AFTER YEARS OF NEGLECT BY MAINSTREAM AMERICAN academics, the impact of black radicalism on postwar American and world history has begun to be examined in recent social science scholarship. Such historical inquiry requires journeying to the “lower frequencies” and addressing the substantive intellectual, political, and practical questions posed by African American radicals. These intellectual pursuits reflect the resurgence of an increasingly radical black public sphere. Moreover, this new emphasis on the study of black radicalism’s shift from a marginal to a central position within a global political arena provides the potential contextual and historical basis for a counterdiscourse to celebratory pronouncements regarding contemporary historical developments. Amid the rather bleak political landscape proffered by contemporary global political developments, the dawn of the twenty-first century has provided a much-needed space to reflect on some of the world-historic events that encapsulated the three decades following World War II. As the progenitor for social and political transformation in the postwar era, the civil rights movement provides a historical context for the confusing contemporary political dialectic that oscillates between the erasure and recovery of a modern black radical tradition.

CONSTRUCTING AN ALTERNATIVE CIVIL RIGHTS NARRATIVE

Although synonymous with the 1954 Brown Supreme Court decision, the modern movement for civil rights preceded this court case by over a decade. However, the years between the landmark Brown case and the passage of the Voting Rights
Act of 1965 constitute the **heroic period** of the modern struggle for civil rights. During these years, black liberation struggles received national attention through the efforts of a broad-based network of activists, including rank-and-file African Americans, grassroots organizers, and national political mobilizers. Black America’s revolt against the legacy of antiblack racism was transmitted to the nation through an increasingly global media apparatus that delivered fantastic images of violent racial confrontation that played out as public theater. In addition to domestic civil rights efforts, international developments in Cuba, Asia, and Africa provided black American radicals with a glimpse of alternative political and world historic realities. As an oppositional social movement challenging the most nightmarish aspects of race and class oppression, the modern struggle for civil rights reached its zenith with the legalistic and legislative victories that marked an end to state-sanctioned apartheid and black electoral disfranchisement. Both popular and historical narratives have conceptualized this era literally and figuratively as the “King years.” Undoubtedly, Martin Luther King Jr. is the individual most identified with the movement; the pervasive image of King in contemporary American popular culture is that of an African American minister preaching from the steps of the nation’s capital, exhorting the disfranchised in attendance to dream of a truly democratic civil society. Yet this historical and political narrative of the “movement” obscures and effaces as much as it reveals and illuminates. King’s subsequent leftward political metamorphosis emerged from the hotbed of radicalism within black politics that existed before the era of Black Power. The absence of civil rights radicals from most chronicles of the movement’s heroic years avoids discussion of once-powerful discourses that represent a veritable Pandora’s box for the US nation-state. Relocating the black political radicalism that has been chronologically situated during the late 1960s in an earlier political landscape dominated by the Southern movement’s struggles against Jim Crow reperiodizes civil rights and Black Power historiography by underscoring the fluidity of two historical time periods too often characterized as mutually exclusive. Moreover, the study of black radical discourses, which traversed a global political expanse problematizing issues of democracy, color, and empire, resituates domestic civil rights struggles within an international arena that witnessed extraordinary events that spanned the world. In the long shadow cast by Cold War political repression, black Americans forged an alternative political philosophy from the ashes of an almost eviscerated black radical public sphere. Comprising college students, ex-communists, military veterans, and an assortment of “organic intellectuals,” this collective underground provided the practical and theoretical context for Black Power radicalism. Thus the tendency to ignore black radicalism’s impact on the movement’s heroic years coupled with the deification of King as a modern-day Moses leading blacks out of an Egypt-land of racist denials has rendered invisible whole narratives of civil rights history and attendantly constructed a parochial view of the era that largely ignores the movement’s role within international political struggles.

Although the heroic period of the movement has been strategically appropriated by the state to deliver sanitized images that extol the resilience of democratic liberalism, the post–civil rights period of Black Power has fallen victim to what