

Same, Same But Different: An Atlanta Case Study in Movement Building

Daniel Horowitz Garcia¹

Exploring the idea of a social movement, and its effect on political struggle, provides a method for putting organizing strategies into historical context. If we wish to understand how past political processes occurred or how to build successful new projects, we must understand the similarities and differences between historical eras. This work yields applicable lessons, specifically basic principles necessary to navigate the difficult political landscape of the day. Using “The ‘Long Movement’ as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies” by Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang as a theoretical framework, this essay studies the Atlanta efforts to fight police brutality during the political crisis of 1973 and 1974. I conclude that the radical approach to organizing opened up political space allowing for working-class people to build their own analysis of their problems and develop a critique of the larger political economy. [Article copies available for a fee from *The Transformative Studies Institute*. E-mail address: journal@transformativestudies.org Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2016 by *The Transformative Studies Institute*. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS: Social movement, Left, Police Brutality, Police Violence, Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua, Clarence Lang, Atlanta, 1970s, John Inman, Communism, Socialism, Hosea Williams, October League, Sherman Miller, Community Organizing.

¹ **Daniel Horowitz Garcia** is the regional manager for StoryCorps in Atlanta. Before joining StoryCorps, he pursued a Masters in History at Georgia State University. He has 20 years' experience organizing in Atlanta and around the South on labor, environmental, criminal justice, and anti-poverty issues. In addition, he has worked as a popular educator using history and historical research in educational projects with trade unions and anti-poverty organizations in Florida and Georgia. He has authored three popular education manuals, edited three others, as well as journal articles and numerous presentations. Address correspondence to: Daniel Horowitz Garcia, e-mail: daniel@alternativehistorian.com.

In many parts of Southeast Asia people, shopkeepers especially, refer to two items as being alike but with some key differences. If one asks a retailer if the watch is just like a Timex, she may respond with, “Yes. Same-same, but different.” One can assume then that the watch is a lot like a Timex, it may function so similarly the differences are difficult to detect, but the watch is not really a Timex. That phrase is also useful in studying political movements. Although people are always in motion, they are not always headed toward the same goal. Many times, they are not even going in the same direction. Those rare times when masses of people do converge can mean astounding things are possible. Apartheid, in Georgia and South Africa, can be brought down. Police can run from angry mothers. Politicians can be forced to tell the truth. These moments are called social movements. They should not be watered down, they should be treated as special and distinct because they are.

If a social movement is important enough to build or study, it should be important enough to define. The fact is that political activity in the sixties was different from activity in seventies and is certainly different than today. Exploring the idea of a social movement, and its effect on political struggle, provides a method for putting organizing strategies into historical context. Good organizing is built on the realities of people’s lives, not the wishes and desires of academics and/or activists. If we wish to understand how past political processes occurred or how to build successful new projects, we must understand the similarities and differences between historical eras. This work yields applicable lessons, specifically basic principles necessary to navigate the difficult political landscape of the day. The organizing of 1970s Atlanta provides such lessons. The main one is that organizing works. It may not yield the tangible results of a new law, policy, or time-specific change that historians, journalists, and foundation officers crave, but it does result in a population capable of a political response when few options seem immediately present. Moreover, organizing works particularly well when seen as a way to understand and confront political systems. In short, it is possible to organize against capitalism by organizing around local problems.

As Dan Berger reminds us, the caricature of 1970s activism is one of “fiery black nationalists and violent New Leftists.” The reality is that in the seventies radicals were inspired to try new ventures based on their experience in the sixties. Some of these new ventures focused on community organizing in order to place political problems into a larger

critique of capitalism.² Atlanta in the early seventies was one place where radicals were attempting such a project. The radicals, however, were only one group involved. Liberal, reform-minded organizations were also organizing around the same issues, sometimes in the same neighborhood. Because the differences in the two groups was ideological rather than demographic, both were multi-racial and contained various generations, studying this particular time in this particular city allows us to determine the impact of that ideologically based organizing. But to begin this study requires us to understand how that ideological diversity formed, and that requires an inquiry into the definition of movements.

