

United States - Review: Black Lives Matter, Challenges and Possibilities

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Review of *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*. By Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. Haymarket Books, 2016, 270 pages, \$17.95 paperback.

Sommaire

- [Class and Racial Structure](#)
- [Political Critique](#)
- [A Basis for Solidarity](#)
- [Past, Present and Future](#)

IT HAS BEEN almost three years since Michael Brown was killed by police officer Darren Wilson in the small suburb of Ferguson, Missouri. The protests that erupted in Ferguson and across the nation afterwards reached such depth and intensity that they spawned a more generalized movement against police brutality.

Black Lives Matter emerged as the name to capture this moment. The slogan was originally from the hashtag created by Black feminist activist Alicia Garza after vigilante George Zimmerman was acquitted of killing Trayvon Martin. One after another, more cell phone footage emerged of police officers murdering Black people with impunity.

These protests were met with fierce repression by militarized police forces and in some cases the National Guard. Rubber bullets, tear gas and tanks were deployed against rebellions that ultimately never approached the scale of the urban uprisings of the 1960s.

Black Lives Matter has in the last few years erupted and faded many times, usually following the timetable of the latest atrocity committed by the police. In the current phase, it is not possible to characterize the movement as one coherent entity. Various organizations and (usually self-appointed) leaders have emerged, with sometimes very different politics and strategic perspectives.

In a political context that is radically altered by the existence of the Trump administration, we should take stock and ask: where is Black Lives Matter now and where is it going?

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, an assistant professor of African-American Studies at Princeton University and frequent contributor to *International Socialist Review*, offers an insightful analysis of the movement in her book *From #BlackLives Matter to Black Liberation*. Full of important historical context and helpful critiques, this book should be read, and the issues she raises debated, by activists who identify with the movement and are grappling with its future direction.

Readers will be challenged to think beyond certain traditional interpretations of the phenomenon of police brutality and the movement against it.

Class and Racial Structure

Taylor often uses class as a framework for understanding changes to the racial structure in this country.

This reveals the unique conditions operating in modern Black political and social life, starting with the vague, if not problematic, concept of the “Black community.”

Where legally sanctioned Jim Crow once kept Black people of different classes geographically bound together in communities, today there is much more differentiation. Taylor points out that the gap between the rich and poor is even more dramatic among Black people than among whites.

Divergent class interests need to be seriously considered if we are to understand the array of forces already operating under the heading of “Black Lives Matter” and seeking to shape its future. Whether in the realm of K-12 education or economic development, Black leaders can be found on opposite sides of the political spectrum.

The framework of the monolithic “Black community” should be challenged as a source of analysis. We should ask, would anyone really be taken seriously if they talked about the “white community”?

The book traces the connection of the rise and fall of the welfare state to the conditions of the Black population in this country. The New Deal and the limited welfare state during the postwar economic boom of course largely benefited whites. White families received subsidized loans for home ownership in newly built suburbs, and white workers at least had the security of knowing they would be hired before and fired after any Black worker.

Taylor argues that despite these programs of massive government welfare, the American ideology of individual achievement was maintained. If whites were able to attain a higher level of material well-being, then what was wrong with all those other people who didn't? Thus, the door was left wide open for theories citing the cultural deficiency of inner-city Black people to explain their poverty.

Taylor is careful to point out that the social welfare state did yield some tangible gains for Black people. Benefits of a high union density and employment rate did touch the lives of many. The expansion of the federal government, along with the anti-discrimination mandates in federal hiring practices that came with it, created better job opportunities for African-Americans.

This was a critical basis for the formation of a Black middle class. The Black political class that came of age in local governments during the late 1960s articulated and represented the interests of this newly developed middle class. This is a crucial point, for the vast majority of African Americans are working-class people, whose aspirations and despair are not well-articulated by those Black politicians.

Political Critique

The book contains a well-developed critique of how the Black political class has operated over a long period. Taylor clearly identifies the inherent limitations in the strategy of electing Black leaders to office as a way to address police brutality.

One can look at the record of people such as former Cleveland mayor Carl Stokes, elected in 1967 as the first Black mayor of a major city. Stokes appointed a veteran white police officer as chief of police, talked tough on crime, and gave business interests the lead in economic development.

Black Philadelphia mayor Wilson Goode, Jr. infamously allowed his police chief to drop a bomb on a house full of members of the Black nationalist organization MOVE in 1985, killing eleven members (including five children).

Perhaps the most glaring example of the contradictions of modern Black political rule came during the Baltimore protests of April 2015, after 25-year-old Freddie Grey died with a nearly-severed spine in the back of a police van.

