

USA: Black Lives Matter (BLM) - A Movement and Its Critics

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THE BLACK LIVES Matter Movement (BLM) is the most significant political challenge in decades to institutional racism and the status quo. Along with the pro-immigrant Dreamers Movement, the Black Lives Matter Movement is not beholden to any established organization, political leader or party.

The usual suspects on the racist and far right — including Black conservatives — attack the Movement for allegedly causing “divisions” in society. Their attacks center on defending the police and ignoring white privileges (the empty phrase “All Lives Matter” is their retort to BLM). These forces, led by FOX News and talk radio, make arguments that are fact-free, blaming racism on those fighting it.

There are also many critiques by “friends” of the BLM and its tactics and strategies. The criticisms focus on concerns — the movement’s lack of specific demands, its few acknowledgments to traditional leaders — that are secondary to the BLM’s overall goal: protect Black lives and bodies, and demand that the state take whatever actions to make that so.

Realities for Black Lives

Recent studies, once again, show that being Black makes life more difficult than for those with white skin. It is more difficult to get good paying jobs, education and housing (even for those with equal or better qualifications than whites). Blacks pay more for loans than whites, even if they have higher incomes. This systemic racial profiling is deeply embedded, so that liberals and even some white radicals and socialists subconsciously accept it.

African Americans know in daily life how this works. Of course, all working people suffer exploitation. African Americans, however, face both class and racial oppression (“superexploitation”).

Black conservatives, like the Republican presidential candidate Dr. Ben Carson, follow a long tradition of Blacks who blame Blacks themselves for their problems. It is the old “pull up your own bootstraps” ideology. Carson, who grew up in Detroit, said his working-class mother taught him to not to rely on handouts and government aid.

Carson’s view represents mainstream right wing/Republican ideology. Jeb Bush said as much in a

South Carolina campaign speech when asked what he offers Black people. “It isn’t one of division and get in line and we’ll take care of you with free stuff. Our message is one that is uplifting — that says you can achieve earned success.”

Carson, Black conservatives, Bush and the right wing have little influence among mainstream African Americans precisely because Carson’s success as a neurosurgeon is not possible for most. Yet Carson himself is a product of African Americans before him who built the country with free labor as slaves and victims of discrimination.

BLM activists and leaders don’t consider Carson and the right wing as true supporters of equality. The BLM does expect more from antiracist liberals and progressives, especially those who fought in earlier civil rights battles. Unfortunately, some of these longtime civil rights figures are the most critical of the new generation of militants.

Liberal Critique Distorts History

A typical critical opinion column appeared in the *Washington Post* (August 24, 2015). It was written by Barbara Reynolds, a former columnist for *USA Today* who wrote an unauthorized biography of Rev. Jesse Jackson. She is also an ordained minister.

“I was a civil rights activist in the 1960s,” she begins. “But it’s hard for me to get behind Black Lives Matter. I support BLM’s cause, but not its approach.” She continues:

“But at protests today, it is difficult to distinguish legitimate activists from the mob actors who burn and loot. The demonstrations are peppered with hate speech, profanity, and guys with sagging pants that show their underwear. Even if the BLM activists aren’t the ones participating in the boorish language and dress, neither are they condemning it. The 1960s movement also had an innate respectability because our leaders often were heads of the black church, as well. Unfortunately, church and spirituality are not high priorities for Black Lives Matter, and the ethics of love, forgiveness and reconciliation that empowered black leaders such as King and Nelson Mandela in their successful quests to win over their oppressors are missing from this movement.”

In Reynolds’ view, “The power of the spiritual approach was evident recently in the way relatives of the nine victims in the Charleston church shooting responded at the bond hearing for Dylann Roof, the young white man who reportedly confessed to killing the church members ‘to start a race war.’ One by one, the relatives stood in the courtroom, forgave the accused racist killer and prayed for mercy on his soul. As a result, in the wake of that horrific tragedy, not a single building was burned down. There was no riot or looting.”

This is a narrow and sanitized version of what happened in the mass civil rights movement. The Black church was central because of segregation. But the movement was also led by students on college campuses, workers in unions and traditional civil rights organizations.

