I N T R O D U C T I O N

B L A C K I N T E L L E C T U A L S A N D
T H E W O R L D T H E Y M A D E

M A N N I N G M A R A B L E

This the American black man knows: his fight here is a fight to the finish. Either he
dies or wins. If he wins it will be by no subterfuge or evasion of amalgamation. He
will enter modern civilization here in America as a black man on terms of perfect
equality with any white man, or he will enter not at all. Either extermination, root
and branch, or absolute equality. There can be no compromise. This is the last great
battle of the West.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880

I

T H E US P R E S I D E N T I A L E L E C T I O N S O F 1 8 7 6 A N D 2 0 0 8 are separated by 132 years and,
at most, six generations of Americans. Yet in racial terms, the distance between
these two events represents a historical epoch. In 1876, Democratic presidential
candidate Samuel J. Tilden, then governor of New York, first appeared to defeat
Republican Rutherford B. Hayes by roughly three hundred thousand popular
votes. However, due to a handful of contested electoral votes, the election was
thrown to the House of Representatives. A deal was brokered that elevated Hayes
to the presidency. The so-called Compromise of 1877 removed federal troops
that had been stationed throughout the South after the Civil War, and it gave
tacit permission to Southern whites to restrict the political and civil rights of
African Americans. Within two decades, most black males had been barred from
the elective franchise; blacks were largely excluded from most public accommoda-
tions and barred from juries; and over one hundred blacks were lynched each
year throughout the region. The terrible system of racial stigmatization and social
exclusion that had emerged was called “Jim Crow.”¹

In November 2008, a Democratic senator from Illinois, Barack Hussein
Obama, won the presidency over conservative Republican John McCain of
Arizona. Like other successful Democratic presidential candidates since Lyndon Johnson in 1964, Obama had constructed a broad support from blacks, Latinos, Jewish voters, voters under the age of thirty, and women. Obama polled 42 percent of all whites’ votes, a figure better than Bill Clinton’s vote in 1992 and comparable to John Kerry’s vote in the presidential election of 2004. Of course, what made Obama’s victory exceptional was the color of his skin—his ethnic identity as an African American. But what was most remarkable, however, was not Obama’s race but the fact that a nation that had been constructed on slavery, and that had tolerated nearly a century of Jim Crow segregation, could elect as its chief executive and head of state a person of African descent.

There were a number of factors that explain the transformation of America’s racial culture. A profound change in white Americans’ attitudes regarding the social integration and assimilation of racialized minorities certainly contributed to a more liberal political environment. The growth of a strong black and Latino middle class, and the desegregation of the labor force and even corporate elites, have also affected social relations. But the most important, single factor in the racial liberalization within US politics was the rise of the Black Freedom Movement, the social protest organizations, campaigns and thousands of demonstrations and strikes spanning the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries by African Americans against US structural racism. These struggles, over time, produced generations of articulate, capable leaders, activists, and intellectuals who expressed the various demands and objectives of the African American masses. It is not an exaggeration to suggest that the black protest intelligentsia was largely responsible for theorizing and envisioning a new world, a world that ultimately would be without racial inequality, white supremacy and black oppression. They imagined and fought for the principles of social justice and human equality, the abolition of European colonialism, South African apartheid and US racial discrimination.

II

African American political culture prior to the Civil War (1861–1865) largely focused on the collective efforts to abolish slavery. The early groups of black leaders certainly disagreed over the effectiveness of different strategies to enhance black empowerment. Some, like Martin Delany, favored what would later become a black nationalist strategy, promoting the development of African American–owned businesses, racially exclusive social organizations and institutions, and the construction of all-black political movements. Others, such as Frederick Douglass, perceived Negro Americans as fundamental Americans who deserved full Constitutional recognition and civil rights. They favored the achievement of racial reforms within America’s democratic institutions, and the elimination of all barriers fostering racial stigmatization and exclusion. It was against this general theoretical and strategic background that the various political struggles by black leaders and intellectuals were waged.

The Compromise of 1877, which gave Republican Rutherford B. Hayes the presidency and removed federal troops from the South, ushered in a new historical conjuncture, which took nearly a quarter century to culminate into a new racial