

# BLACK AND WHITE

LAND, LABOR, AND POLITICS IN THE SOUTH

T. Thomas Fortune

*Introduction by Seth Moglen*

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## INTRODUCTION



Timothy Thomas Fortune was the most eloquent and influential African-American radical of the late nineteenth century. The leading black journalist of the 1880s and 1890s, he was also a militant activist who founded the Afro-American League, the first national political organization to fight for full equality for black Americans. Fortune is a decisive figure in the African-American protest tradition. In his writing and activism, he constituted a bridge between the militant visions of the black abolitionists and the rise of the Niagara Movement at the turn of the twentieth century. His influence on the generation of black protest leaders that followed him is concrete and direct. It was Fortune who gave W.E.B. Du Bois his first writing opportunities as a correspondent for his newspaper, and the young Du Bois viewed Fortune as a mentor and role model. It was Fortune who brought Ida B. Wells to New York to continue her anti-lynching campaign in the pages of his paper, the *New York Age*, when vigilantes in Memphis threatened her life and destroyed her press. It was Fortune's platform for the Afro-American League that provided a model for the NAACP. There is no way to understand accurately the contours of the modern civil rights movement, from Du Bois and Wells to Martin Luther King Jr., without understanding Fortune's intellectual and institutional contribution to it. And there can be no proper assessment of the nature and persistence of African-American economic radicalism—from the Fourierism of Sojourner Truth to the contemporary visions of Angela Davis and Cornel West—without grasping Fortune's role in elaborating the economic intuitions of the black abolitionist generation into a

coherent socialist analysis of racial capitalism in *Black and White: Land, Labor, and Politics in the South*.

*Black and White* is Fortune's masterpiece. The first socialist book written by an African American, it is a foundational text for the black radical tradition and a milestone in the intellectual history of the American Left. It is required reading for anyone who cares about the African-American freedom struggle—and the wider movement for racial and economic justice in the United States. Having spent his own childhood in slavery and having survived the horrors of Reconstruction and its aftermath, Fortune set out in this book to explain why the abolition of slavery had not made African Americans free. In the first half of *Black and White*, he offers a passionate account of the ways in which white racism had deformed America from its inception—and had doomed black people to slavery and, after emancipation, to unique forms of violence and discrimination. In the second half of the book, he argues that institutionalized racism was only one part of the problem and that the continued oppression of African Americans was also the result of an underlying economic system that had exploited the labor of black people during hundreds of years of slavery and that continued to exploit them (and poor people of other races) after the Civil War. He insists that if the legacy of slavery was ever to be overcome, and if the United States was ever to realize its long-betrayed promise of equality, there would need to be a fundamental transformation of the capitalist economic system as well as the elimination of white racism.

Despite its importance, *Black and White* is largely unread today. The reasons for this neglect are complex, as I will explain below, and they have in part to do with the paradoxical character of Fortune's later political development. But beyond these biographical complexities, *Black and White* has remained half-buried—acknowledged by experts but not widely read—because it has always been an unsettling work. When it was first published in 1884, Fortune's book represented an exceptionally bold demand for racial

and economic equality. It told painful truths about the role of white racism in American history and it called for fundamental change in the economic order. Most Americans have preferred not to face such provocations. With the exception of two short-lived reprints that appeared at the height of the modern civil rights movement, *Black and White* was out of print throughout the twentieth century. It is my hope that readers are, at last, ready for *Black and White*—and that this edition will enable Fortune's most important work to reach the wide audience it deserves.

### **The Life and Career of T. Thomas Fortune**

Timothy Thomas Fortune was born into slavery in Marianna, Florida in 1856. Emancipated with the rest of his family at the end of the Civil War, he came of age during Reconstruction, experiencing both its promise and its violent betrayal. Fortune's father, Emanuel, emerged after the war as a leader of Marianna's black community, which elected him to the Reconstruction-era Florida Constitutional Convention and then to the Florida House of Representatives. This period of hopefulness was shattered by the reimposition of white supremacy in northwestern Florida. The Ku Klux Klan murdered with impunity scores of African Americans in Marianna in the 1870s and drove Republican leaders—including Emanuel Fortune—from the town through a campaign of assassinations and death threats. This reign of terror broke the health of Fortune's mother and contributed to her early death.<sup>1</sup> By the time he reached adolescence, Fortune had already learned the painful lesson shared by millions of freedmen and freedwomen: that the end of slavery had brought neither equality nor justice to African Americans. In a little more than a decade, his people had been politically disenfranchised, economically exploited, constrained by segregation, and terrorized by lynching and other forms of racial violence. Fortune would spend his adult life analyzing this unjust social order and seeking to understand how it might be resisted and transformed.

Like most former slaves, Fortune had limited opportunity for formal education. He attended a school set up by the Freedman's Bureau for a few months and, as a young man, he had the luxury of one year in the preparatory department at Howard University. Raised in a literate household, however, Fortune acquired a passion for learning early on and he was, like many nineteenth-century African-American leaders, prodigiously self-educated. As his writings make clear, he read voraciously in many fields, including history, politics, economics, and literature. He worked in print shops as a boy, which initiated him into the printer's trade and, ultimately, led him into the journalist's vocation. He served as page in the Florida state senate when he was a teenager, which stimulated his political ambitions even as it taught him disillusioning lessons about the realities of Reconstruction politics. As a young man, Fortune taught school in Florida for a brief time—but he found intolerable the racial indignities and outrages of the Jim Crow South. With his wife, Carrie, he moved to New York City in 1881 to pursue a career in journalism.

