



Thousands march from Freedom Plaza down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C. (December 13, 2014).

Black Lives Matter: Toward a Modern Practice of Mass Struggle

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Born as a Twitter hashtag, Black Lives Matter has evolved into a potent alternative to the political paralysis and isolation that racial justice proponents have faced since the election of Obama. In just over two years, the young movement has reinvigorated confrontation politics, giving voice to a popular and righteous rage, establishing a new touchstone of grassroots resistance, and ending the acquiescence that has crippled progressive forces in the age of Obama. The upsurge, which has centered on the crucial, galvanizing issue of police misconduct, also shows signs of addressing larger questions of social inequity. With continued momentum, Black Lives Matter may help reverse the counteroffensive against workers and people of color that has defined the long aftermath of the 1960s and 1970s liberation struggles.¹ To surpass the relatively ephemeral accomplishments of precursors such as Occupy Wall Street, however, the emerging movement must draw on and modernize the creative traditions of popular insurgency. It must become a sustained, truly mass struggle, confronting ferocious backlash and overcoming multiple challenges while developing its considerable strengths.

Black Lives Matter began, quite modestly, as #BlackLivesMatter. The hashtag was created in 2013 by Patrice Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi—California and New York-based organizers active in incarceration, immigration, and domestic labor campaigns—after the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder in Florida of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin. The slogan’s deeper significance as the rallying cry for an incipient movement crystallized in 2014 during the Ferguson, Missouri uprisings against police brutality. In the words

of activists, the hashtag leapt from social media “into the streets.” Black Lives Matter, which Garza has called “a love note” to black communities, now serves as shorthand for diverse organizing efforts—both sporadic and sustained—across the country. The most recognizable expression of widespread black outrage against police aggression and racist violence, the phrase has engendered a spirited, if decentralized, movement.

Birth of a Contemporary Human Rights Movement

The variety of local campaigns associated with Black Lives Matter confounds attempts to portray the movement in fine detail. Still, the contours of a modern human rights struggle are discernible. Black Lives Matter is youthful, though it has reenergized older activists who are eager to connect with a new generation of organizers. It arises from an organic black protest tradition, while drawing impassioned participants of all colors. Its leadership departs sharply from the model of the singular, charismatic clergyman or politician. Founded by black women, two of whom are queer, the movement has galvanized an array of grassroots activists in multiple communities. Few are full-time organizers, though many have had encounters with racialized policing or otherwise are personally affected by mass incarceration. Many are also feminist, LGBTQ, working-class or low-income, social media

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savvy, and streetwise. Like other members of the movement, they are waging an unpretentious, democratic, militant crusade, determined to remain autonomous both from the American political establishment and from old guard leaders, such as Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, seen as more invested in punditry than in popular struggle.²

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It is this commitment to independence and militancy that has shaped the tactics of the movement. Demanding accountability for racist violence and an immediate end to the murder of black people at the hands of the state, Black Lives Matter activists have used a host of disruptive techniques to advance their cause. Their mainstay has been occupation—of highways, intersections, sporting events, retail stores, malls, campaign events, police stations, and municipal buildings. They have organized “die-ins,” marches, and rallies in multiple cities, viewing creative disturbance as a means of dramatizing routine attacks on black life.³ Tellingly, the mantra of such demonstrations has evolved from “Hands up, don’t shoot!” to the more emphatic “Shut it down!” Whether the movement categorically rejects—or simply mistrusts—electoral politics remains unclear. What *is* evident is that most Black Lives Matter adherents recognize the inherent shortcomings of appeals to politicians, the courts, and other “acceptable” channels of redress, and have wholeheartedly embraced the arena of the street.

