Introduction

Margin and Mainstream in the American Radical Experience

"Please be informed that I am ready to serve in any unit of the armed forces of my country which is not segregated by race," wrote Winfred Lynn to his local draft board in 1942 after learning of his conscription into the United States Army. The 36-year-old landscape gardener from Jamaica, Queens, New York City, loathed Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan but vowed to go "to prison or to die, if necessary, rather than submit to the mockery of fighting for democracy in a Jim Crow army." Only when his lawyers concluded that his case against the Selective Service would be stronger were he in uniform did Lynn submit to conscription. He saw duty in the Pacific, made the rank of corporal, and watched his case reach the Supreme Court, which declined to hear it on January 2, 1945, dashing what one black newspaper, proclaiming Lynn "Hero of World War II," termed "the most important legal battle to challenge segregation in the armed forces." Only the Second World War's end in 1945 brought him an honorable discharge and the outcome he had sought for three long years: freedom.[1]

Worrying that Lynn's stance was too radical, even unpatriotic, the nation's leading civil rights organization, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), had declined to support his case. His first attorney was his younger brother, Conrad Lynn, who

[1] Dwight Macdonald and Nancy Macdonald, *The War's Greatest Scandal: The Story of Jim Crow in Uniform* (March on Washington Movement, n.d.), p. 5; "Winfred Lynn Reports on Jim Crow in Army," *Socialist Call*, 5 November 1945, p. 3; "Harlem Awaits With Big Welcome Winfred Lynn, Hero of World War II," *Arkansas State Press*, 26 October 1945, p. 1.

had been expelled from the Communist Party in 1937 for supporting Trinidadian workers' strikes, contrary to the Party's conciliatory Popular Front line. Next to join the defense was another radical, Arthur Garfield Hays, a civil libertarian who had represented anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, evolutionist John T. Scopes, and the Scottsboro Boys. The chief supporter of Lynn outside the courtroom was a militant trade union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, comprised mostly of black train workers inclined to fight for race equality as well as economic gain.

Winfred Lynn's disregard of wartime pressures out of insistence upon equality bore the militancy of the Brotherhood, whose leader A. Philip Randolph was graced with imperturbability, a courteous bearing, and a mellifluous voice. Randolph visited the White House repeatedly as chief race spokesman of the 1940s, striving to prevent a resurgence of the European colonialism and lynching that followed the First World War. "This is not a war for freedom," he held in 1944. "It is not a war for democracy. It is not a war to usher in the Century of the Common Man. . . . It is a war to continue 'white supremacy,' the theory of *Herrenvolk,* and the subjugation, domination, and exploitation of the peoples of color. It is a war between the imperialism of Fascism and Nazism and the imperialism of monopolistic capitalistic democracy." Randolph organized a 1943 Harlem mass meeting on Lynn's behalf and signed a letter lamenting "the sight of a Jim Crow American army fighting against Nazi racialism."[2]

With Randolph as the spearhead, this left-led black freedom movement of the 1940s made two signal breakthroughs: it widened access to jobs and compelled desegregation of the armed forces. Randolph had formed a March on Washington Movement around those demands, planning a rally of tens of thousands at the Lincoln Memorial on July 1, 1941. As a socialist, he considered racism the product of economic insecurity and competition and held that "our present political and economic capitalist order is unable to satisfy the needs of modern man" because under it "one section of the population appropriates a part of the product which others have produced without giving any equivalent exchange." In the spring of 1941 the March on Washington Movement swelled with poor

[2] A. Philip Randolph, "March on Washington Movement Presents Program for the Negro," in *What the Negro Wants*, ed. Rayford W. Logan (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944), p. 135; A. Philip Randolph, Willard S. Townsend, Norman Thomas, and Roy Wilkins, "A Worthy Cause," *Los Angeles Tribune*, 3 January 1944, p. 9.

and working-class blacks, although the small black middle class viewed it as an irresponsible provocation and the Communist Party objected out of fealty to the Non-Aggression Pact between Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union and Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany. All the same, the March on Washington Movement was impressively effective. Worried about the "international embarrassment" that would result from a demonstration against segregation in the nation's capital, as *Fortune* magazine put it, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt agreed to issue Executive Order 8802, which established a Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to monitor defense contractors, just in time for Randolph to call off the protest march. It was the most significant federal civil rights advance since Reconstruction.[3]