Fortune rose to prominence with remarkable rapidity as a journalist, political organizer, and race leader in the 1880s. After his arrival in New York, he quickly established himself as editor of a weekly African-American newspaper that was initially called the *Globe* and was later renamed the *New York Freeman* and, finally, the *New York Age*. During the period of his editorship (from 1881 to 1907), Fortune's paper was widely regarded as the leading journalistic voice of black America. In part, its influence resulted from the national scope of its circulation and contributors. But above all, African Americans read the *Age* (and the white press took notice of it) because of Fortune's eloquent, sophisticated, and fiery editorials. Week after week, he denounced the injustices to which black Americans were subjected, and he devoted particular attention to the deteriorating condition of black people in the South. He condemned the legal—and extra-legal—processes by which African Americans were being deprived of the vote in the former states of the Confederacy. He railed against the convict-lease system, which made the

systematic imprisonment of black people profitable to white employers. He denounced the crop-lien system and other economic practices that had reduced millions of black southerners to a state of peonage or near-slavery as a result of debts, which grew no matter how hard they worked. He criticized every aspect of racial segregation, from separate and inequitable schools to the humiliations of Jim Crow railroad cars and other public accommodations. He denounced anti-miscegenation laws, insisting on the right of black and white Americans to intermarry if they wished. He exposed the horrific realities of lynching, and he fearlessly urged African Americans to defend themselves against violence—through arms if necessary.

An ambitious reader and thinker, Fortune placed his analysis of the African-American experience within a global framework. In the pages of the *Age* (and in other black- and white-owned papers for which he wrote), he denounced racism in all its forms—in the North as well as the South, in the discriminatory treatment of other racial and ethnic groups within the United States (including Asian and Native Americans), and in the expanding project of U.S. and European imperialism in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific. He was also unusually attentive to the way in which the oppression of African Americans was part of a global system of economic exploitation that affected poor people of all races and nationalities. Accordingly, he reported on developments within the American labor movement (especially in the 1880s)—and he hoped that it would blossom into a cross-racial movement for economic justice.

Within this global frame, Fortune prided himself on being an “Afro-American Agitator”—and he was an active political organizer as well as a militant journalist. Insisting that African Americans were entitled to all the rights of citizenship, Fortune played a leading role in conceiving and creating the first ongoing national protest organization committed to securing those rights, the National Afro-American League. He issued a call for the organization’s founding in the pages of the *Freeman* in 1887, and he drafted a proposed con-

stitution for the League that same year. The League aimed, above all, to educate public opinion and to bring legal suits in the courts in order to secure the civil rights guaranteed to African Americans by the federal Constitution but abrogated after the abandonment of Reconstruction. The national organization promoted the formation of local branches around the country and hoped to coordinate nationwide legal and political activism, directed especially at voting rights, equal access to education, protection against lynching, fighting segregation, and reforming the penitentiary system. Fortune served at various times as president and secretary of the League (and of its milder later incarnation, the National Afro-American Council). He brought a successful court case of his own against a New York hotel bar that refused to serve him, and he championed the civil rights cases of others. Although financial and political constraints prevented the organization from realizing its potential, the Afro-American League provided the model on which later and more successful protest organizations would rely.<sup>2</sup>

During the 1880s and 1890s—one of the bleakest periods of African-American history—Fortune thus established himself as an uncompromising champion of full racial equality. His most important contributions to the African-American political tradition were made during this period, as editor of the *Age*, as a visionary founder of the Afro-American League, and as mentor and inspiration to other African-American militants such as Wells and Du Bois who came to prominence later.<sup>3</sup>

It was also during the 1880s that Fortune made his intellectual contributions to the black radical tradition—which are as important as his journalistic and organizational ones, though they have not been as well recognized by historians. With the publication of *Black and White: Land, Labor, and Politics in the South* in 1884—Fortune established himself as the most ambitious African-American political thinker and social theorist of his generation. Most important, he extended the economic dimension of African-American political thought. From the era of slavery onward, African Americans had



been acutely aware that their racial oppression was intimately bound up with their economic exploitation. As the slave narratives persistently demonstrate, slaves saw clearly that their masters profited from their own unremunerated labor and that the masters justified this economic system by asserting the racial inferiority of African people. Many of the black abolitionists regarded the movement to end slavery as a challenge not only to a racial ideology, but also to an economic system—and they were drawn to various forms of economic radicalism, from the Fourierism of Sojourner Truth to the Free Produce movement of Henry Highland Garnet.<sup>4</sup> In *Black and White*, Fortune developed these economic intuitions more systematically than ever before, offering an unparalleled socialist analysis of racial capitalism in the United States. This analysis, and the bold political program that followed from it, found flowering in the rich and varied traditions of twentieth-century African-American socialism.