Political Tendencies within the Movement

This bold strategy has by no means stopped or even slowed the crescendo of violence. The achievements of Black Lives Matter are

nevertheless striking. First, the movement has remained largely unfettered by “respectability politics,” the belief that subjugated groups can win support for their cause simply by adhering to conventional standards of decorum. As exponents of Black Lives Matter are keenly aware, rituals of propriety will not dignify dark skin that society as a whole detests and degrades. Movement participants have refused to engage in victim blaming. They have resisted dead-end narratives that emphasize “black-on-black crime” or that prescribe cultural rehabilitation while eschewing righteous dissent. (Such perspectives reinforce the racist premise that black pathology—not white supremacy—is chiefly responsible for the state’s systematic assault on black people.)

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They have amassed concrete victories, too. Scattered instances of police officers being charged and disciplined for misconduct suggest that popular outcry can help force concessions from even the most repressive system.⁴ The movement’s real success, however, lies in popularizing radical discourse and providing a vibrant model of democratic participation. As the movement’s founders have written,

When we say Black Lives Matter, we are broadening the conversation around state violence to include all of the ways in which Black people are intentionally left powerless at the hands of the state. We are talking about the ways in which Black lives are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity . . . How Black women bearing the burden of a relentless assault on our children and our families is state violence. How Black queer and trans folks bear a unique burden from a heteropatriarchal society that disposes of us like garbage and simultaneously fetishizes us and profits off of us, and that is state violence.⁵

Such rhetoric suggests that far-reaching change—not the mere amelioration of police abuse—is the objective.

Black Lives Matter’s elements of spontaneity and self-organization reflect a grassroots surge rather than a measured and conciliatory airing of grievances. Although by no means consistent or complete, its attempts to center those closer to the margins—women, queer people, and various non-elites—through the production of blogs, reports, missives, and by simply invoking the names of unsung victims of police violence (“Say Her Name,” as a related campaign is dubbed), signal an ethos of inclusiveness and a desire for a fundamental rearrangement of power relations.

... [D]etermination to preserve black life in the face of white supremacist violence has always been a radical principle ...

Similar traits have defined past social movements. One thinks immediately of the uncompromising spirit of the civil rights–Black Power era, and particularly of the militancy of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Like Black Lives Matter participants, SNCC’s young members also belonged to a generation radicalized by a shocking, highly publicized murder—the 1955 killing of Emmett Till by southern racists. Other historical analogies may be drawn. The street insurrectionists (labeled “rioters”) of the 1960s in some ways anticipated modern activists who face militarized police in urban centers.

In the current generation of protests, one detects resonances of Black Power’s insistence on self-definition and human rights rather than on mere social inclusion. Of course, determination to preserve black life in the face of white supremacist violence has always been a radical principle, from the anti-lynching crusades of Ida B. Wells around the turn of the twentieth century, to the Negro Silent Protest Parade of 1917, to the protests surrounding the Scottsboro Boys case of the 1930s, to the 1951 *We Charge Genocide* petition by the Civil Rights Congress, to the exertions of the Deacons for Defense and the Black Panthers

at the peak of the postwar movement. What animated these struggles—and those of countless leftist and labor causes—was their insurgent nature and the uncompromising character of their rank and file participants, traits that Black Lives Matter exemplifies.⁶

The Struggle for Racial Justice in the Age of Obama

That said, calling “the movement for black lives” (a broad designation encompassing the many formations informally linked to Black Lives Matter) a “new civil rights movement” may obscure how dramatically the social landscape has shifted in recent decades. If Obama’s presence in the White House symbolizes acceptance by many Americans of the ideal of a multiracial society, the modern era also has witnessed the construction of a mass incarceration regime that viciously targets black communities. Dominant conceptions of “race relations” posit interpersonal relations, or the visibility of black elites, as critical indexes of progress. Such measures obscure both the persistence of systemic racism and the extent to which racialized practices have fueled the explosive growth of the carceral state. Enforcing racial hierarchy has been a central task of policing since the days of slave patrols. Today, however, the criminal justice system performs social control tasks—the regulation of black bodies, the harnessing of black surplus labor in the name of corporate profit—once fulfilled by Jim Crow segregation and other overt forms of discrimination.⁷