The tactics were dictated by the reality that the racist forces controlled the Southern states, which had laws denying Blacks any rights. The state used violence (not just the police force but vigilantes) to brutalize and murder Blacks without fear even from the federal government. That complicity is why the terror inflicted on Blacks could exist for decades!

Not surprisingly, even though many African Americans carried guns in their communities for personal protection, Martin Luther King, Jr understood that the relationship of forces in the South required nonviolent tactics.

In a changing world where former colonies in Africa and Asia had won their freedom after World War II, Washington was being “embarrassed” by its own apartheid Southern states. How could the U.S. ruling class advance its interests with the newly freed countries of the colonial world while allowing legal segregation at home?

Reynolds’ reference to Nelson Mandela and South Africa is also a distortion of history. She fails to mention that the African National Congress decided that the peaceful nonviolent tactic would not overthrow the white ruled state. Mandela was the founder and leader the ANC’s armed wing (Umkhonto we Sizwe, Spear of the Nation) before his capture by the South African regime with the help of the CIA.

After serving 27 years in prison and with the writing on the wall for the apartheid regime, Mandela and ANC leaders made a decision to make a deal with the white rulers for political power, while allowing the economic reins to remain almost untouched. Political change became possible because of Black uprisings, mass protests and armed actions over the previous decades.

Rise of Black Militancy

What occurred in the civil rights battle was not so simple either. As the movement grew stronger and it became clear that the ruling class had to confront the white supremacists in the South, many of the young and most militant leaders began moving to the left.

These militants understood that legal equality was not the same as full freedom and equality. That’s why King advocated and supported affirmative action programs to give Africans Americans a chance to make up for decades of lost opportunities.

Reynolds and many others like her naturally took advantage of the new legal opening to build their own middle-class careers. The new Black layers in business and the professions continued to oppose the white racism that still permeates this society. But their direct activism is largely over.

For working-class Blacks who could not do that, Black Lives Matter is very personal and real. The explosions in Ferguson and other cities are centered in the poorer neighborhoods, where in some cases the police leadership and politicians are Black.

BLM stands on the shoulders of the militants in the aftermath of the civil rights, voting rights and housing laws, in declaring that both major political parties and the police disrespect Black bodies and rights. Respect is the powerful demand of the Black Lives Matter Movement: to end police terror, and prosecute those causing harm and death.

Mass Action Tactic

The BLM does not advocate actions that local activists are not for or ready to lead. Its grassroots leaders make those decisions.

The tactic includes mass public action. Many liberals and radicals, especially those focused on electoral politics, are critical because BLM activists have “taken over” rallies and meetings of presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders and challenged other friendly Democrats. They are pushing all institutions of government, including both the Congress controlled by Republicans and the White House, residence of the first Black Democratic president. The electoral arena, however, is not the movement’s focus.

It does not have to condemn those frustrated by the slow and ineffective justice system. A minority (or police agents) committing violence is not BLM's responsibility.

The response to the South Carolina murders reflects the history of white domination in the heart of the Confederacy. African Americans know what the violent extralegal racism of whites was, and still is. Black leaders in South Carolina responded with an achievable goal: prosecution of the white terrorist murder.

At the same time, BLM understood that pressing for removal of the Confederate flag symbol (it was a BLM female activist from North Carolina who took down the Confederate flag and still faces criminal charges) could mobilize broader actions across the South and North.

It's unfortunate that older activists like Reynolds focus on the "failure" of the new leaders to "respect" their elders. It is a fact of struggle (and history) that new generations create their own plans and leaders.

Most will be young, as were King and Malcolm X, Black Power activists and industrial workers in the auto plants of Detroit in the 1960s and '70s. Revolutions are made by the young. These youth know that history is important, but at best only a guide.

Reynolds, however, does note one significant difference between the BLM and King-led civil rights movement — the prominent leading role of women. Three young women created the call for BLM, and women are prominent activists and leaders. BLM in that sense has already learned the lesson of earlier Black and feminist rights struggles, giving the new movement an added strength to bring about fundamental change.

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P.S.

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