Fortune's contribution to the black radical tradition in the 1880s and early 1890s—including the intellectual contribution of *Black and White*—has been obscured to a substantial degree by his later political development. Most important, Fortune formed a complex alliance with Booker T. Washington that had, by the turn of the century, irremediably damaged his reputation among other black militants. Born the same year, Washington and Fortune both spent their childhoods in slavery and came of age in the South during the tumultuous years of Reconstruction. When they first met as young men, Fortune was the more prominent and he used his influence to promote Washington's early efforts at Tuskegee. They shared some social perspectives, including a commitment to elementary and industrial education, a conviction that some strategy needed to be found for improving relations between black and white southerners, and an intuition that the economic advancement of African Americans would ultimately help to erode white racial prejudice. But from the outset, Washington's conservative demeanor and political outlook differed starkly from Fortune's fiery radicalism.

While Washington publicly conciliated southern whites, Fortune fiercely denounced white racism. While Washington eschewed militant demands for political, civil, and social equality in the hope that gradual economic mobility would gain other rights for African Americans over time, Fortune agitated for full equality of every kind, denounced segregation in all its forms, and criticized the injustice of the capitalist economic order. Despite these differences, however, the two men forged a deep personal friendship—and, over time, an increasingly intimate if paradoxical political alliance, based to some degree on shifting calculations on each man's part of what he might gain from the other.<sup>5</sup>

As Washington rose to unparalleled prominence and influence, especially after his 1895 Atlanta Exposition Address, he became the dominant partner in this relationship. In the course of the 1890s, Fortune became increasingly dependent on Washington, who secretly provided desperately needed financial support for Fortune's newspaper. Fortune also hoped (in vain) that his well-connected friend might help him secure a prominent political appointment. As Washington gained power over Fortune, he increasingly influenced the editorial policy of the *Age* and undermined the latter's political autonomy as a writer and activist. Fortune became Washington's trusted adviser, and also editor and ghostwriter of the conservative leader's speeches and publications. He continued to disagree with Washington privately and publicly on many political matters. But he also felt increasingly obliged, by personal loyalty and professional dependence, to support Washington and to promote his causes. When Washington's accommodationist leadership came under increasing criticism at the turn of the century, Fortune came to the defense of his friend and patron. During this important political conflict, Fortune attacked, sometimes vituperatively, the anti-Washingtonian radicals—including some, like Du Bois and Wells, whom he had mentored in the past and whose political views were, in fact, very close to his own. In the process, Fortune irretrievably alienated the emerging generation of black militants who went on to found civil rights organizations such

as the Niagara Movement and the NAACP, as well as anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist political formations that marked, ironically, an extension of his own radical writing and organizing in the 1880s and early 1890s.<sup>6</sup>

Fortune finally broke openly with Washington in 1907, unable to sustain any longer the conflict between his own political principles and Washington's accommodationist course. At this time, he suffered a debilitating personal and psychological collapse. He lost financial control of the *Age* (in part through Washington's machinations), and he descended into destitution and illness. Although he supported himself as an impoverished journalist until the day he died (his last editorials for the Garvey movement's newspaper, *The Negro World*, were published the week after his death in June 1927), Fortune never regained his earlier prominence or the autonomy he needed to develop his own political vision.<sup>7</sup>

Fortune's most important work, *Black and White*, went largely unread during the twentieth century, in part because the vicissitudes of his later career clouded his importance to the black radical tradition. The conflict between Booker T. Washington and his critics at the turn of the century has had lasting historical importance—and Fortune's role in that conflict has been the best-known aspect of his career to many historians. The image of Fortune as Washington's lieutenant and public champion has caused many to overlook the revolutionary egalitarian vision he developed in the 1880s. This problem of perception was dramatically compounded by the fact that the black radicals who built most directly on Fortune's early accomplishments were so angered and disappointed by his alliance with Washington that they tended in later years not to emphasize the influence of his earlier writing and activism.

But there is a deeper historical cause of *Black and White's* neglect. The canon of African-American writing was largely consolidated during the Cold War—and Fortune's anti-capitalism, like that of many other African-American intellectuals and artists, was threatening to the academic consensus in a society that was mainly hostile

to or fearful of socialist ideas. Cold War anxieties and sensibilities shaped all humanities and social science disciplines in American universities during the second half of the twentieth century, and African-American studies was no exception. While the literature of racial self-assertion became increasingly permissible in the era of the civil rights movement, economic radicalism continued to seem alarming to many. For this reason, the explicitly socialist views of Du Bois and A. Philip Randolph, for example, were little studied; Martin Luther King Jr.'s turn toward economic radicalism was downplayed; the revolutionary poetry of Langston Hughes was, for decades, out of print and ignored. In this climate, the writings of a black socialist from the 1880s seemed like an eccentric historical curiosity or even an intellectual embarrassment.