While it may not make sense to have a rigid idea of social movement, it also does not make sense to not set parameters. I hope to use Atlanta to test the parameters of what constitutes a social movement by using an article that critiques the idea, popular in many historical circles, of the “long civil rights movement.” In 2007 Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang pointed out the problems with extending the idea of the civil rights movement back before 1945 and beyond 1968. They also believe the struggle of black people does not fit into the standard civil rights narrative of a flurry of activity beginning after World War II, peaking with the Voting Rights Act, and collapsing after the death of Martin Luther King, but they are demanding firmer ideas of what constitutes a movement. In particular they want a distinction between the ideological orientation between one movement and the next. That insistence on ideological distinction is particularly useful in this case study. Using their theoretical tools, I conclude that the 1970s in Atlanta was a transitional time period moving away from the civil rights movement and towards a more radical orientation. This transitional period allowed for a systemic critique of capitalism and a broadening of political vision. I begin with a more in-depth study of Cha-Jua’s and Lang’s article and give a short history of Atlanta politics, including the political situation in 1973 and 1974. I then examine some of the responses to the string of police killings. Here, I look closely at the work of radical organizations, in particular the October League and the Atlanta Anti-Repression Coalition, and their work alongside reform-minded civil rights groups. Finally, I summarize the legacy of radical organizing in Atlanta.

² Dan Berger, “Introduction: Exploding Limits in the 1970s,” in *The Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010. Kindle. location 66.

MOVEMENT?

Cha-Jua and Lang challenge the idea of a single movement stretching across time. Although their metaphor of a vampire borders on antagonistic, they make the point that a long movement view implies an unchanging struggle without end. The implication relies on an ahistorical story of struggle. Instead Cha-Jua and Lang believe in a long period of black activism, one they call the Black Liberation Movement (BLM). However, they believe the BLM covers periods of social movement, like civil rights, and times outside of such activity. They also believe the BLM covers more than one social movement. They believe Civil Rights and Black Power constitute separate movements and provide an analytical criteria to back up their claim. The authors believe the Long Movement thesis, among other things, “erases conceptual differences” between the movements, such as the distinction between civil rights and black power.³ For the authors the difference is more than semantic, it is fundamental to understanding where one movement begins and another ends.

Cha-Jua and Lang single out historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall for critique. They take issue with Hall’s use of “‘Civil Rights’ as the catch-all phrase” since it “minimizes ‘Black Power’ to simply a militant moment” in civil rights history. The result is that black power is seen only as a set of tactics, and usually connected to violence, or that it is not seen at all and is “suppressed as a specific movement.” Pulling from political science and African American history, Cha-Jua and Lang define civil rights as “incorporation in the U.S. polity” and civil society. Black power is a product of black nationalist tradition with an emphasis on “African Americans’ distinct cultural ethos.” This collapsing of civil rights and black power is possible, say the authors, because scholars do not adequately explain what forms a social movement. Focusing on tactics, such as the false dichotomy of non-violence vs. armed self-defense, does not distinguish black power from civil rights since such methods were deployed in both movements. Instead the authors suggest focusing on differences in ideology, discourse, and long-range objectives.⁴

I am taking Cha-Jua’s and Lang’s advice seriously. In this essay I look at the ideology, discourse, and long-range objectives of a multiracial group of leftwing activists in Atlanta. Cha-Jua and Lang may question the usefulness of such an endeavor since they argued that anti-communist,

³ Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, “The “Long Movement” as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies,” *The Journal of African American History* 92, no. 2 (2007): 265-266.

⁴ Cha-Jua and Lang: 271-274.

state repression “effectively smashed” most radical black nationalist organizations and the rest “became shadows of their former selves.”⁵ However, I believe a closer inspection shows that individuals in these groupings were able to adapt to changing conditions even as the organizations did not, and these adaptations allowed organizing to flourish. Both the Long Movement narrative and Cha-Jua’s and Lang’s critique hold that by the early 1970s black nationalism was the dominant framework for black organizing. I want to emphasize the importance of organizing in that ideology. Cha-Jua and Lang acknowledge that many of the black nationalist organizations merged with “new communist” groups. The experience of black and white working-class activists organizing on not just a radical anti-capitalists basis, but one that centered the oppression of black people is worth studying. Atlanta in 1973 and 1974, as deeply flawed and short-lived as it was, is an example of such an experience.

In addition to the growing dissimilarity in orientation, this period also highlights the different approaches to leadership. Historian Stephen Tuck relates a story of welfare mothers meeting with Martin Luther King and questioning whether the proposed Poor People’s Campaign would meet their needs. This example, from 1968, shows the rise of working-class black people in leadership positions, a phenomenon that grows into and throughout the 1970s. Tuck’s observation that the seventies was a time of proliferation rather than fragmentation helps to put the work of groups with such differing ideologies into historical context.⁶

THE POLITICAL HISTORY

In 1973 Atlanta was a city on fire. Demonstrations were an almost daily occurrence. There had been strikes at two hospitals, a nursing home, the Nabisco plant, Sears retail stores and a warehouse, and the Mead Corp. The Mead strike was a successful wildcat strike against both the company and the union, accused of collaborating in discriminating against black workers.⁷ The strike also solidified the reputation of the October League (OL), a communist organization that saw the strike wave as a sign to send organizers into factories. However, the OL was not only organizing within

⁵ Cha-Jua and Lang: 272.