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Ironically, the sheer scope and intrusiveness of the modern carceral state provide distinct opportunities for organizers. By confronting racist patterns of policing, Black Lives Matter is addressing a reality that touches the lives of a wide segment of people of color. Structural racism in the post-segregation era generally has lacked unambiguous symbols of apartheid

around which a popular movement could cohere. Yet mass incarceration and the techniques of racialized policing on which it depends—“broken windows,” stop-and-frisk, “predictive policing,” and other extreme forms of surveillance—have exposed the refurbished, but no less ruthless, framework of white supremacy. In poorer black and brown communities, recognition that cops serve primarily to monitor and subjugate rather than “to serve and protect” has fostered both deep resentment and radical, oppositional consciousness.⁸

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It has also created the potential for multiracial, class-conscious movements. However, despite the emergence of Black Lives Matter offshoots such as “Native Lives Matter,” no national alliance of people of color has coalesced on the issue of police violence. More extensive collaboration with Latinos and undocumented populations—both groups that have participated in Black Lives Matter protests—would signal a major victory for the movement. For the moment, the relative diversity of many Black Lives Matter formations has yet to engender a consciously multiracial political surge from below, as in the “rainbow radicalism” that marked some phases of Black Power organizing during the 1960s and 1970s. Lingering interethnic tensions and divisions, as well as the burdens of daily economic survival, continue to militate against the rebirth of such an expansive “rights” consciousness and ethic of solidarity. The existing movement has drawn the backing of white leftists and certain student organizations. Yet confrontations between Black Lives Matter proponents and presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders, in which activists interrupted campaign events to demand more robust engagement with questions of structural racism, have elicited deep hostility from some of the candidate’s supporters. Thankfully, such

interventions have revived debate about the dynamics of race and class (and the role of white privilege) in American progressive politics.⁹

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The relationship of Black Lives Matter to white working-class and poor people, who also face elevated rates of police abuse, remains unclear. The false universality of the assertion that “All Lives Matter” appeals to many white workers, especially those inclined to dismiss black claims in the name of a fictive post-racial ideal. However, racially diverse groups of workers, including active members of the Fight for \$15 minimum wage campaign, have joined Black Lives Matter protests. (Collaboration between the movements has remained informal and fairly sporadic.) And although labor as a whole is split on the issue, some unions with large memberships of people of color have urged the AFL-CIO to withdraw its support for police unions, which often serve as mechanisms for suppressing civilian challenges to, and oversight of, law enforcement. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) has issued statements of support for Black Lives Matter, but has yet to grant the movement the vigorous backing it has offered the Fight for \$15 struggle. Complicating the relationship between labor and the movement for black lives is the reality that the livelihood of some workers (e.g., prison guards) depends on the carceral state. Ultimately, Black Lives Matter may help intensify the growing pressure on the contemporary labor movement to revive its social justice roots. As a whole, however, Black Lives Matter activists have largely neglected to engage progressive trade unionism or to identify labor as a major ally.¹⁰

Internal Divergences and External Threats

Even as it contemplates external alliances, Black Lives Matter is grappling with its own

internal tensions. The movement has avoided ties to mainstream electoral politics, which has long been a barren realm for the pursuit of genuinely progressive visions of transformation. Upon learning of their formal endorsement by the Democratic Party last fall, Black Lives Matter organizers promptly repudiated the statement of support and reaffirmed their commitment to autonomy. Yet elements within the movement (thus far not organized as distinct cliques) clearly wish to converse with, rather than merely confront, elites such as Hillary Clinton. A robust skepticism toward—rather than a strategic or ideological aversion to—electoral politics appears to characterize much of the movement. (This is an area of real potential conflict in the future.) Although many Black Lives Matter exponents see exerting mass pressure as their sole imperative, others have begun to formulate specific policy demands. Time will tell whether this impulse leads to substantive reform or merely to a conservative transition “from protest to politics.”¹¹

Some organizers wish to transcend reformism altogether and pursue a revolutionary path. Leftists within and beyond Black Lives Matter have urged the movement to confront its ideological contradictions (including relatively ambiguous stances on electoral politics and the principle of class struggle), disavowing any trace of collaboration with the ruling class and identifying capitalism itself—and not merely white supremacy—as the enemy. Leaders of the movement have displayed signs of a race-class analysis that acknowledges the inseparability of economic justice and black liberation. (A Black Lives Matter website identifies both black poverty and “genocide” as forms of state violence.)¹² However, the movement has yet to articulate a clear analysis of the economic underpinnings of white supremacy. Until it does so, it is unlikely to develop a specific agenda of social redistribution with which to bolster its promising rhetoric of systemic change.