Even among historians who admired Fortune's race politics—and who worked to retrieve him from obscurity—there was a pronounced tendency to dismiss his economic vision. Fortune's biographer, Emma Lou Thornbrough, for example, declared that "Fortune's understanding of economics was not profound." In his introduction to the first reprint of *Black and White* in 1968, James McPherson offered the similar judgment that the author's "economic ideas were derivative and sometimes superficial." Both historians sought to separate Fortune's economic analysis from his race politics: Thornbrough contended that these two strands of *Black and White* were "somewhat contradictory," while McPherson asserted that "When he wrote as a quasi-Marxist, Fortune was less perceptive and original than when he wrote as a Negro who had experienced first-hand the prejudices of white society."<sup>8</sup> In my view, these assessments obscure what is most original and important about *Black and White*. Having been a slave and having seen the freedpeople reduced to debt-peonage throughout the South, Fortune knew quite as much "first-hand" about economic exploitation as he did about racial prejudice. And he perceived, moreover, that the two were intimately connected. It was his accomplishment to have produced the first book by an African American—indeed, by *any* American—to explore with

such subtlety and in such detail the relationship between racism and capitalism in the United States.

### **Black and White**

*Black and White* is a complex book, which weaves varied materials into its ambitious argument. It is, in part, a work of journalism in which Fortune synthesized and extended arguments he had offered in editorials and articles (as well as in public speeches) during the early 1880s. The literary tone resembles that which he employed in the *Globe*—a mixture of careful reporting, fierce polemic, and barbed irony—and the reader can gain from *Black and White* an understanding of the political views and literary style that made Fortune a national figure while still in his twenties. *Black and White* is also, in part, a work of history. Like other texts in the black radical tradition—stretching back, for example, to David Walker's *Appeal* and forward to Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*—Fortune's book offers an account of the African-American past in order to explain his people's present condition and future prospects. *Black and White* is also, as I have noted above, an ambitious work of social theory that explores the complex relationship between racism and capitalism in the United States. And finally, *Black and White* is a revolutionary political manifesto. Offering a detailed analysis of the causes of injustice in American life, Fortune proposes a bold political remedy, calling to working people of all races and ethnicities to build a mass movement that would, at last, provide the economic foundation for an egalitarian and inclusive democracy. Because the work pursues a complex agenda, an overview here may help readers to grasp its structure and some of its most ambitious arguments.

In the first half of the book, Fortune offers a compressed history of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction as a context for understanding the subsequent position of the freedmen and freedwomen in the South. In his fiercely ironic retelling of the nation's history, he emphasizes the ways in which institutionalized racism

had contradicted the most expansive promises of America, from its origin to the present. He points out the hypocrisy of the early colonists, who had fled tyranny in England but enslaved Africans in the New World. He criticizes the often-celebrated Founding Fathers for betraying their own Enlightenment ideals by founding the new nation on slavery and warping their own political institutions as a result. Even the Constitution, which purported to protect the rights and guarantee the equality of all Americans, institutionalized the enslavement of millions of black people. Fortune refuses to accept the idealistic view that the Civil War was fought to end these contradictions by abolishing slavery. He insists that most white Americans had no desire to liberate black people from bondage and that even Lincoln had been motivated by expedience rather than principle in his decision to emancipate the slaves.

In this context, the fate of African Americans after the war was consistent with the history of racial oppression and exploitation that preceded it. The federal government refused to protect the rights of former slaves, including those guaranteed by the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution. As a result, the freedpeople were rapidly disenfranchised and deprived of legal protections throughout the South, and they were exposed to extraordinary violence and exploitation at the hands of white southerners. Drawing on his own experience as a slave and survivor of Reconstruction's aftermath, Fortune offers the stark claim that, after emancipation, African Americans in the South experienced "a slavery more odious, more galling, than mere chattel slavery." In the 1880s, he explains, "They are more absolutely under the control of the Southern whites; they are more systematically robbed of their labor; they are more poorly housed, clothed and fed, than under the slave régime; and they enjoy, practically, less of the protection of the laws of the State or of the Federal government" (14). Fortune's account of the betrayal of African Americans during and after Reconstruction is one of the most memorable features of *Black and White*—and he gave voice in these pages, as in his journalism, to the anger and suf-

fering of a generation. He urged his readers, moreover, to accept the disturbing proposition that the exploitation of black people in the United States had changed its form after emancipation, but had not diminished in its intensity.

Fortune also offers a series of political proposals for responding to this distinctive history—and continuing reality—of racial oppression. He insists that African Americans were entitled to all the rights of citizenship and that they must fight for full equality. More specifically, he argues that because the federal government had legalized, promoted, and protected the institution of slavery, it must take ultimate responsibility for the injuries inflicted by the slave regime and it should provide reparations to those who had been harmed. Acknowledging that full restitution to former slaves and their descendants would be almost incalculable, Fortune proposes that the government should begin by providing adequate and equitable education. He calls specifically for the funding of a single, integrated national education system, which would provide African Americans with the educational opportunities they required for advancement and would also help to erode the legacy of white racism. He condemns the nation's refusal to pay for such a system of equitable education, and he criticizes the alternatives in terms that remain strikingly relevant today. He offers, for example, a fierce critique of the nation's preference for spending vast sums on prisons that disproportionately incarcerate black people rather than more modest sums on good schools that would provide social and economic opportunities for all. And he insists that charity is a poor alternative to public provision of equitable education, since the benefits provided by philanthropy are counterbalanced by the pity and contempt they perpetuate toward those designated as beneficiaries.