The protests were directed against the unresponsiveness of a largely Black political establishment. The

mayor, district attorney and police chief were all Black. In response to the crisis the Baltimore police chief steered the conversation to Black-on-Black crime and other well-worn stereotypes.

These elite Black figures, the author asserts, can “scold” poor Black people in a way that most white politicians would currently not be able to, as Barack Obama has often demonstrated in his speeches to Black youth at Historic Black Colleges and Universities. Taylor explains that the existence of this Black political class represents a unique feature of the current period that racial justice movement activists must face.

The quickly retreating social welfare state has been replaced by the rise of the carceral police state. Linking back to the broader forces of capitalism at work, Keeanga-Yahmatta Taylor asserts that the primary function of the police today is to control the increasing surplus population neoliberalism is creating.

As jobs are cut and automated, schools are closed, and the minimal material requirements of life are no longer guaranteed, the state has no solution for everyone left out of the neoliberal vision.

A Basis for Solidarity

For Taylor, however, the nightmarish scenario engulfing more and more people in this country does provide the material basis for multi-racial solidarity. The book is clear that ultimately Black Lives Matter will have to build a multi-racial working-class coalition to achieve its aims.

Black people are disproportionately poor and working-class, which is connected to the disproportionate amount of police violence we experience. The data also show police violence rampant against poor whites, Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian-Americans.

Of course, the assemblage of multi-racial coalitions is no easy task. The continued physical separation of most of the white and Black working class is a major factor making it so difficult. (An analysis of this geographic divide and its facilitation by the 1949 Housing Act would have been helpful.)

This strategic consideration of what coalitions Black Lives Matter will have to make in order to achieve any of its aims is pressing. The book makes a very important contribution by raising these questions and forcing those who are reading to look at it more seriously.

Taylor praises the Vision for Black Lives platform, with its solid programmatic demands that the Left can get behind. However, there could have been more critical discussion of how the platform is still divorced from strategic thought on how to go about realizing any of its demands.

Though it is briefly mentioned, it would have been instructive to further examine the 1972 Gary Convention in relation to the Vision for Black Lives platform.

The Gary Convention sought to unite Black political actors from across the spectrum to create a common program and vision. In a quite fascinating political spectacle, the convention included everyone from revolutionary Marxist organizations to Black politicians already well-integrated into the establishment.

The Gary Convention was more broadly representative of the Black population than Black Lives Matter is today, and took place towards the end of a period of heightened politicization and mass mobilization across the country. Yet the convention was plagued by deep divisions and ended in disunity.

Lessons from this experience should be absorbed by those involved in the movement against police brutality and for racial justice more broadly.

Past, Present and Future

Taylor resuscitates crucial and usually overlooked history that helps us envision what broader working-class action could look like in the future.

Numerous rank-and-file labor rebellions of the late 1960s and early '70s often featured Black and white workers in solidarity on the same picket lines. These events challenged the notion that the white working class overwhelmingly represented Richard Nixon's "silent majority" who resented any gains by Black people and social protest.

Taylor calls for the movement to make common cause with low-wage Black workers in order to deepen its reach and impact in society. She also resolutely defends Marxism and the ideas of socialism as relevant to the fight against racism. Black and white socialists of various stripes, as Taylor asserts, have always been at the forefront in the fight for racial justice.

There is a tendency in the book to lump different personalities, organizations and movements into the category of one long "Black freedom struggle." There is a certain use to this for polemical purposes. However, for historical analysis it can obscure more than it reveals.

The political differences among a diverse array of Black figures such as Bayard Rustin, Stokely Carmichael, A. Philip Randolph, Malcolm X, Angela Davis, Martin Luther King, Jr., Ella Baker, C.L.R. James and the Black Panthers were very real and significant. The organizations that these people built had distinct social bases, strategic perspectives, and relationships to the state.

Each period of heightened Black political activity, whether it was Reconstruction, Marcus Garvey and his United Negro Improvement Association, the Sharecroppers Union in the south or the modern Civil Rights Movement, had its own specific political contexts. As we examine Black Lives Matter today we must reckon with the broader political situation that is unique to our moment.

From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation should be read by all those who wish to understand the context in which Black Lives Matter has arisen. For young activists who want to explore difficult questions about the movement's strategic orientation and organizational structure, this is a book for you.

Keeanga-Yahmatta Taylor does a great service by providing insights into thorny topics such as the tendency of Black Lives Matter to rely on a decentralized structure and social media, the complicated role of foundation money, and the tensions with other mainstream civil rights organizations. A book like this can only help movements for racial justice develop and grow.

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P.S.

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