⁶ Stephen Tuck, “We Are Taking up Where the Movement of the 1960s Left Off: The Proliferation and Power of African American Protest During the 1970s,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 43, no. 4 (2008): 640, 647.

⁷ For an in-depth study of the strike consult Monica Waugh-Benton, “Strike Fever: Labor Unrest, Civil Rights and the Left in Atlanta, 1972” (M.A. thesis, Georgia State University, 2006).

local plants. Like other leftists in the city the organization was involved in local community struggles as well. In 1973 and 1974 a main concern in Atlanta's black community was crime and the police. The city's police department killed 23 black people in 19 months beginning in 1973.⁸ That same year Atlanta had more murders per capita than any other city in the U.S. To add to this volatile mix the city's almost century-old political system, termed a "community power structure" by one sociologist,⁹ had collapsed. The behind-the-scenes business elite, white and black, who had controlled policy making were being openly challenged. To understand the impact of this change, it is necessary to understand how this process functioned.

Beginning in the 1930s, voter registration drives in the city slowly increased the power of the black vote as a bloc. However, the power of this bloc was limited. Georgia, one of the first states to attack Reconstruction after the Civil War, was also one of the first states to introduce the poll tax in 1868. That same year the state established the white primary, barring blacks from voting in the Democratic Party primaries where most elections were contested. The 1877 state constitution, created after the final defeat of the Reconstruction government, established the poll tax as cumulative. This meant that in order to vote a citizen would have to pay taxes for each year since reaching voting age. This framework of political obstacles kept black voter registration at low levels for decades.¹⁰

Despite this narrow political maneuvering room, Atlanta's black community was able to win some material gains. Although the white primary meant that African Americans could not vote for most candidates, they could vote in general or special elections. In 1919 and 1921, African Americans voted against and defeated two referenda on school bonds because no funds were dedicated for the black community. After the vote negotiations between city officials and African American leaders led to a reapportionment of the bond monies and the referenda were passed.¹¹ This dynamic of a black elite negotiating with white political officials set the stage for the city in dealings on racial politics. As late as 1962 the same

⁸ Mack H. Jones, "Black Political Empowerment in Atlanta: Myth and Reality," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 439, no. (1978): 109.

⁹ Kevin Michael Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*, Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ David Andrew Harmon, *Beneath the Image of the Civil Rights Movement and Race Relations: Atlanta, Georgia, 1946-1981*, Studies in African American History and Culture (New York: Garland Pub., 1996), 9, 13-14.

¹¹ Harmon, 13.

strategy was used when an \$80 million municipal bond, one that did not include funds for black neighborhoods, was rejected. When Mayor Ivan Allen modified the bonds, they passed with overwhelming black support.¹²

In the 1940s voting reforms led to increased voter participation by African Americans. Georgia ended the poll tax in 1945 and lowered the voting age to 18. In 1946 the U.S. Supreme Court declared the white primary unconstitutional. The political realignment of the 1930s meant that black Atlanta was no longer a Republican Party stronghold. African-Americans began lining up behind the Democratic Party. While the reforms and realignment increased black voter participation, it did not fundamentally change the nature of that participation. A moderate, black elite still served as gatekeepers and intermediaries between the black working class and the white political establishment. In 1945 the United Negro Veterans Organization led a demonstration calling for the hiring of black police officers. The *Atlanta Daily World*, the leading black newspaper in the city, condemned the march. Specifically, the paper ridiculed the participation of the black masses, believing change came from a “practical education plan.”¹³ This was a plan devised and implemented by the black elite. The job of the masses was to register to vote, and to vote for whoever was called for in the education plan.