Another proposal to which Fortune devotes considerable attention is the call for what he terms the "political independence of the Negro." In the 1880s, many African Americans continued to give unwavering support to the Republican Party as the party of Lincoln and emancipation. (This view had been famously expressed

by Frederick Douglass, who declared that “the Republican party is the ship and all else is the sea.”) Fortune was among the early African-American leaders to insist that black Americans should question this loyalty, since the Republican Party had been complicit in the betrayal of the freedpeople during and after Reconstruction. Fortune had no illusions about the Democratic Party of the 1880s (which he calls “the party of oligarchy, bloodshed, violence and oppression”), and he urges African Americans to support any candidate of any party who promised to represent their interests in any particular political contest. In part, Fortune recommends “political independence” as a pragmatic strategy that would force political parties to compete for black votes. But he also presents it as an expression of a broader ideal of African-American integration and assimilation. He urges black Americans to do what they could to overcome racial separation and to forge political and social contact with others, and especially with white southerners. Through such efforts, he argues, “Afro Americans” (the term he preferred) should work to assimilate into the nation on equal terms, as European immigrants were doing. On his account, such assimilation entailed no abandonment of race pride: on the contrary, such a strategy of self-conscious integration would forward the demand for full equality.

The economic strand of Fortune’s argument is present from the opening pages of *Black and White* and it informs his account of the racially particular experience of black Americans. In particular, he insists that chattel slavery in America was an *economic* institution and an integral feature of a *capitalist* economic order that was legalized and promoted by the federal government (33). He also emphasizes that there was an economic as well as a racial logic to the continued oppression of the freedpeople, whose economic exploitation was extended through such institutionalized practices as the crop-lien and convict-lease systems. In the first half of *Black and White*, this economic analysis is developed as a subordinate feature of an account about the distinctiveness of the black experience in America. Having developed that account in



detail, and having given sustained attention to the logic of white racism, Fortune then turns in the second half of the book to the ways in which the African-American experience can also be understood as part of a more general history of economic exploitation in the United States. In Chapters II to I6, economic analysis comes to the forefront, as Fortune combines the thought of leading nineteenth-century American economic radicals with the economic insights and aspirations of the slaves and freedpeople among whom he was raised.

Fortune offers an ambitious critique of modern capitalism as an evolving, global economic system that rests on the exploitation of labor by capital. Like most nineteenth-century economic radicals, he holds to a labor theory of value, insisting that all forms of wealth are ultimately produced by labor. In a capitalist economic system, however, those who own capital—and, therefore, own the land, factories, and other means of production—derive an unjust profit by paying the lowest possible wages to those who own nothing but their labor. He emphasizes that this economic system leads to the concentration of wealth in the hands of a “privileged class,” whose profits derive from the exploitation of working people who are driven to the brink of starvation even in the nation’s wealthiest cities. Fortune is alert to the evolving character of this economic system. He points out that industrialization has dramatically increased the productive power of society, but that the unchecked operation of the market and the unthinking celebration of competition has created widespread unemployment and the steady depression of wages. Similarly, he notes that the rise of the modern corporation has introduced new dynamics of exploitation at the point of consumption as well as in the workplace. Fortune also emphasizes the global character of this economic order, which affects working people of all races and nationalities—and which structures not only domestic economies, but also relations between imperial powers and subject colonial people. In response to this unjust economic system, he joins other radicals in calling for a united struggle of

“the laboring classes” to overthrow “the tyranny of capital” and to secure “the more equal distribution” of wealth (109).

In developing his critique of the modern capitalist economy, Fortune situates his argument within two streams of American radical thought. He indicates that his ideas are continuous with the black abolitionist tradition—by quoting, for example, from an 1883 address in which Frederick Douglass linked the successful movement to end slavery with the broader struggle of “oppressed classes” worldwide against all forms of “class rule” (105). Fortune also draws deeply on the ideas and authority of white economic radicals, including Henry George (the celebrated advocate of the Single Tax), John Swinton (Fortune’s friend and editor of his own militant New York newspaper), and Edward Kellogg and William Godwin Moody (authors of ambitious nineteenth-century economic treatises).<sup>9</sup> Even as he draws on their work, Fortune is concerned to expand the perspective of these white radicals, insisting that the experience of black people must be taken into account by the burgeoning American labor movement. Demonstrating that the lives of African Americans were being shaped by the same economic forces as their white contemporaries’, he insists that they too must have their place in any effective movement for economic justice. As he explains clearly at the end of Chapter 12, his distinctive aim is to show that “*the condition of the black and the white laborer is the same, and that consequently their cause is common*” (109; italics in original).