In the years that followed, Randolph forgot neither armed forces desegregation nor "the famous Winfred Lynn case," as he called it in Congressional testimony in 1948. Jim Crow units had endured menial, humiliating work during the Second World War, and black Americans saw the military as a national institution with millions of employees whose desegregation would weaken the racial caste system. When Democratic President Harry S. Truman proposed universal military training and conscription as the Cold War set in, Randolph visited the White House to inform Truman that his own "frank, factual survey" found that "Negroes are in no mood to shoulder a gun for democracy abroad so long as they are denied democracy here at home." If a draft were instituted while discrimination persisted, Randolph announced, he would "advise Negroes to refuse to fight as slaves for a democracy they cannot possess and cannot enjoy": "Negroes are just sick and tired of being pushed around, and we just do not propose to take it, and we do not care what happens." This threat of mass draft resistance was radical – "treasonable," said Georgia Senator Richard Russell – but sufficiently credible to disconcert Truman, who faced an election year as well as an accelerating Cold War struggle with the Soviet Union over Africa, Asia, and Latin America, whose peoples already were inclined to look askance at U.S. claims to represent the "free world" given American racial segregation. When Truman issued Executive Order 9981 in 1948, abolishing racial segregation in the

[3] Herbert Garfinkel, *When Negroes March: The March on Washington Movement in the Organizational Politics for FEPC* (1959; New York: Atheneum, 1973), pp. 17, 64; Cornelius L. Bynum, *A. Philip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2010), p. 57.

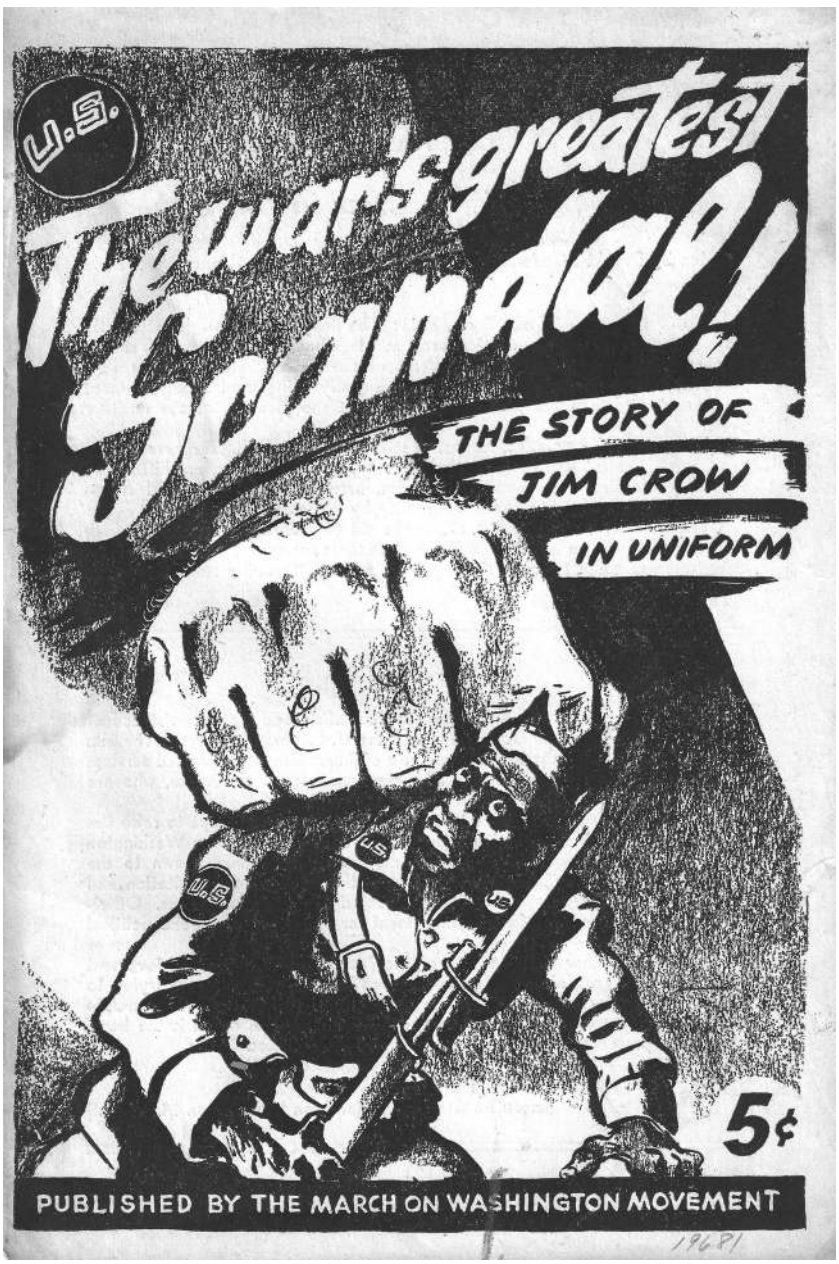

FIGURE 0.1. The March on Washington Movement organized by the black socialist labor leader A. Philip Randolph, which called on the U.S. military to abandon its racist practices during the Second World War. 1943. *Authors' collection.*