Questions of gender and sexuality appear to have generated the most significant fissures within Black Lives Matter. Although black women have been on the forefront of the movement, some supporters continue to frame the struggle in terms of a putatively masculine

prerogative of self-defense. The corporate media, for its part, consistently presents police brutality and extrajudicial killing as crises primarily for black men. By organizing vigils, rallies, and other events in the name of murdered women and girls, campaigns such as “Say Her Name” have fought the erasure or marginalization of the stories of black women, who face stunning rates of police assault and incarceration.

LGBTQ activists have used similar tactics to battle marginalization, even as they toil on the frontlines of struggle. Queer participants staged a constructive intervention during the Movement for Black Lives National Convening in Cleveland last summer, taking to the stage during one session to decry what they saw as elements of transphobia and heterosexism within the larger movement.¹³ Willingness to reassess patriarchal and heteronormative leadership, it seems, will be a major test of Black Lives Matter’s long-term viability.

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The competing political tendencies within Black Lives Matter have yet to become full-fledged factions. External opposition remains by far the greatest threat to the movement. The very phrase “black lives matter” has elicited tremendous anger and scorn in some quarters. (GOP candidates such as Ted Cruz have rallied their political base simply by reveling in the backlash.) Protesters in Ferguson, Baltimore, and elsewhere have been labeled “looters” and “thugs.” (The latter term appears to be the racial code word of the moment.) Conditioned to accept the premise of black criminality, a large portion of white America instinctively reads black demands as cases of cynical, special pleading. Many Americans continue to practice the art of evasion, embracing expressions such as “All Lives Matter,” “Police Lives Matter,” and most bizarrely, “Southern Lives Matter” (a response to criticism of the display of Confederate flags).

Even avowed opponents of anti-black violence have condemned militant resistance, choosing instead to issue “calls for healing and injunctions against anger.”¹⁴ Like “All Lives Matter,” such appeals seek to deflect, discredit, or suppress black protest.

Police themselves have been the most forceful agents of the Black Lives Matter backlash. The anti-racist movement is facing the kind of intense state repression that crushed Occupy Wall Street. Police spokespeople and apologists have encouraged the demonization of the struggle, and have propagated the absurd claim that Black Lives Matter actually provokes assaults on cops. Meanwhile, the apparatuses of state violence have mobilized for a disgracefully one-sided war. Urban police forces have repeatedly confronted unarmed protesters with military-grade weaponry, a symptom of despotism that Americans seem to tolerate only because the most visible targets of such deployments are black. Anticipating further unrest, some law enforcement agencies have amassed a fearsome arsenal, including acoustic cannons, weaponized drones, and the foul smelling “skunk spray” used by the Israeli military in the subjugation of Palestinians. It is not surprising to learn that U.S. police and military forces view Black Lives Matter protesters as enemy combatants, subject them to extensive surveillance, and discuss their conquest in precisely the terms of a colonial occupation.¹⁵

These acts of coercion show no signs of cowering the resistance. Black Lives Matter, though still young, has entered a decisive phase. Whether it can expand its popular base will depend on its capacity to strengthen links to other embattled groups and grassroots movements, explicitly address the spate of violence against transgender people of color, and develop a firm ideological foundation while retaining its resiliency and élan. If it can do so, the movement may well pose a deeper challenge to existing social and political arrangements, prefiguring a more humane future and forging a theory and practice of mass struggle for our time.

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