By exploring the position of African Americans in the modern economic order, Fortune develops a remarkable analysis of the long-term relationship between racism and capitalism in the United States. In essence, he contends that the continued functioning of the capitalist economy will tend to undermine, and eventually eliminate, racism in America—but that the economic enslavement of the poor by the rich will retain its exploitative character even as its racial dimension gradually disappears. He insists that because African Americans are more accustomed to hard work than their white peers, they will compete effectively, over time, for land and

wealth. When even a small minority of black people have gained class status and power—once even a few are bank presidents and “land sharks”—they will command the respect (and the economic dependence) of their white subordinates, as do other members of the privileged class. As a result, the race prejudice entailed by slavery will pass away. Such a development would be an enormous gain from a race standpoint, but Fortune insists that the economic order will be no more just when a small number of black people have joined the exploiting class. Fortune’s prose captures brilliantly the historical ironies of this long-term process. He evokes passionately the racial vindication that will be felt by many when the black capitalist can “turn the tables upon the unscrupulous harpies who have robbed him for more than two hundred years; and from having been the slave of these men, he, in turn, will enslave them [. . .] from having labored to enrich others, he will force others to labor to enrich him” (123). Fortune emphasizes that black people have every right to rise to such economic dominance, as long as the American social order rests upon, and legalizes, this system of exploitation. But he refuses to accept the idea that the upward mobility of a small black elite can morally justify an economic system that continues to exploit the majority of all races. Like the black abolitionists—who worked to abolish slavery, not to turn slaves into masters—Fortune seeks to eliminate the underlying economic system that forces the many “to labor to enrich” the few.

In order to challenge that underlying system, Fortune seeks to address the root causes of economic exploitation and to find a means of guaranteeing a just and adequate livelihood to all. Participating in a long American tradition of agrarian radicalism, and drawing particularly heavily on the ideas of Henry George, Fortune argues that there must, above all, be a revolutionary change in the ownership of land.<sup>10</sup> He contends that just as every human being has an inherent and inalienable right to the air and water necessary to survival, so too is every person entitled to access to the land—which guarantees to each person the conditions for mate-

rial subsistence. Asserting that land is “the common property of the people,” he condemns as “land monopoly” any form of ownership that excludes people from free access to the soil. Land monopoly, on his account, produces, directly or indirectly, all other forms of social inequality. When people are deprived of free access to the soil, they are at the mercy of those who own the means of production: they must pay extortionate rents to land-owners or accept exploitative wages in other kinds of employment. After offering a historical account of the evolution of land monopoly, Fortune then moves on to condemn the way in which most nineteenth-century Americans had been dispossessed of the land not only by corporations, but also by individual property owners who had actually monopolized the largest share of the land. He insists that the problem is not merely the vast landholdings of the railroads and of the very rich, but the system of private ownership itself.

Fortune’s remedy is a daring one. He proposes nothing less than the direct abolition of private property in land.<sup>11</sup> Championing a kind of agrarian socialism, he contends that it would be “wise statesmanship and sound governmental policy to confiscate to the people the millions of acres which avarice, cunning, favoritism and robbery” have placed in private hands (141). Any person cultivating his or her own land should be permitted to continue farming—but the government should declare that “all vacant land was free to settlement upon condition of cultivation” (152). Fortune emphasizes that cultivation should not entail ownership: land should remain common property, but it should be everywhere freely available to any person willing to cultivate it through his or her own labor. Fortune’s aim was not to force all Americans to return to subsistence farming, turning back the clock on industrialization. Rather, his proposal for revolutionary land reform was, above all, an attempt to imagine a strategy for guaranteeing to every American a livelihood free from exploitation. By guaranteeing access to the land, he hoped it would be possible to liberate millions from tenant-farming, sharecropping, and all forms of “wage slavery.”

If every American could sustain himself or herself through direct cultivation of the soil, none would be forced to accept starvation wages or agricultural peonage. Many might continue to perform wage-labor, but none need accept exploitative conditions from fear of destitution. Land reform would, in this way, interrupt the logic of modern capitalism that pitted the poor against one another in a fight for survival. Creating a large domain of "common property" to which everyone would have access, his proposal would establish an economic escape route for the most exploited.

Fortune makes clear that his revolutionary proposal has emerged not only from an encounter with the writings of economic radicals like Henry George, but also from the distinctive experience and aspirations of African Americans. He describes the abolition of slavery as a precedent for his proposed abolition of private property in land—and he insists, moreover, that only a further economic revolution of this kind could complete the unfinished project of emancipation.<sup>12</sup> For Fortune, the abolition of slavery clearly demonstrated that the government had the power and the moral obligation to confiscate a form of property (even on a vast scale) that rested on exploitation and injustice. But abolition did not go far enough, as it left untouched the underlying property relations that enabled the continued exploitation of the former slaves—and of labor by capital more generally. Chattel slavery had been ended, but new forms of peonage and "industrial slavery" were intensifying. Readers today may be surprised by Fortune's emphasis on land monopoly as a root cause of these inequitable social relations. But it is important to keep in mind that while he was writing during an era of rapid industrialization, he himself had been raised within the plantation economy and he knew that most former slaves continued to be exploited as landless agricultural laborers. In this context, Fortune explicitly understood his proposal for revolutionary land reform as an extension and fulfillment of the dream so widely shared by freed slaves that they would receive "40 acres and a mule" after emancipation. He insists on the "justness" of their expectation, arguing that

the former slave was doubly entitled to land: as a reparation for the injuries of slavery, but also and more fundamentally, as a natural right shared with all other human beings. Fortune shrewdly notes that the rightful entitlement of the freedpeople would only have been met if they had been given access to the land on the condition of cultivation and with the understanding that the land could “in no wise be alienated” (152). Had they merely been given parcels of land as private property, many would have lost it through debt or intimidation—and the rights of future generations would not have been secured. Fortune understood his own socialist proposal, in contrast, as the full realization of the freedpeople’s yearning for secure access to the land and protection from further exploitation.

