definition of the urban crisis of the 1960s that has become taken for granted. It did so through a strategic and selective presentation of its conclusions through mass-media outlets. In one of its most-often-quoted phrases, the report claimed, "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one Black, one white—separate and unequal." It famously argued that "what white Americans never understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it." The Kerner Commission's conclusions were based on data primarily gathered during the Detroit rebellion, and were widely circulated in mass-media narratives.<sup>53</sup>

Making use of an array of statistics and qualitative interviews, the Kerner report described conditions such as unemployment, poverty, housing discrimination, income inequality, and racial perceptions to provide a causal argument to understand how to prevent rebellions labeled as civil disorders. Despite the commission's findings based on what most experts agreed was a sound assessment that white racism and poverty were the key factors shaping the urban uprisings, the report would still assert that structural and institutionalized inequality could not fully explain the causes of the rebellions. It shifted its focus from politics and economics to family structures by claiming that conditions of unemployment among Black poor people produced a "culture of



poverty.” The report reflected a growing common sense that a culture of poverty in the ghetto caused social problems. Its framework was rooted in the logic of the Moynihan Report, which asserted that poor Black people’s family structures prevented social and economic development. To be sure, dominant ideologies of race, gender, and sexuality were crucial to the narratives employed by traditional intellectuals in analyzing the causes of the revolt. Deploying behavioral models prevalent in liberal social science at the time, the Kerner Commission shifted the structure of understanding away from long-term structural inequality to establish a causal chain from family structure to social crisis.<sup>54</sup>

Crucially, the report legitimated the perception that a “culture of poverty . . . generates a system of ruthless exploitative relationships within the ghetto.” In doing so, it sanctified the racial liberal common sense that criminality in poor communities of color was “the pathological outcome of racial discrimination.”<sup>55</sup> It further argued that counterintelligence units “staffed with full-time personnel should be established to gather, evaluate, analyze and disseminate information on potential as well as actual disorders. . . . It should use undercover police personnel and information.” The commission recommended integrating leaders and organizations from communities of color into surveillance operations. It also argued that media should “improve coordination with police in reporting riot news through advance planning and cooperate with the police in the designation of police information centers . . . and [the] development of mutually beneficial guidelines for riot reporting.”<sup>56</sup>

While the Kerner Commission rejected countersubversive narratives of events promoted by figures such as FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, who depicted radicals and revolutionaries as the source of uprisings, “urged broader social intelligence programs to provide a barometer of potential disturbances,” according to Donner. As such, these recommendations distorted its message of race and class inequality conveyed in the two-nation thesis, and this distortion had a logic to it. It provided justification for carceral resolutions of the urban crisis. As such, the Kerner Commission’s call for expanding police surveillance as a tactical response to rebellions represented a shift in the hegemonic form of racialized crisis management, one that simultaneously named racial inequality as a problem and made counterinsurgent appeals to security to secure its legitimacy.<sup>57</sup>

## VISIONS OF THE FUTURE IN THE PRESENT

The dispossessed of this nation—the poor, both white and Negro—live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize a revolution against that injustice, not against the lives of the persons who are their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing to . . . lift the load of poverty.

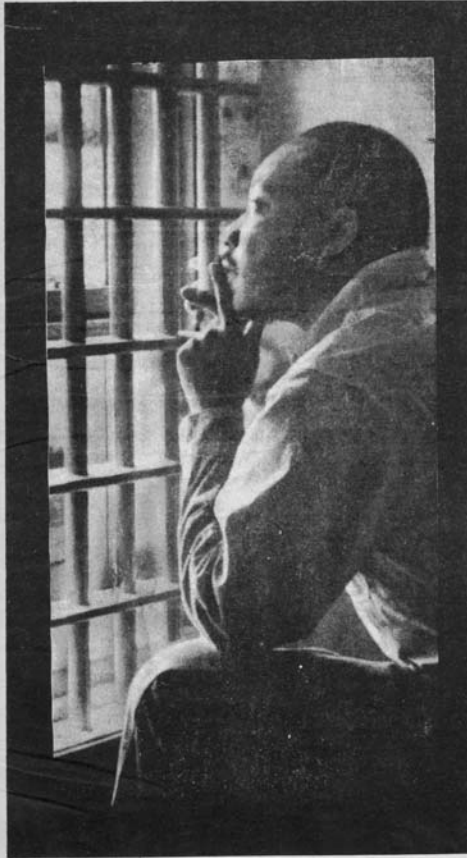
—Martin Luther King Jr., *The Trumpet of Conscience*, 1968

