

United States: Black Lives Matter - From Movement to Organization - and seeking political definition

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The Black Lives Matter movement that swept the United States as 2014 ended and 2015 began, protesting the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and Eric Garner in New York City, has now transformed itself into an organization committed to opposing not only police brutality but also all of the economic, social, and political conditions that oppress Black people in the United States. Black Lives Matter is certainly one of the best things to happen to American society in half a century, an organization that deserves our support as it attempts to keep the movement alive and growing and to define its politics. Nothing could be more important for African Americans or the American people as a whole than the building of an independent Black movement on the left.

Black Lives Matter was founded by three Black women organizers Alicia Garza, Director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance; Patrisse Cullors, Director of the Coalition to End Sheriff Violence in Los Angeles; and Opal Tometi, an immigrant rights activist. They started in 2013 with the #BlackLivesMatters to protest the acquittal of George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer, in the killing of Trayvon Martin, a 17-year old Black youth. The movement really took off in 2014 in response to the police killing of Brown in Ferguson where many future Black Lives Matter activists first met each other and began to build a movement. In August of 2014 Black Lives Matter organized a "freedom ride" of 500 activists to Ferguson to support the Ferguson protests, an event that created a sense of identity and community among the participants. Leaving Ferguson, the young Black activists decided to return to their hometowns but to continue to work together to turn the movement into a national organization.

The young activists have also been working to keep the movement alive. As the long and brutal 2014-15 winter began to draw to a close, the Black Lives Matter organization began to organize protests around the country, though not all such protests that occurred were actually led by the group. At the University of Washington in Seattle on February 25, hundreds of students walked out of class in support of the Black Lives Matter movement and to protest several racist incidents on campus. In Chicago on February 28, Black Lives Matter, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Gay Liberation Network gathered and protested outside the Homan Square police facility where African Americans and others have reportedly been held without access to a telephone or a lawyer, as well as being mistreated.

Actions continued in March. On March 9 at the Armory Show, a major art exhibition in New York City, a Black Lives Matter artists group read poetry, performed music, and staged a die-in, reenacting the last moments of the life of Eric Garner before champagne sipping gallery goers. In Louisville, Kentucky on March 15, Black Lives Matter protestors staged a demonstration at the 4th Street Live dining and entertainment district, protesting the arrest of a Black man last summer for wearing baggy pants and bandannas banned by 4th Street Live. In Portland, Oregon a Black Lives Matter protest marched into a restaurant on March 16 where a mostly white clientele was having brunch and loudly read off the names of Blacks killed by the police and then asked diners to stand with them in solidarity, which some did. The actions, large and small, some called by Black Lives

Matter and some by others adopting the name, showed spirit and creativity.

A New Black Manifesto

Meanwhile, Black Lives Matter issued statement titled “All #BlackLivesMatter. This is Not a Moment, but a Movement,” a radical manifesto that proposes to re-envision as well as to rebuild the Black movement in America. It is an important document and worth quoting at length.

[Black Lives Matter] goes beyond the narrow nationalism that can be prevalent within Black communities, which merely calls on Black people to love Black, live Black and buy Black, keeping straight cis Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans and disabled folk take up roles in the background or not at all. Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements. It is a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement.

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 poverty and genocide is state violence. How 2.8 million Black people are locked in cages in this country is state violence. 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 hetero-patriarchal society that disposes of us like garbage and simultaneously fetishizes us and profits off of us, and that is state violence. How 500,000 Black people in the US are undocumented immigrants and relegated to the shadows. How Black girls are used as negotiating chips during times of conflict and war. How Black folks living with disabilities and different abilities bear the burden of state sponsored Darwinian experiments that attempt to squeeze us into boxes of normality defined by white supremacy, and that is state violence.

#BlackLivesMatter is working for a world where Black lives are no longer systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. We affirm our contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression. We have put our sweat equity and love for Black people into creating a political project-taking the hashtag off of social media and into the streets. The call for Black lives to matter is a rallying cry for ALL Black lives striving for liberation.

First, this initial statement suggests a break with “a narrow nationalism,” though exactly what is meant by that is unclear. Black Lives matter shares some elements of the historic Black Nationalist movement, such as its call for independent Black organization and its sense of identification with and responsibility for African issues, such as the Boko Haram kidnappings in Nigeria. (“How Black girls are used as negotiating chips during times of conflict and war.”) Black Nationalism historically had a strong attachment to Africa and the Black diaspora, tended toward the building of a separate Black community or nation with its own Black, capitalist economy, a community under the leadership of a Black male leader—such as Marcus Garvey or Eliza Muhammad—who advocated a patriarchal society. Black Christian leaders, while not necessarily separatists, also supported the traditional patriarchal values. Even revolutionary Black nationalist organizations, such as the Black Panther Party, often shared the patriarchal and macho attitudes.