*Black and White* ends with Fortune’s call to workers of all races to join together in a mass movement to achieve economic justice. The needs of former slaves were ultimately the same as those of all other members of the “producing class.” It was not only black people who needed protection from exploitation, but all working people. “The future struggle in the South,” he explained, “will be, not between white men and black men, but between capital and labor, landlord and tenant” (154). And not only in the South. “The hour is approaching when the laboring classes of our country, North, East, West and South, will recognize that they have a *common cause*, a *common humanity* and a *common enemy*; and that, therefore, if they would triumph over wrong [ . . . ] *they must unite!*” (154–155, italics in original). Over the next decade, Fortune was bitterly disappointed by the failure of the white-led labor movement to build this cross-racial alliance, but in 1884 he believed fervently that only such an alliance could bring real freedom, at last, to the former slaves and economic justice to all Americans.<sup>13</sup>

Fortune believed that the experience of slavery and its aftermath had taught African Americans crucial truths about the nature of capitalism. Over 250 years, many millions of Africans and African-descended people had been exploited in order to enrich their masters: the transatlantic slave-trade had been conducted and the slave-

system sustained, with all its violence, in order to deliver profits to those who had money to invest in human chattel. Like many others who had endured the experience of bondage, Fortune believed that slavery had demonstrated with an unmistakable clarity that an economic system organized to maximize profit by exploiting the productive capacities of human beings was immoral. The particular form of capitalism embodied in American chattel slavery was justified, in part, by a racial ideology—and in *Black and White*, Fortune explored and condemned its toxic persistence. But he also argued that the underlying system of economic exploitation had persisted, too, even as its forms evolved in the era of debt-peonage, sharecropping, convict labor, and industrial “wage slavery.” He pointed out that these practices, which affected poor people of every race, were justified by other ideological means—including, tragically, the Enlightenment language of rights itself. Having himself been owned as the property of another man, he insisted that no one could have a “right” to any form of private property that had been gained through the exploitation of others. He argued, instead, for a different conception of property rights, insisting that all human beings had an inherent entitlement to “common property,” which would enable them to sustain themselves with dignity. Without this kind of economic justice, he insisted, the political rights guaranteed by law were a sham, as former slaves had learned after emancipation. As he declared in one of the most memorable lines of *Black and White*: “to tell a man he is free when he has neither money nor the means to make it, is merely to mock him” (18). If Americans wished to free themselves from the legacy of slavery, he contended, they would need to bring an end to economic exploitation and to all its ideological justifications.

*Black and White* deserves a wide readership today. It enables students of African-American history to see that black people

responded to the betrayal of Reconstruction not only with fear and the accommodationist strategies that culminated in Booker T. Washington's "Atlanta Compromise," but also with militancy and ambitious egalitarian visions. Fortune's call for cross-racial organizing and for an agrarian socialism challenges common presumptions about the "whiteness" of anti-capitalist thought in the United States and it enriches our understanding of what was imaginable (if unrealized) for the American labor movement at the end of the nineteenth century. Students of sociology might well be provoked by Fortune's analysis of the shifting economic function of racism in the United States and by his contention that the entry of a black minority into the owning class would merely change the complexion, but not the exploitative nature, of modern capitalism. Reading *Black and White* should encourage students of African-American politics to reconsider economic radicalism as a continuous and evolving impulse within the African-American tradition, stretching back to the black abolitionists and extending forward through many of the African-American protest movements of the twentieth century and on to our own time. And finally, political activists of various kinds today will find in Fortune a lost progenitor: prison activists, labor organizers, multicultural coalition builders, anti-globalization protesters, and defenders of immigrant rights should all take courage from *Black and White*, even as they grasp more firmly the long arc of their own emancipatory movements.

#### NOTES

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1 My account of his life here and in the paragraphs below relies on the only full-length biography of Fortune: Emma Lou Thornbrough, *T. Thomas Fortune: Militant Journalist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972). Students looking for a shorter introduction to Fortune's life and work can find it in Emma Lou Thornbrough, "T. Thomas Fortune: Militant Editor in the Age of Accommodation," *Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century*, eds. John Hope Franklin and August Meier (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), pp. 19–37. Fortune's own fullest account can be found in a series of autobiographical articles called "After War Times," published in *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, between July and December 1927.

2 In its broad ambitions, the Afro-American League was an extension of the antebellum Convention Movement, as well as several short-lived organizational efforts of the 1860s and 1870s. On Fortune's leadership role in the Afro-American League (and the League's influence on later protest organizations, including the NAACP), see Thornbrough, *Fortune*, pp. 105–135 and *passim*.

3 For Fortune's role as an early mentor and inspiration to Du Bois, see David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868–1919* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993), pp. 38–39, 74, 339, 411. For Fortune's support of Wells, including his assistance to her in continuing her anti-lynching campaign after Memphis vigilantes destroyed her press, see Thornbrough, *Fortune*, pp. 123–126; Linda O. McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 91, 97, 148, 156; and *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, ed. Alfreda M. Duster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 61–71, 77–78.