military, Randolph called off the civil disobedience campaign, having once again applied popular pressure to wrest a stunning civil rights victory by federal executive order.[4]

That might mark the end of the story were it not for one final twist. Truman's executive order was so vague about the timetable for military desegregation that some radicals saw it as postponing, rather than fulfilling, justice. Among them was Winfred Lynn, who joined a small band of radicals led by pacifists A. J. Muste and Bayard Rustin who vowed to carry the civil disobedience campaign forward. Their Campaign to Resist Military Segregation – with Lynn the gardener as its treasurer – urged "Negro and white youth to refuse induction into segregated military establishments." Just as A. Philip Randolph had honored Lynn's wartime resistance in his testimony to Congress, so Lynn was following a credo first articulated by Randolph: "These rights will not be given. They must be taken."[5]

What is a radical? The word *radical* comes from the same Latin word as *radish*. Both describe objects that are red, zesty, and sometimes found underground, but their real etymological connection is in their shared derivation from *radix*, the Latin word for *root*. As any gardener knows, radishes are root vegetables, and radicals seek the roots of social problems. When Thomas Paine, an artisan radical of the eighteenth century, rebutted the conservative Edmund Burke's condemnation of crowd violence in the French Revolution, he pointed to the bloodthirsty example that monarchy had set. "Lay, then, the axe to the root," he wrote, "and teach governments humanity."[6]

By positing a need to go to the root, radicals suggest that mere pruning will invite social problems to sprout forth with renewed vigor. That is why radicals have not opposed particular wars alone but often have set

[4] Senate Committee on Armed Services, *Universal Military Training: Hearings Before the Committee on Armed Services*, 80th Cong., 2nd sess., 1948, pp. 687–688; Jervis Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait* (1973; Berkeley: University of California, 1986), p. 239; Senate Committee on Armed Services, *Universal Military Training*, p. 689; William C. Berman, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1970), p. 119.

[5] "Resist Military Segregation Goes On After A. Philip Randolph Abandons It," *Arkansas State Press*, 27 August 1948, pp. 1, 8; A. Philip Randolph, "Keynote Address," in *March on Washington Movement: Proceedings of Conference Held in Detroit September 26–27, 1942*, p. 5.

[6] Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man: Being an Answer to Mr. Burke's Attack on the French Revolution* (London: Printed for J. S. Jordan, 1791), p. 33.

out to eliminate militarism, state expansion, and empire – or even, among pacifists, violence and domination themselves. Likewise, it is why radicals have not stopped at attempts to reduce poverty through charity but sought to replace the very system of concentrated private ownership and capital accumulation that generates vast inequalities in income and wealth. To be sure, radical activism frequently leads to lesser adjustments, along the lines of the old adage that by demanding the whole loaf one may secure half. Ultimately, however, radicals have tended to be sustained by the view that a great range of social problems are tied together and must be addressed holistically.

Because they do not accept the status quo's legitimacy, radicals have often adopted tactics and strategies considered irregular or beyond the pale. Some methods – marching in demonstrations, signing petitions, setting up picket lines, or running candidates independent of the major parties – may seem innocuous exercises of basic democratic rights, but to conventionally minded Americans such activity can seem weird or risky. Radicals have often been tarred as dangerous, reckless, extremist, or subversive, especially if they advocate tactics such as disruptive civil disobedience or armed self-defense, but that does not necessarily prevent them from being effective. As Nathaniel Hawthorne once put it, "The world owes all its onward impulses to men ill at ease."[7]

