

## Black Lives Matter and the End of Identity Politics

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With the extrajudicial murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, and the global protests that it sparked, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement's crucial contribution to debates about racial injustice and formulating an anti-racist project worthy of its name has become painfully clear once again. David Theo Goldberg rightly perceived the emancipatory force of BLM from its inception: "'Black Lives Matter' is gathering steam as the compelling human and social rights movement of our time."<sup>1</sup> What makes BLM different from other progressive movements? At the top of the list is its refusal to pursue the predictable paths of identity politics. It does not seek to play the game of liberal politics. We should recall how its members refused to endorse Hillary Clinton in her 2016 presidential bid. Would you endorse someone who willfully capitalized on America's long-history of antiblackness by championing the notorious 1994 crime bill and characterizing "gangs of kids"—meaning black youth—as "superpredators"?

BLM activists also ruffled liberal feathers, especially those of Democratic National Committee, with their bold endorsement of the Palestinian Cause. BLM fostered an atmosphere of collaboration, inviting activists to couch their struggle against racial domination in global terms. Black-Palestinian solidarity was (re)born: "The onslaught on Black and Palestinian lives is rife with a discourse of victim-blaming that softens the edge of systematic violence and illuminates the dehumanization process. [It] is a message to the world as much as it is a commitment among ourselves that we will struggle with and for one another. No one is free until we all are free."<sup>2</sup>

BLM's ongoing struggle against racial domination is *open to all*. Its call for redress is not exclusive to black people. Its anti-racist politics is foreign to the category of separatism. This critical orientation is a problem for the status quo. BLM's activists don't want to be recognized *within* the system, assuming their allocated place within the symbolic order. They are not seeking inclusion into the privileges of white society (at who's expense—brown people, indigenous Americans, immigrants, etc?). They aren't looking for appeasement or accommodation. Their goal is clear: to bring the unjust system down in the name of a more just state *à venir*.

COVID-19 indirectly intensified the public outrage of police brutality. Undistracted by sports or other recreational activities, thrust into mass unemployment, and conscious of their own vulnerability to death through disease, people in the United States, and around the world, were interpellated as witnesses to this gross racial injustice. The liberal push for police reform is no longer seen as sufficient. The American script—which typically contrasts rogue officers with "the majority of men and women in law enforcement who take pride in doing their tough job, the right way, every day"<sup>3</sup> (Obama's inadequate response to Floyd's murder)—is faltering, losing credibility by the minute. White people are waking up to the fact that the problem is not the

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<sup>1</sup> David Theo Goldberg, "Why 'Black Lives Matter' Because All Lives Don't Matter in America," *The Huffington Post* (September 25, 2015). Available at [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-theo-goldberg/why-black-lives-matter\\_b\\_8191424.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-theo-goldberg/why-black-lives-matter_b_8191424.html). Accessed June 12, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> "Statement of Black-Palestinian Solidarity." Available at <http://www.blackpalestiniansolidarity.com/about.html>. Accessed June 12, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> <https://twitter.com/barackobama/status/1266400635429310466>

brutality of the police but the police itself—whence the urgent call to defund the police. White liberals, in particular, are struggling with this call. What does it mean for them? They were enjoying hating the haters (Trump and his supporters, the Alt-Right and the Charlottesville protestors, etc.), but can they hate the police—police officers are figures of authority that white liberals have been taught to trust, admire, and respect all their lives?

Along with defunding the police, we must consider the question of prison abolition. Here I find Stefano Harvey and Fred Moten’s work on the undercommons refreshing. As BLM does, they proceed by complicating liberal assumptions and formulations of problems—indeed, bad questions often engender worse answers. Harvey and Moten seek to reconfigure the coordinates of the prison debate: for them, it is “not so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery.”<sup>4</sup>

If white liberals are lukewarm about defunding the police and prison abolition, they are even more hesitant about renouncing their investment in capitalism. They are for the most part still invested in reforming capitalism, capitalism with more rights for blacks and other people of color. They don’t see capitalism as an enterprise that was racist at its very origins. At the same time, they fail to see that white people themselves are becoming less and less immune to capitalism’s voracious appetite, to what Achille Mbembe describes as the “*becoming black of the world*.”<sup>5</sup> This is why BLM is so vital for the Left. BLM’s racial justice message is intertwined with its call for economic justice, foregrounding the devastating role of racial capitalism, but here again: *Is this a message that white liberal America will hear?* We might consider the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. a cautionary tale: MLK is now remembered in mainstream discourse and white minds as an icon of the civil rights movement, preaching tolerance and non-violence—but what is all but erased from this portrayal is MLK’s profound anti-capitalist (and anti-military) message. This is an MLK of toothless identity politics promoted by liberal democrats and conservatives alike—an MLK compatible with capitalism, deprived of his revolutionary message. BLM can avoid this fate only by maintaining and underscoring its dual but interlocking struggles against racial domination and economic exploitation, by its commitment to society’s excluded, its solidarity with the globally excluded. BLM’s message is universalist or it is nothing at all.

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<sup>4</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 42.

<sup>5</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 6.