Black Lives Matters, founded by women and taking up the cause of women and LGBT folks, has clearly broken with the patriarchal and heteronormative notions of the past. Of course, there have always been Black women leaders from Ida B. Wells who fought against lynching to Ella Baker of the Student Non-Violent Organizing Committee, as well as gay leaders such as civil rights organizer

Bayard Rustin. This may be, however, the first Black movement openly seeking to embrace all Black people in America.

Within the Black communities there have frequently been tensions and sometimes antagonism between African Americans and foreign-born Black people whether from Africa, the Caribbean, or Latin America. Black communities have also often resented undocumented immigrants or even legal immigrants who received jobs and social benefits that put others ahead of Black people who have been here for 400 years. Yet Black Lives Matter makes it clear that all Black lives matter, including those of the foreign born who may have a different culture, religion, language, or legal status. Yet, while distancing itself from some elements of the Black Nationalist tradition and while embracing a broad conception of Black people, Black Lives Matter does not so clearly indicate its position vis-à-vis the Black liberal tradition. Black Lives Matter has not, so far, taken any formal position on the institutional African American organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) or the National Organization for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Perhaps alluding to them Cullors has said, "This is not about respectability politics. This is not about the Black person in the suit and tie, the Black person who goes to church on Sunday. This is about all Black people — our relationship to this country and its relationship to us." Beyond that Black Lives Matter activists have challenged Rev. Al Sharpton, a longtime liberal establishment figure, viewed by some as corrupt and deeply resented for attempting to put himself at the head of the movement.

Similarly Black Lives Matters has not confronted the class question, that is the question of what social class will provide the leadership and the social basis of the movement. While questions about the Black working class, labor unions, and even socialism came up, for example, at the Black Lives Matter gathering at the Riverside Church in New York a couple of months ago, they have not yet been taken up and explicitly discussed by the organization or its leaders.

The question of which class leads the Black movement is a decisive one. The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, while made up overwhelmingly of working class African Americans, was led by African American ministers who formed part of the Black middle class, made up of professionals and businesspeople, albeit mostly small businesspeople, who wanted to integrate Black people fully into capitalist America. Leaders and followers risked their lives in a heroic struggle to win the most basic civil rights, political rights, and simply to gain fair treatment and dignity. As many have argued, they wanted to complete the democratic revolution in the South left undone by the Civil War, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow. Their struggle won by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965, although it would take another decade before those laws were fully enforced throughout the South.

As the movement turned to the North and became national, the Black Power movement and the urban rebellions of the 1960s and 1970s succeeded in frightening the powers-that-be, forcing open the doors of employment and starting up the escalator of promotion for African Americans, while at the same time in the process destroying the Black-white liberal alliance that had existed until then. The result was that some African Americans won pink collar, white collar, and even some executive positions in government and the corporations, leading to a deep division between the new Black capitalists and upper middle class and the Black middle and working class and the poor. As some African Americans found jobs in corporate America and moved out of the ghetto and into the suburbs, the old Black bourgeoisie collapsed while their children became part of a new one.

The Civil Rights and Black Power movement leaders found not only access to corporate jobs and in some cases the suburbs, but also found leadership roles mostly in the Democratic but also in the Republican Party. A whole generation of civil rights and Black power activists became precinct workers, local party leaders, and elected officials in the Democratic Party, even as the Democrats

gave up their commitment to the New Deal and War on Poverty politics. While African Americans advanced in government, until Barack Obama become the first Black president, the Black community fell farther behind all Americans in income, in assets, and in prospects for the future. Meanwhile the Black movement institutionalized at the top while its activists based was demobilized. The Democratic Party and particularly Black Democrats, if they cannot get rid of the new movement will be only too willing to help Black Lives Matter institutionalize and to draw it into the party, where some accommodations will be made to its not so respectable style and even to some of its demands, so long as they do not challenge the agenda of austerity.

The Black Lives Matter movement leaders and activists know this story, some of their grandparents and parents lived it, but it remains to be seen what conclusions they have drawn from it. While Black Lives Matter has not yet had to confront all of these questions—the role of the working class and the relationship to the Democratic Party—those questions will inevitably come on their agenda, as they did for other Black movements of the past. These questions are being debated both within Black Lives Matter, in the broader movement, and among Black Americans This is a new organization that is still defining itself, and it will have to confront these questions and to do so in such a way that it maintains its political independence if it is to become a force in American society and in changing the world as it aims to do.

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P.S.

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