The terms *left* and *right* are often used in conventional political discourse to describe positions on the contemporary U.S. political scene, with liberalism and the Democratic Party referred to as "the left" and conservatism and the Republican Party as "the right." Radicals have defined the left more robustly. In the French Revolution of 1789, when left and right were first used to designate contending political blocs, "the left" meant revolution: the overturning of existing social relations, the eradication of the *ancien régime* of feudalism and monarchy. The quintessential slogan of the French Revolution – *liberty, equality, fraternity* – is as good a place as any to start in understanding the radical left, especially if *solidarity* is substituted for the last of the three terms, to make it gender neutral. *Liberty, equality, solidarity*: the radical left has sought to expand personal freedom, establish greater social, political, and economic equality, and widen the scope of mutuality by recognition of the inherent dignity of all. The role of the left has been to point to a future society governed by self-determination and cooperation, pitting it against both the elitism of

[7] Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables; and the Snow Image* (1851; Boston: James R. Osgood, 1871), p. 330.

traditional society with its top-down ranking of humankind and modern ultra-competitive society with its survival-of-the-fittest ethics.

The conviction that power should be distributed on a vastly more participatory basis – that every gardener may govern, to adapt an old formulation – has led the radical left to dissent from conventions that many take to be natural. The left has tended, if not with total consistency, to oppose the division of people into superior and inferior castes or groups, whether by social class (wealthy, poor, intermediate), gender (male and female), or race ("whites" over African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and other people of color). Some past social structures of division, such as slavery and state-mandated racial segregation, have succumbed to radical challenges, but even today privileges accorded on the basis of class, gender, and race remain the focus and target of radical action, supplemented by concerns such as promoting peace, environmental sustainability, and freedom of sexual orientation. What makes left-wing criticism radical is the conviction that freedom, equality, democracy, and solidarity will demand changing the existing order of social life in fundamental ways – supplanting, for example, the power of multinational corporations – and devising new egalitarian ways of social interaction and political engagement. In this way the radical left differs profoundly from the so-called "radical" right, which works to reinforce class, gender, and racial privileges, if often in the guise of liberty, patriotism, populism, tradition, or merit. The radical left has always been a minority current in an American society that is reluctant to entertain possibilities of dramatic change. Indeed, U.S. culture has seen implacable, enduring hierarchies despite the country's founding declaration that "all men are created equal." Nevertheless, the left has propelled major changes and frequently given shape to what Americans broadly take as the nation's core traditions.

This comprehensive history of American left-wing radicalism since the Second World War will cover the left's surge right after the Second World War, adversity in the McCarthy era, growth in the 1960s and 1970s, and precariousness in more recent decades. The waxing and waning of radical fortunes across this entire period are best understood by apprehending *margin* and *mainstream* as the constitutive duality of the American radical experience. Radicals must exist in estrangement from society, in opposition to the whole established order, as when the Black Panther Party condemned a white-dominated "Babylon" or radical feminists opposed "the patriarchy." Radicals oppose existing society, placing them on the outside, but at the very same time desire a future in which their values

are made the basis of a restructured society. Toward that end, they must strive to transform, by whatever means available to them, the culture and society they oppose, which requires engaging larger currents that can issue in victories. The task of maintaining ardent opposition to the status quo, as outsiders if need be, while also seeking solidarity with strong social forces, here and now, that might be capable of changing it root and branch poses a dialectic of margin and mainstream. That dialectic entails a tension between two commitments: the willingness to hold fast for a minority view and the struggle to imagine and help fashion a new majority. Such a tension can be, at different times, fruitful in generating new strategies and tactics of change or disabling as it tempts leftists in either direction, toward unjustified pride in their isolation or toward an appeal to popularity that sacrifices their radical goals. Margin and mainstream, together, provide the fulcrum of our analysis of the history of American radicalism.

So characteristic of the radical experience is this duality that it dates to American radicalism's formative phase, prior to the Civil War, when to advocate immediate freedom for all slaves was a *radical* idea embraced by a prophetic minority, an idea that made one a pariah. Wendell Phillips, one such pariah, is an exemplary case study in how margin and mainstream works powerfully as a descriptor of the condition of radical commitment. A well-bred Boston attorney, Phillips risked comfort and found himself relegated to the margins when he decided to give full measure to his beliefs when he saw another abolitionist attacked by a conservative mob. As a result, Phillips became "the first and greatest American agitator," even the "inventor" of the "method of agitation," according to his first biographer, and as a result was compelled to suffer "the decree of social outlawry."[8]

If a rebel, however, Phillips was not alone. The decades before the Civil War saw abolitionism spill over, stimulating other egalitarianisms. Communal experiments in socialism mushroomed. The early labor movement challenged onerous working conditions and poor pay. Experimental freethinking flourished against the restraining orthodoxies of established religion, public opinion, and custom. Radical women of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – Mary Wollstonecraft, Fanny Wright, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth, Victoria Woodhull, and others – were regarded as scandalous for