David Andrew Harmon’s analysis of the black political leadership of this period suggests they were dedicated to working within the system of segregation for gradual reforms that did not challenge that system as a whole. Bound by “existing racial attitudes and political realities,” black leadership relied on popular tactics, like rallies and mass meetings, only to “build support for decisions already made or for opponents to constructively vent [black working class] frustrations.”¹⁴ This strategy was so gradual that frustration regularly needed venting. Harmon points out that while Atlanta did eventually hire black police officers in the late 1940s the issue had been under negotiation for 60 years. In 1973 that frustration was focused on Chief John Inman and his heavy-handed policing tactics. However, the rise of various ideological forces, including black nationalism and new communist groups, meant that black elites could no longer completely control the actions of the black working class. They

¹² Winston A. Grady-Willis, *Challenging U.S. Apartheid: Atlanta and Black Struggles for Human Rights, 1960-1977* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 38.

¹³ Harmon, 24, 27-28.

¹⁴ Harmon, 34-35.

certainly could not control black nationalists and other radicals.

THE CHANGED ENVIRONMENT

The Atlanta mayoral election of 1969 saw an effective end to the politics of the previous era. Thanks to the voting rights wins of the 1960s, the number of black politicians in the city greatly expanded. This included, in 1973, the election of the first African-American mayor. The expansion of political opportunity meant the expansion of influential positions no longer tied to the traditional political elite. The influence of the black financial elite was also limited. Although Atlanta had a large population of wealthy African-Americans, this group employed only a small number of black people. In 1972 the total was slightly more than 4,200 workers.¹⁵ Most black people were not financially dependent on other black people. In addition, new political possibilities were opening up. This provided a perfect environment for an expansion of political discourse and the proliferation of activity Tuck wrote about. Various ideologies competed for hegemony including communist, reformist, and nationalist. The competition was one of outreach and respect. Groups worked to reach as many people as possible and win them over. A true test of having won people over was whether or not folks would respond to a call for a demonstration. Following an organization into the street did not mean buying into that organization's ideology, but it did mean accepting, at least in part, how the members of that organization articulated an issue. Throughout 1973 various organizations presented solutions to police violence including a civilian review board, a city ombudsmen, and, of course, the firing of Inman. Yet as the year progressed, and the number of murdered and assaulted rose, more working-class blacks were willing to listen, and even accept, a radical critique of the police.

A quick review of stories from the *Atlanta Constitution* shows that opinions about the Atlanta police, in general, and Inman, in particular, were becoming more negative as 1973 wore on. In May Inman was directly confronted during a public meeting by a city council candidate who questioned the chief about leniency towards police who break the law, including brutality. Inman's answers proved unsatisfactory to at least one black man who demanded the chief prove he was not racist through an investigation by the Atlanta Community Relations Commission.¹⁶ The Commission was a 20-member group created by the city, its member were

¹⁵ Jones: 96.

¹⁶ Bob Allison, "Prove You're Not Racist! Inman Heckler Yells," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 4, 1973.

appointed by the mayor, to study race relations, investigate discrimination, and make recommendations. That a community member would demand an investigation from such a group shows that such reform efforts were seen as at least potentially effective by some. Inman declined to accept the investigation. Instead he attempted to repair his image.

The fact is John Inman needed to work on his image. The assaults and killings in the black community were turning black opinion against the police, and the rising crime rate was making white people uneasy with his performance as well. Inman added to the fire by launching a police investigation of corruption against a city alderman. The investigation was so transparently political that even the *Atlanta Constitution*, not a participant in radical discourse to say the least, issued an editorial calling for his censure by the city council. "The city is sick of little men trying to put the blame on others for this mess," the editorial read. "It wants no police organization talking about 'taking over.' It despises unwarranted charges being brought against men until there is reasonable expectation they are guilty."¹⁷ If only the black population were turning against him, Inman could have weathered the storm. But this editorial shows he was losing support among white businessmen, and no one in Atlanta politics could afford that. Inman counterattacked with a photo op.

Seven black women from southwest Atlanta met with Inman in June to discuss "black hoodlums and drunks" in their neighborhood. Accompanied by a "white welfare case worker," the women complained about muggings and robberies in their neighborhood going uninvestigated. They demanded a more responsive police force with greater presence in the community. Inman was happy to oblige and promised the situation would improve once 33 new officers were hired. The reporter concluded, "There was little doubt that the women were all impressed with the reception they got from Inman and the hopes he expressed for more curtailment of crime in the future."¹⁸ In truth there is little doubt this was a puff piece designed to help Inman with his persona in the black community. In the entire year of 1973 this is the only time Inman voluntarily met with low-income, black people. However, the event does suggest that some segment of working-class blacks were potentially willing to view the police as an ally rather than another entity in their community to be feared. Neither Inman nor the mayor's office capitalized on this potential, and it soon evaporated.