The Kerner Commission's definition of the urban crisis of the 1960s should compel us to reconsider how it contrasted with the perspectives of the Black freedom movement. As we saw in the previous chapter, Martin Luther King Jr. responded to the urban rebellion of the 1960s by challenging the structure of racism, militarism, and poverty. In his speeches he linked the racist and imperialist war in Vietnam to the political and economic repression of the poor and working-class people of color. As they initiated demands on the state for an end to police brutality, equal access to the social wage, and civil and human rights, Dr. King sought to articulate the struggle for the redistribution of social wealth.<sup>58</sup> In February of 1968 King visited Detroit to gain support for the Poor People's Campaign. Then Black sanitation workers went on strike in Memphis, and he joined them. Dr. King's tragic assassination in April of 1968 in that city sparked new upheavals in Detroit and across the country.<sup>59</sup>

Perhaps like no year since 1848, 1968 is remembered as a year of global revolution and counterrevolution. The tumultuous events included urban uprisings in more than two hundred cities after Dr. King's murder, student and worker mobilizations in Paris in May, mobilizations in Mexico City among students and workers, and uprisings in Kingston, Jamaica, after the Black Marxist historian Walter Rodney was prevented from reentering the country. These struggles were not unrelated. The spontaneous rebellions of the poor asserted the emergence of an aggrieved and insurgent people with specific class aims and interests.<sup>60</sup>

Black freedom and radical labor struggles in Detroit gained momentum following the garbage workers' strike in Memphis. In May, more than four thousand autoworkers initiated wildcat strikes at the Dodge Main. As part of an effort to organize the energies unleashed by the urban rebellions into a social force at the point of production, Black workers in DRUM established picket lines at the factory gates to shut down the plant while marching to the rhythm of bongo drums.

# AND NOW KING WHO IS NEXT ?



On Thursday evening, April 4, 1968, while standing on the balcony of a Memphis hotel, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was felled by an assassin's bullet. Within one hour's time, the news media across the country was announcing the King was murdered by a lone assassin and that no conspiracy was involved, as we go to press one week later one lone assassin is still being sought.

**Why no conspiracy?** Because even though Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was the most famous black leader in the Civil Rights Movement, in relation to America's racist, decadent society, he was just another "black nigger". We reiterate that a blackman living under the scope and influence of American society, be he Ralph Bunche, Martin Luther King, or Joe P. Joyce, exists as a super-exploited subject with less rights than a common street dog. To state that there was a conspiracy involved in Dr. King's murder would in essence be like saying that it takes an elaborate plan, a meeting of minds for a "whiteman to kill a nigger". In contrast, everytime a black brother is placed in the U.S. picks up a brick and breaks a white store owner's window, he finds himself involved in a giant conspiracy by the time he gets to court.

We cry out that not only was the assassination of Dr. King a conspiracy but it is part and parcel of the largest and most brutal conspiracies in history and that even the attitudes and prostrations the honkies have been going through, acting like they are mourning, are conspiratory. This conspiracy is part of the step by step escalation of the brutal, brutal, inhumane war of genocide being waged by the ruling white powers and their fascist machines against the Afro-American population pinned up in the confines of these 50 racist states.

#### WHY DR. KING

Dr. King was the foremost advocate of non-violence to which we re, have been, and always will be opposed to, because it is some of the most ridiculous hogwash to ever be taught in the history of mankind's struggle against oppression. Dr. King offered no threat to the system; his intent was for black people to share equally in the exploitation and plunder of the rest of the world. King's preaching put him in the chorus of the tumbling non-violent preachers along with Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, Jr., and the likes. But King differed from the rest in the sense that he showed signs of moving independently as times. Dr. King came out in opposition to the racist war in Vietnam. He voiced his opposition long after Black revolutionaries and radicals had staged massive demonstrations against the brutal onslaught, but he did oppose it. Dr. King moved again to the dilfline of the power structure by supporting the black workers struggle in Memphis before his death. Also, as far back as winter of 1964-65, J. Edgar Hoover came out and called Dr. King "The biggest liar in the country," indicating further the uneasy truce the power structure had for him. Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young have proven their position; they will support any action whatsoever the power structure takes, be it the rasulin bombing of black ghettos in America, or the shooting of black workers who are courageous enough to resist the oppression and exploitation of Chrysler, Ford, GM, or other capitalist giants. These sycophants will stick as close to the power structure's actions as Vice President Ky of South Vietnam's puppet government is sticking to Fascist General Westmoreland's decisions on Vietnam.