[8] Carlos Martyn, *Wendell Phillips: The Agitator* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1890), pp. 105, 179.

their advocacy of equal rights for women, abolition, and freethinking about religion and marriage. These combined campaigns shocked and outraged the American public even if they presaged many social and cultural changes later widely accepted. They give enduring clues as to the sensibility of American radicalism, for radicals ever since have repeatedly acknowledged them as forerunners, as when A. Philip Randolph said of the "New Negro radicals" of his generation, "We stood upon the shoulders of the civil rights fighters of the Reconstruction era, and they stood upon the shoulders of the black abolitionists."[9]

Wendell Phillips understood full well that the abolitionist cause he had joined was that of a distinct and beleaguered minority subject to vitriolic opprobrium, as he stated in 1853: "The press, the pulpit, the wealth, the literature, the prejudices, the political arrangements, the present self-interest of the country, are all against us. . . . The elements which control public opinion and mould the masses are against us. We can but pick off here and there a man from the triumphant majority." Simultaneously, his radicalism rested on a deep belief in the cause of democracy, the rule of the majority among a self-governing people. In the very same year as his unblinking recognition of his marginality, he said, "The convictions of most men are on our side, and this will surely appear, if we can only pierce the crust of their prejudice or indifference." He was committed to change by means of moral suasion, because he believed the democratic age required "a government of brains, a government of ideas. I believe in it – in public opinion." In these words, Phillips made clear the tension between the necessity of accepting marginality as a principled oppositionist, even to the point of inviting scorn and persecution, while simultaneously orienting toward, indeed *believing in*, the people at large.[10]

How did Phillips hold to opposition in the face of overpowering hostility while claiming democracy was on his side? Only by a powerful sense of futurity: a confidence that today's persecuted minority would in the long run forge popular sentiment. Radicals by necessity tack back and forth between the aspiration to represent a broad popular constituency and the actual status of being a political minority engaged in agitation, persecuted by authorities, and abhorred by much of popular opinion. Small bands of radicals can reshape the mainstream when, given the right

[9] Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph*, p. 21.
[10] Wendell Phillips, *The Lesson of the Hour*, ed. Noel Ignatiev (Chicago, Ill.: Charles H. Kerr, 2001), pp. 46, 70, 80.

combination of changing circumstances and wise and creative strategy, the agitators' ideas and ambitions succeed in mobilizing sufficient numbers to demand great change, whether by electoral means or mass protest outside the doors of formal legislatures, compelling new policies and popular majorities.

A democratic dilemma arises insofar as opposition to the status quo places agitators in a literal or figurative stance of outlawry. Disobeying existing conventions, they often must face a reactionary, resistant mainstream – not only among constituted authorities but much of the public too. For a radical politics, then, "democracy" cannot mean whatever majority opinion holds at any particular moment but must speak to the promise that masses of people will at some point prove amenable to radical ideas, whether consciously or not. At the same time, the radical left must expect and be prepared for rapid changes in circumstances, so its agitators must address themselves not to routine government and party competition but cultivate readiness for "extraordinary politics," revolutionary situations that are not in any strict sense predictable or well scripted. Phillips recognized this, declaring in 1853, "Politics is but the common pulse-beat, of which revolution is the fever-spasm." The latter could be found in those exceptional moments when marginal agitators suddenly gain access to mainstream sentiment and in crises that demand dramatic improvisations. Thus even though Phillips began as a pacifist, he proved ready to change his tactics and strategy as the Civil War broke out. He and the escaped slave Frederick Douglass bent all their agitation toward compelling the reluctant Republican Party leadership to make abolition of slavery the Union's cause of arms. The fact that war provided the occasion for Abraham Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, and ride to reelection in 1864 on a platform endorsing a new Constitutional amendment for an absolute end to slavery in the republic – ideas far outside the mainstream only a few years before – proved Phillips's revolutionary anticipation correct. The anti-slavery crusade remains one of the clearest cases in all American history of how forbidden, vilified radical opinions and organizing can suddenly propel dramatic and almost completely unexpected new futures.[11]

For black abolitionists and the most radical of white abolitionists, the eradication not only of slavery but also of racism was the aim. Beyond that profoundly radical objective, abolitionism gave rise to all manner of

[11] Phillips, *Lesson of the Hour*, p. 73.