In September anger towards Inman began spilling over on the mayor.

¹⁷ "Stop This Police Mess," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 3, 1973.

¹⁸ Sam Hopkins, "Inman Hears Fears of Black Mothers," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 1, 1973.

The Metro Summit Leadership Congress, a coalition of civil rights organizations, interrupted Mayor Sam Massell's press conference to demand he fire Inman. The 25 protestors included candidates for city council, notably long-time activist Ethel Mae Mathews. The group met with the mayor but was dissatisfied and picketed city hall for two hours. Apparently Massell was also dissatisfied since at one point he walked out of the meeting, although he later returned. In addition to calling for Inman's firing the protestors wanted more black police officers, police to live in the city of Atlanta, and an end to "policemen murdering black people." This action was a response to the police assault on Claudette Pinson, a 15-year-old, developmentally disabled girl who was reportedly punched in the stomach by police.¹⁹ She was the second teenage girl to be assaulted in four months.

By the time of Pinson's assault 13 people had been killed by the police over the course of the year. Although a police probe of the Pinson case was promised, it yielded nothing. An independent inquiry was attempted by the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice. The Commission held a two-day hearing on police brutality. The Commission heard testimony from a variety of witnesses and victims of police violence as well as then Vice Mayor Maynard Jackson. Inman and Massell refused to speak to the researchers. The Commission found that police killings in Atlanta were the highest in the nation, twice that of New York, Oakland, or Chicago. The Commission also reported: "Without a doubt police brutality and misconduct against the black community has reached a crisis proportion that threatens to incite racial rebellion and other acts of violence in Atlanta." In addition to killing, police were accused of "discourtesy, false arrests, excessive use of force, planting evidence."²⁰ The city was already known in 1973 as a place for counterculture and radicalism in the South, but Atlanta was now developing a national reputation for police violence.

ENTER THE LEFT

In 1972 the victory at the Mead Corp. did more than win gains for black workers. It showed the effectiveness, and the tensions, in building a united front of radicals and reformers. It also launched Sherman Miller into the

¹⁹ Jim Merriner, "Incident Flares Tempers: Massell Gets Police Brutality Protests," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 11, 1973.

²⁰ Frederick Allen, "Police Brutality Hearing Begins," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 15, 1973. Jim Merriner, "Firing of Inman Demanded Again," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 20, 1973.

spotlight. Miller was chair of the strike committee at Mead, and he was also a member of the October League (OL). The OL was formed out the remaining activists from Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), a national organization of college students, mostly white, that was radical but not ideological. In 1969 the organization of thousands of students across the country imploded due to a civil war among various communist factions. Out of the ashes of this collapse came many new communist organizations including the OL.

The “new communist” organizations were groups that adhered to ideas of Marxism-Leninism but rejected the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) and the Soviet Union. Groups like the OL embraced “antirevisionism.” Antirevisionism was a denunciation of the Soviet Union’s rejection of Stalin. In 1956 Nikita Khrushchev made a speech at the USSR party congress condemning Stalin for his crimes. New communist groups broke with this condemnation, calling it a revision of history.²¹ Some groups, like the OL, claimed the Soviet Union as a deformed state morally equal to other capitalist nations. Instead, they turned to China for a purer form of Leninism. The potential recruiting pool for groups like the OL was quite large in the early 1970s. One poll in 1970 found more than three million college students (40% of the total) thought a revolution was needed in the U.S.²²

The OL was formed when two remnants of SDS merged: the Georgia Communist League (GCL) and the October League in Los Angeles. The Los Angeles grouping was centered around Mike Klonsky, a national leader from SDS who had advocated the organization work to defeat capitalism by working off campus with working-class people. The GCL was created by former members of the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC), an organization of mostly white students who coordinated the involvement of young people in civil rights work. The GCL focused its work on fighting racism and the Vietnam war. The two organizations merged in 1972 and launched a program that including fighting capitalism by preventing the South from developing as a super exploited zone for corporations, fighting fascism by attacking racist politicians & organizations, and building working class power through

²¹ Mari Jo Buhle and others, *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, Illini Books ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 48.

²² Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao, and Che*, New ed. (London ; New York: Verso, 2006), 4, 18.

multiracial workplace organizing aimed at taking over unions.²³

Although the OL was not formed with a majority black membership, the black members involved were quite influential. In addition to Miller other members included Harry Haywood, a veteran of the CPUSA and creator of the “black nation” thesis which posited that the South was a culturally and economically distinct zone because of the oppression of black people. However, in 1972 the spotlight was on Miller. His organizing during the Mead strike was recognized within the Atlanta black community and nationally among radicals. After the strike Miller embarked on a speaking tour that led to a rapid national expansion of the OL.²⁴ Miller was also reflective about what the strike gained and what it did not. He noted in an interview that white workers did not join the strike, but this was not an inevitable outcome. Rather than be disillusioned he rededicated himself to multiracial organizing. "I'm under the impression that multi-national worker organizations can be built in the plant despite the widespread racism that exists, especially here in the South," he said. He also noted that multi-national, by which he meant multiracial, organizations should not "negate the particular struggles of black people."²⁵ These quotes, particularly the use of “multi-national” rather than multiracial, show the influence of Haywood’s thinking and illustrate the growing acceptance of nationalist discourse in regards to race among radical groups. However, Miller is clearly opposed to separatism. The revolution he sees is one that has a plan to address white supremacy but is carried out by whites and blacks together.

Miller and the rest of the OL also ended the strike with a tense but functional working relationship with many of the old guard civil rights leaders, especially Hosea Williams. Williams had once been one of Martin Luther King’s lieutenants and had thrown himself into local organizing, often to the consternation of other civil rights organizations in Atlanta. During the Mead strike Williams and other civil rights leaders made disparaging remarks about Miller and the OL members, even attempting to scare away support by pointing out their communist beliefs. Miller and other OL organizers called Williams an opportunist. In fact the workers knew about Miller’s communism and Williams’s opportunism and dealt with both pragmatically. As long as OL members were good organizers and Williams could bring resources to the strike, they were willing to have

²³ Kieran Walsh Taylor, “Turn to the Working Class: The New Left, Black Liberation, and the U.S. Labor Movement (1967-1981)” University of North Carolina, 2007), 60-61, 64, 69.

²⁴ Taylor, 98.

²⁵ "Interview: Mead Strike Leader," *The Call*, November 1972.

them both.²⁶ Perhaps it was the influence of the workers' pragmatism, but after the strike OL members refrained from publicly attacking Williams. After badly losing an election for city council president, the OL newspaper believed his loss was the result of attacks by the "local power structure" who despised Williams's "long record of militant struggle in the civil rights and Black workers movements."²⁷ Despite his "reformist preachings," Williams had "stood up to police terror and racial discrimination" and had "drawn a line between himself and the flunkies of the big corporations like Inman and Maynard Jackson." Because of this the OL concluded that "anything but a policy of 'unity and struggle'" would be divisive and isolating.²⁸ These semi-cordial relations proved useful as the OL began organizing against police brutality.

On June 4, 1973 police shot Pamela Dixon, who was 14 years old and also developmentally disabled. Dixon was shot while allegedly wielding a knife at four uniformed police officers while her mother was screaming at the police to not hurt her daughter. She survived the shooting, was arrested, and eventually convicted of simple assault. However, her case became a rallying point for organizations throughout the city. In the days after she was shot tenant organizations, high school groups, civil rights organizations, and radicals came together to create the Pamela Dixon Defense Committee. The community elected Sherman Miller chair.²⁹

Leftwing groups had been prepared to organize around the Pamela Dixon case. In 1972 groups like the OL, the Black Workers Congress, the African Liberation Support Committee, and others formed the Atlanta Anti-Repression Coalition (AARC). The AARC was a vehicle for community organizing by the left. It had a different ideological character than the civil rights organizations, and it had a different organizing style as well. The group began organizing in housing projects, including Capitol Homes where Dixon was shot. The AARC, in attempting to create the "broadest kind of movement," worked to instill a "perspective broader than simply anti-police" among the people. They did this through door-to-door, one-on-one conversations in the community. As co-chair Don Stone explained, this was done to "see where people's heads are, and on the basis of that gear up for the long range process of building that movement." The conversations were not simply listening sessions, they were also political education. AARC organizers made sure people knew that the firing of

²⁶ Taylor, 91-93.

²⁷ "Black Mayor Elected in Atlanta," *The Call*, December 1973.

²⁸ "Stop Racist Police Terror," *The Call*, August 1974.

²⁹ "Rally in Capitol Homes," *The Great Speckled Bird*, August 6, 1973. "Pamela Dixon," *The Great Speckled Bird*, August 13, 1973.