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The new address of the Inner City Voice:  
8651 Grand blvd  
Detroit, Michigan

FIGURE 6. Cover of the *Inner City Voice*, produced by the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in the wake of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in 1968. Newspapers Collection, Tamiment Library, New York University.

Company officials used photography as a mode of surveillance against direct action and subsequently used the pictures as evidence to punish Black workers. Twenty-six workers, including strike leader General Baker, were fired, and other workers were forced to miss workdays. As a cultural and political tool to counter the criminalization of worker self-activity, militants formed a semi-autonomous Black worker caucus. They produced a newsletter to address the racist conditions in the plant as part of their effort to channel discontent into political organization on the shop floor. They eventually succeeded in getting the laid-off workers rehired. From the outset, the newsletter highlighted the racism of the company as well as the consistent failures of the UAW to respond to the grievances of Black workers. The newsletter similarly decried the UAW's support of the Detroit police department's brutality directed at the Black community.<sup>61</sup>

DRUM used cultural productions to dramatize the contradictions of life under U.S. racial capitalism and the emergent carceral state. Toward that end, they published leaflets documenting racist conditions in the plants and published the *Inner City Voice* to tap the energy unleashed by the 1967 rebellion at the point of production. John Watson also edited the Wayne State University campus paper, the *South End*, and used it to provide news and analysis about antiracist and anticapitalist struggles. These cultural productions delineated the ideas and actions of an autonomous Black workers' struggle that included demands for the elimination of racism in the union and in corporate bureaucracies as part of a coordinated Black freedom struggle for moral authority at the point of knowledge production, a better social wage, and the democratic transition to socialism. The Black students and workers in the group were able to build a federation of community-based struggles over housing, schools, police brutality, wages, and cultural dignity—forming the League to coordinate their political and cultural activity.<sup>62</sup>

League organizers were long-term antiracist and anticapitalist activists. They called attention to the social struggle against racial capitalism and for a new society, while their cultural productions intertwined with the heightened working-class militancy of the period. Interventions in culture seized the political imagination of many radicals, and underscored the importance of the ideological class struggle. Representing the contradictions of race and class in U.S. industrial cities, the League struggled over which definition of the dramatic events of 1968 would capture the political imagination. They engaged in a class struggle in culture to transform the common sense by articulating an antiracist and

socialist vision of social transformation, a vision that attempted to neutralize the prose of counterinsurgency.<sup>63</sup>

Filmed in the context of the events of 1968, and following the rebellion of the previous year, *Finally Got the News* tells the dramatic story of the dialectics of insurgency in Detroit.<sup>64</sup> Produced, directed, and distributed in association with League members such as Cockrel, Watson, and Hamlin, the film derived its title from a chant delivered during direct-action protests by Black workers and their allies, “Finally got the news / how our dues are being used.” The film takes the history of Black freedom and class struggles in North America as its point of departure. As an instance of revolutionary filmmaking, it presents the cultural history of social struggles. It taps the poetic and musical practices that shape the lives of the working class in Detroit. It presents the roots of a distinct phase of political, economic, and ideological development in a popular form. Set against the background of the music of Detroit, it provides a powerful representation of the freedom dreams of labor and freedom struggles. The film draws on the aesthetic poetics of the Black radical tradition to delineate a distinct way of seeing transformations in the political economy of U.S. industrial capitalism. This way of seeing was essential, as Fordism’s promise of high wages and full employment was contradicted by the facts of punitive policing, precarious labor, and perilous housing in the postwar urban ghetto. In wrestling with the contradictions of race and class in the city and the factory in the way that it does in this precise historical conjuncture, the film offers a materialist critique of the conditions of the poor and the working class that highlights the unfinished business of the Second Reconstruction. It therefore serves as an alternative archive of this decisive historical conjuncture, a moment of rupture marked by radical social protest, economic crisis, and the restructuring of the state form.<sup>65</sup>