4 Truth lived in an egalitarian community influenced by Fourier's ideas (though not a strictly Fourierist commune) in the 1840s—and the mixture of abolitionist, feminist, and radical economic ideas she developed in this period influenced the later political work for which she is famous: see Nell Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: Norton, 1996), pp. 88–95. For Garnet's economic radicalism, see his famous 1843 *Address to the Slaves of the United States of America* (in which he urged slaves to "cease" their "toil" until their rights were acknowledged)—and on his relation to the Free Produce Movement, see Joel Schor, *Henry Highland Garnet: A Voice of Black Radicalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), especially Chapters 5 and 6. For the Free Produce movement and abolitionism more generally, see Lawrence Glickman, "'Buy For the Sake of the Slave': Abolitionism and the Origins of American Consumer Activism," *American Quarterly* 56.4 (Dec. 2004): 889–912.

5 On Fortune and Washington's complex relationship, see Thornbrough, *Fortune*, pp. 137–323; and Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader, 1856–1901* and *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901–1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972, 1983). The best primary sources for an understanding of their personal friendship and political alliance are to be found in the extensive correspondence collected in *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, ed. Louis Harlan (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972–2000), now also available as an online database.

6 For Fortune's attacks on Washington's radical critics, including Du Bois, see Thornbrough, *Fortune*, pp. 243–252. For the ambivalent later attitude of black militants of the Niagara generation toward Fortune, see especially Du Bois' poignant 1907 essay, "The Lash," which records his surprising degree of continued sympathy and admiration for Fortune's past efforts, despite his anger and disappointment with the older man's personal failings and dependence on Washington, reprinted in *Writings in Periodicals Edited by W. E. B. Du Bois: Selections from the Horizon*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (White Plains, NY: Kraus-Thomson, 1985), p. 16.

7 See Thornbrough, *Fortune*, pp. 287–370.

8 Thornbrough, *Fortune*, pp. 70, 82; and James M. McPherson's introduction to *Black and White* (New York: Arno Press, 1968). For more positive assessments of Fortune's economic vision, and its contribution to the African-American political tradition, see August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880–1915* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970), pp. 46–47; William Toll, "Free Men, Freedmen, and Race: Black Social Theory in the Gilded Age," *Journal of Southern History* 44.4 (Nov. 1978): 584–587; and Jean M. Allman and David R. Roediger, "The Early Editorial Career of Timothy Thomas Fortune: Class, Nationalism and Consciousness of Africa," *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 6.2 (1982): 39–52.

9 Fortune quotes these writers at length, emphasizing in this way that the revolutionary critique of capitalism must not be viewed (and potentially dismissed, perhaps especially by white readers) as an exclusively African-American perspective. It should also be noted that Fortune's ideas, and some of his vocabulary, were clearly influenced by Marx. Fortune does not quote Marx in *Black and White*, and it is quite possible that he had not yet encountered Marx's ideas in print—though those ideas had a strong influence (especially via German immigrant radicals) on the New York labor movement

milieu of which Fortune was a part. Within a year of finishing *Black and White*, he had certainly read some English-language explicators of Marx's ideas, some of which he discussed in a review of "Socialistic Literature" in his newspaper: see *New York Freeman*, 14 February 1885.

10 Fortune quotes from George's *Social Problems*, published the year before *Black and White*—and he was clearly familiar with the arguments offered in George's most famous work, *Progress and Poverty*. George himself was writing in a long tradition of American agrarian radicals who insisted that the political rights guaranteed by the Constitution would be no more than empty promises if working people did not have economic security and autonomy—which was, in the eighteenth and much of the nineteenth century, commonly understood in terms of the right to land. For one especially eloquent writer in this tradition, see Thomas Skidmore, *The Rights of Man to Property* (New York: 1829; New York: Burt Franklin and Co. Inc., 1966).

11 Fortune follows Henry George in his commitment to abolishing private property in land, though Fortune does not indicate any interest in the mechanism of the Single Tax on land—to replace all other taxes—which George proposed as a means (among other things) for ultimately turning land into "common property." For George's most important articulation of his program, by way of comparison, see Henry George, *Progress and Poverty* (New York: 1880; New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1966).

12 In his journalism of the 1880s, Fortune pursued this provocative claim that abolitionism was a precedent for (and could be understood as an instance of) a broader socialist politics. His use of the terms "socialism" and "communism" was not entirely systematic in this period, but see, for example, his striking assertion that "abolitionism" was "another name for communism" in the United States: *Globe*, 16 February 1884.

13 Fortune persistently encouraged black and white workers to support one another's strikes—and he condemned strikebreakers of both races (see, for example, Fortune's editorials in the *Globe*, 26 January 1884, and the *Freeman*, 1 May 1886, 22 May 1886, 4 December 1886). On Fortune's hopes for, and disappointment in, the white-led labor movement, see for example his evolving editorial comments on the Knights of Labor, in the *Freeman*, 17 July 1886, 2 October 1886, 23 October 1886.

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