John Inman would not be enough to fundamentally change the relationship between black people and the police. Betty Bryant, also co-chair of the organization, made it clear that only ending capitalism would accomplish that goal. She said AARC saw organizing in the community as a “means of educating the people--and more or less getting them ready to understand that capitalism has got to go.”³⁰ The OL especially contrasted this with civil rights organizations, notably Williams, who were “unwilling to rely totally and consistently on the masses of people.”³¹ Williams and other civil rights leaders were also willing to settle for short-term reforms while the AARC organizers wanted to tear down the system. Any differences between radicals and reformers, however, was set aside in June when the community erupted in response to another killing.

While allegedly attempting to serve an arrest warrant two black police officers killed 17-year-old Brandon Gibson, a resident of Bowen Homes. Gibson did run from the officers, but it is unclear if the police identified themselves during the attempted arrest. It is also unclear exactly how Gibson was killed. The first reports were that Gibson grabbed an officer’s gun and was shot by a third policeman in order to save the lives of the arresting officers. This narrative was quickly disputed. The main witnesses to the story were the officers involved and Charles Stephens. Stephens was identified as an ice cream vendor in the *Atlanta Constitution*, but the counterculture paper *The Great Speckled Bird* found in its investigation that Stephens may have been a police informer. The *Bird* reporters also found that although Stephens claimed to have been looking through a kitchen window he was nowhere near the incident when it took place. Gibson’s younger brother, Benjamin, did come to the scene and claimed that Brandon was being beaten by police and never held the gun.³²

In the days immediately after the shooting, Inman’s actions, at best, did not help the situation. At worst, they inflamed it. He refused to cooperate with the city ombudsman in investigating the shooting. He also refused to meet with the mayor’s office to discuss the “volatile situation” with the community.³³ Inman responded to community actions with mass arrests and more violence. The day after the killing hundreds of people marched

³⁰ Paula Jacobs and Jon Jacobs, "Anti-Repression Movement in Atlanta: Where It Is and Where It Is Going," *The Great Speckled Bird*, August 26, 1974.

³¹ Stop Racist Police Terror.

³² Jon Jacobs, "Community Protests Murder of Brandon Gibson," *The Great Speckled Bird*, July 1, 1974. Jim Stewart, "Investigators Get 2 Versions of Police Shootings," *Atlanta Constitution*, June, 26, 1974.

³³ Jim Stewart and Barry Henderson, "Inman to Refuse City Request," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 25, 1974.

from Bowen Homes to police headquarters where 35 were arrested, most for stepping on the grass. Four days after the killing, at Gibson's funeral, the police attacked an unpermitted march of 250, arresting 14 and injuring several. The funeral march was originally planned to be a procession against police brutality, but due to political pressure from the Governor and Mayor the plans were cancelled. However, a gathering of mostly working-class blacks, with a smattering of whites, congregated at the Martin Luther King memorial and marched without a permit.³⁴

The funeral march was publicly led by Williams, but much of the organizing was done by the AARC. The Coalition had been organizing in Bowen Homes for more than a year by that time and had a good reputation within the community. Many of those who gathered at the memorial were AARC members, but the majority were outraged community members. That the officers involved in the shooting were black did little to placate community sentiment. That the mayor was black also did little. Maynard Jackson was the first African-American elected as mayor, but he was out of town at a conference during the shooting and the march and only able to issue statements calling for calm. Sentiment among black people in Bowen Homes was that Gibson's death was "one in a series of police shootings," and that firing Inman would certainly help their situation but would not alter their relationship to the "whole repressive capitalistic system."³⁵

In fact little happened as a result of these protests. No charges were filed against the officers, some months later Gibson's brother and mother were arrested in another scuffle with police, and the Atlanta police continued to have a reputation for violence. Any changes that did occur were ones that leave little evidence. It is quite likely many of the residents of Bowen Homes gained a new political understanding of their lives. Some may have joined with anti-poverty groups in the city, and a few may have even become cadre in the OL or other leftist organizations. The questions remains if the organizing around police brutality in Atlanta in 1973 and 1974 was part of the Long Civil Rights Movement, Black Power, or something else entirely. More importantly, if the organizing didn't lead to

³⁴ Jim Stewart and Frederick Allen, "Police Arrest Williams, 13 Marchers," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 27, 1974 1974.

³⁵ Jim Stewart and Frederick Allen, "Police Arrest Williams, 13 Marchers," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 27, 1974. Jacobs.

tangible change, was it worth it?