In the opening vignette, to a drumbeat, *Finally Got the News* presents a series of historical documents illustrating how the surplus value produced by Black workers under slavery gave rise to American industrial capitalism. Inspired by the historical and theoretical frameworks in Karl Marx’s *Capital* and W.E. B. Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction in America*, it provides a cinematic representation of how the emancipation of Black workers from slavery quickened the step of the American working class as a whole. As the intensity of the drumbeat increases, the audience is presented with scenes from the history of the class war that ultimately

culminated in the formation of the CIO during the 1930s, a period when the working class created mass power of a kind unparalleled on an international scale. Emphasizing the dialectics of insurgency, these images are juxtaposed with the pervasive and persistent forms of antilabor and anti-radical repression. In addition to tapping collective memories from radical labor and freedom movements in the United States, the film features shots from the Mexican revolutionary artist Diego Rivera's mural of Fordist auto production in the city. These representations of the history of the class struggle provide the context for the film's depiction of what was known among the working people of Detroit as the "great rebellion." In sharp contrast to the narratives of criminality, chaos, and illegality presented in the prose of the counterinsurgency, the film presents images of workers engaged in a struggle for dignity against the police state. While the moment of the uprising is short-lived, it is depicted as a return of working class militancy. In these ways *Finally Got the News* expresses in film the very radicalism sparked by the uprising.

In the first scene, John Watson provides a lecture on the centrality of the labor of Black workers in the building of the American industrial-capitalist empire against the backdrop of posters from the revolution of 1968. These images suggest his class-conscious and internationalist understanding of the revolutionary movements in China, Cuba, and Vietnam and their links to insurgencies in Detroit. In doing so *Finally Got the News* demonstrates the strategic role of expressive culture in connecting Black freedom and socialist internationalist movements. In presenting Watson as an organic intellectual, it connects the League to urban class struggles in cities such as Mexico City, Paris, Oakland, Havana, London, and Beijing during the events of 1968. The film then directs our attention to the specific situation facing the working class in Detroit. Through Watson it articulates a Marxist framework for audiences to understand the roots of the problems they face as workers, renters, and urban dwellers. In doing so, the film connects the Black radical tradition to Marxism.<sup>66</sup>

In a dramatic instance of Marxist social theory articulated in the film, radical attorney Kenneth Cockrel's dialectical and materialist analysis of finance capital lays bare the contradictions at the heart of the money-form.<sup>67</sup> "The man is fucking with shit in Bolivia," Cockrel declares, "He is fucking with shit in Chile. He is Kennicott. He is Anaconda. He is United Fruit. He is in mining! He's in what? He ain't never produced anything in his whole life. Investment banker. Stockbroker.

Insurance Man. He don't do nothing. We see that this whole society exists and rests upon workers and the whole mother-fucking society is controlled by this little clique which is parasitic, vulturistic, cannibalistic, and is sucking and destroying the life of workers everywhere."<sup>68</sup> He therefore interrogates speculative capital's movement beyond national borders to exploit cheap labor, and by doing so highlights a critical feature of the political economy of U.S. and global capitalism.<sup>69</sup>

*Finally Got the News* argues that the struggles of Black workers were linked to the fate of the proletariat as a whole. In the film's vignette entitled "The White Working-Class," Watson explains, "There is a lot of confusion amongst white people in this country, amongst white workers in this country, about who the enemy is." Based on this analysis of the situation Watson says that white workers often "end up becoming counterrevolutionary, even though they should be the most staunch revolutionaries." "Basically the reason that they're racist is because of the fact that they are afraid you know that the little bit of niche they have in society is going to be lost," Watson argues, "but ain't nobody been trying to demonstrate to them that rather than being against the Black movement and being enemies of the Black movement, that they should be in favor of the Black movement and supporters of the Black movement, because the things that the Black movement is doing inside of industry are basically in their interest. The kinds of demands and the kinds of movements, you know, which Black people are making inside of the plants are not inimical to the interests of the average white worker."<sup>70</sup>

This part of the film points to the difficulties of organizing within and against U.S. racial capitalism.<sup>71</sup> Watson notes how working-class whites were subjected to the "same contradictions of overproduction, the same contradictions of increasing production," and were aware of their class exploitation. Even so, Watson describes how their class consciousness was overtaken by cultural signifiers expressed in radio, television, and newspapers that stoked fears about street crime, Black people moving into white neighborhoods, the menace of Black sexuality, or otherwise racialized images depicting the Black working class as a threat. According to Watson, discourses associating race and crime captured the cultural and political imaginary of many white workers through extensive media coverage in venues such as the television news, magazines, and newspapers. The dominant ideologies of law and order deflected poor whites' class anger away from the ruling class and toward the Black working class, who were purported to be agents of criminality. In this way, *Finally Got the News* illustrates the ways in which

racialization and criminalization were essential to securing consent to authoritarian solutions to the crisis of capital and the state.<sup>72</sup>