CONCLUSION

As this short summary shows, Atlanta in 1973 and 1974 was quite active. According to traditional civil rights narratives, the ones challenged by Cha-Jua and Lang, this sort of action would seem more suitable to the late 1960s than the early 1970s. The one saving grace for the defeatist 1970s narrative is the lack of a clear win. The Atlanta organizing did not produce a city equivalent of a Voting Rights Act or a Civil Rights Act, and therefore plays into the chronicle of a vibrant (and victorious) 1960s followed by a blasé (and defeatist) 1970s. Cha-Jua and Lang contest the traditional narrative's measure of victory and defeat. They provide a means of inquiry by looking at the ideology, discourse, and long-range objectives. If the struggle of the 1960s and 1970s had different politics leading to different goals, does it make sense to say they are the same movement? I do not think it does. Connected? Yes. But the same? No.

Tuck writes that the "hidden grassroots struggle" of the 1970s tells a story of activism continuing from the 1960s but in a different form with different leadership. Tuck disputes the idea that the 1970s saw fragmentation of activity, rather he sees proliferation.³⁶ This view is entirely consistent with both Berger's assessment as well as the Atlanta anti-police brutality story. The various left groups that emerged, like the OL and the AARC, did not come about because of a fragmented political landscape. Rather, they were the result of a proliferation of individuals looking for the expression of political, at times deeply radical, ideas. Many of these individuals, like Sherman Miller, moved to Atlanta to be part of the political scene. Yet many others, like the Gibson family, were from the city and were motivated to become involved in radical politics from their own experience. This proliferation changed political discourse within the city. No longer was black political activity dictated by politicians and other elite. As the outrage over Gibson's death shows, elites had little influence on people's actions.

Tuck also makes the point that leadership mattered. Black working-class men and women had always been a part of black struggle, but beginning in the late 1960s their leadership was finally coming to the fore. As his story of the challenge to King by welfare mothers illustrates, this new leadership sometimes challenged the long-range objectives of the

³⁶ Tuck: 640.

traditional civil rights organizations.³⁷ This pattern was repeated in the Atlanta organizing where radical organizers worked alongside reform activists but consistently challenged the ultimate goals being fought over. Ideology was a contested terrain. Radicals, particularly those involved in AARC and the OL, articulated a united front strategy modeled on the leftwing coalitions in the aftermath of WWII. They repeatedly worked with Williams and the civil rights groups, but this does not mean they shared the same view of the world. They also brought their worldview directly to the people. While few became active communists, it is clear that radical ideas of how the police relate to poor, black people became the dominant view in the public housing projects.

Taken together we can see that early 1970s Atlanta was absolutely connected to the struggles of the 1960s, but it is more difficult to say the anti-police violence organizing was part the civil rights movement. Cha-Jua's and Lang's framework, combined with Tuck's ideas, lead me to conclude this was a transitional period where both movement frameworks were in play. However, I also conclude the transition was away from a Civil Rights Movement towards a more radical black liberation-oriented movement. Cha-Jua and Lang are right to distinguish between the civil rights and the black power movement. The details on the ground show there were ideological differences that led to different results, such as the proliferation of community organizing in the last 30+ years. Using their article we are better able to determine the impact and legacy of this period.

But what does it all mean? I conclude that although similar in many ways the watch is not a Timex, the differences are slight but significant. The early 70s in Atlanta were a time of transition. It had many of the characteristics of the civil rights movement, but some significant differences. The main difference was the creation of political space for groups that had not held formal leadership even within the civil rights movement, notably working-class black women. The struggles against police brutality in Atlanta before, during, and after the 1970s almost always had one or more black mothers in the center. From the early 1970s onward these women took formal leadership roles in that work. Moreover, they took leadership roles in other areas of struggle as well. Georgia developed, and maintains to this day, a vibrant network of anti-poverty activists and organizations made up overwhelmingly of working-class black women, the same type of women at the center of radical organizing in the seventies. This isn't the result of a leadership campaign, but it also

³⁷ Tuck: 647.

is not accident.

The radical organizing practice of the seventies introduced a new vision of what political space could be. While few people may have developed an explicitly anti-capitalist politics from their involvement, many people did experience a space where they could develop their own analysis. The ideological diversity of Atlanta made it possible for people to see the pros and cons of different types of politics as applied to their situation. When radical organizers said that the problem was the police not police brutality or capitalism not the mayor, participants could and did apply that thinking to their own life. They contrasted it with what liberal organizations said. Some agreed with the radicals, many did not, but all expanded their idea of the possible. The act of considering a systemic critique and thinking about a systemic solution broadened the idea of what life could be. I submit that is the best measure of the success or failure of radical organizing.