The League articulated a distinct political perspective on this dramatic turning point in postwar U.S. history. They suggested that the class anger of white workers had been redirected away from capital and the state and toward poor inner-city residents who were being defined as threats to safety and security. Spaces in cities once depicted as safe became redefined as dangerous territory that would require security measures to control the population. This emergent form of securitized urbanism was endorsed through narratives of law and order. This rhetoric legitimated the formation of the neoliberal carceral state by fanning the flames of populist anger. The terms *riot*, *crime*, and *law and order* became euphemisms to express multiple tensions and class anxieties. The roots of economic insecurity in shifts in the political economy were effectively displaced through narratives of law and order and the racist construction of scapegoats.<sup>73</sup>

*Finally Got the News* also suggests how the counterinsurgency unleashed in response to the struggles in the streets and factories of Detroit shaped the restructuring of urban space. Urban police squads launched counterinsurgent campaigns that systematically violated the civil liberties of aggrieved communities, who were depicted as internal enemies of the domestic security apparatus. Strategies of containment utilized by the U.S. state to crush Communist insurgencies in Vietnam were deployed by law enforcement agencies in domestic spaces. Police departments, sheriff departments, and law enforcement agencies repressed Black radicals, antiwar activists, and the Left. Their effort to crush radical social movements in the name of protecting “the people” from threats to law and order is a central factor in understanding the political foundation of the carceral state. By shifting our characterization of the conjuncture we can better understand how carceral policies have served as instruments of both racism and class rule.<sup>74</sup>

As Georgakas and Surkin noted, the leadership of the League saw that capital would “abandon the regions and the populations that had made them so wealthy and powerful.” The League’s materialist analysis of the situation was vindicated. The resulting unemployment devastated cities and hit the Black working class particularly hard. By the end of the 1970s more than 50 percent of Black industrial workers lost their jobs as a result of automation, capital flight, and deindustrialization. In the past, the local state had been a site to institutionalize victories of Black freedom and labor movements. In the aftermath of these strug-



gles, members of the League noted how local politicians abandoned the pretense of a social wage in favor of funding law-and-order approaches.<sup>75</sup> Law-and-order narratives have painted a highly racialized portrait of unemployed Black workers as socially and economically inassimilable in the context of aggressive austerity measures, attacking spending on public education, health care, housing, and other essential elements of a social wage. In turn they justified increased expenditures for policing and prisons. By making state security the central issue, discourses of law and order presented the repression of surplus workers as a natural response to disorder on one hand, and denied Black insurgent workers recognition as subjects of their own history on the other.<sup>76</sup>

While the League's victories in its struggle for rights, resources, and recognition for Black workers represents a historical advance—and it made significant contributions to the class struggle in culture through its newspapers and films—it was not able to stop plant closures, capital flight, structural unemployment, or the expansion of policing, prisons, and permanent war. Just as the victories of the Second Reconstruction gave Black workers a new terrain from which to fight, the economic crisis of the 1970s led to increases in poverty not seen since the Great Depression. Prison populations exploded in the ensuing neoliberal turn in U.S. and global capitalism. In the current period, one in twenty-two people in the state of Michigan are in jail, in prison, or on parole or probation, which costs the state more than \$7 million per year. One in sixteen people have been incarcerated on the east side of Detroit. The prisoners are disproportionately Black, poor, young males who have been rendered disposable by capital. Representations of surplus workers as menaces to social order and internal security have been pivotal in the construction of domestic enemies against which the neoliberal project of expanding police and prisons has defined itself. The dominant depiction of surplus workers as security threats has served as a justification for the expansion of the neoliberal state.<sup>77</sup>

Yet the story does not end quite so neatly. *Finally Got the News* is a film that very few people have seen, and *Inner City Voice* is a paper that few people outside of the antiracist Left may have read, but they survive as important sources of evidence about the historical and geographical roots of the current conjuncture. They underscore the potential to facilitate alliances between activists, artists, and authors in articulating conjunctural interventions. They relay the types of discourses and practices

needed to counter the hegemony of the neoliberal carceral state. This knowledge of social contradiction serves as an important counterpoint to the security ideology that has institutionalized counterinsurgency as a modality of neoliberal governance. Seizing hold of social memories articulated in the poetics of insurgency as they flashed up briefly, the League attempted to subvert the rhetoric of counterinsurgency. Its cultural productions therefore function as powerful social forces. It shows that alternative resolutions of crisis have been possible—a historical lesson that was further demonstrated in the Attica rebellion.<sup>78</sup>