

Why “Black Lives Matter” Matters

Peter Skerry

FOR SOME MONTHS NOW, my wife and I have been taking long, pandemic-induced walks around the affluent suburb where we live just outside of Boston. Before the winter snows arrived, we were struck by the number of Black Lives Matter (BLM) signs we encountered—in something like an inverse ratio to the number of black Americans who actually live here, or could afford to live here, or would even want to live here.

Such displays have much to do with the ease of, and increased demand for, virtue signaling in the age of social media. Yet the signs also reflect genuine outrage at repeated deadly encounters between black Americans and law enforcement. Whatever their considerable political or intellectual shortcomings, the BLM movement, as well as efforts such as the *New York Times*'s 1619 Project, have plainly tapped into the deeply felt belief of many Americans, white and black, that the legacy of this nation's history of slavery and Jim Crow remains to be reckoned with.

After three decades of identity politics, multiculturalism, and diversity talk, the notion that this problem has been neglected may strike many as preposterous. Yet in important respects, over this period America has evaded and even ignored the distinct concerns of its black citizens. In 1998, a third of a century after the 1964 Civil Rights Act was adopted, Nathan Glazer argued that “this country has a special obligation to blacks that has not been fully discharged.” Twelve years later, in 2010, he restated the problem more forcefully: “Perhaps the strangest thing about black America today is how little we talk about it.” At that point, Glazer was echoing the observation of his esteemed Harvard colleague, sociologist William Julius Wilson:

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Through the second half of the 1990s and into the early years of the twenty-first century, public attention to the plight of poor black Americans seemed to wane. There was scant media attention to the problem of concentrated urban poverty (neighborhoods in which a high percentage of the residents fall beneath the federally designated poverty line), little or no discussion of inner-city challenges by mainstream political leaders, and even an apparent quiescence on the part of ghetto residents themselves.

This is precisely the void that BLM would soon fill. Today, Americans are talking about black Americans a lot.

Yet millions of other Americans have had enough of such talk. Many believe that the nation’s obligations to African Americans were never their responsibility in the first place. Others feel that, after decades of controversial or downright objectionable policies ranging from compensatory programs to affirmative-action quotas, whatever debts were owed have long since been retired.

Such sentiments have waxed and waned among substantial segments of American society since the 1960s. And in recent decades they have been exacerbated by the economic, social, and cultural strains resulting from post-Cold War globalization. Foremost among these have been the consequences of free trade and historically high levels of immigration, policies endorsed by elites across the political spectrum. To be sure, these have benefitted many Americans, especially the well-off. But they have also negatively affected our less affluent citizens, white as well as black. To square this circle, elites have embraced, or at least gone along with, the notion that the interests and moral claims of “racial minorities” — or alternatively, “people of color” — are all equivalent, if not indistinguishable. Somehow this conceit is supposed to not only justify prevailing levels of immigration but also suggest specifically that the interests of Hispanic and Asian immigrants are not at odds with those of African Americans. Many of these same elites eventually embraced what has come to be taken as inevitable — America’s emergence as “a majority-minority society.” Lost in such rhetoric have been the continuing, even exacerbated challenges facing not only black Americans but also many white Americans.

Little understood and rarely acknowledged, these are the conditions that spawned Black Lives Matter and account for its having thrust itself,

or been thrust, into the role of the vanguard of the multicultural left. A few rabid souls have ferreted out what they regard as the Marxist foundations of BLM. But this gives its prime movers too much credit. BLM has been shaped more by post-modern cultural theory than by Marxism. By their own account, the three young women who ignited this proudly “leaderless” movement have been shaped primarily by feminism and queer theory. Hence their vitriolic critique of the male-dominated black church, not to mention the traditional family. And hence the largely unasked question: How do these hugely successful entrepreneurs plan to address the continuing plight of genuinely disadvantaged black Americans?

A MAJORITY-MINORITY NATION?

Prudence might have counseled discretion about the claim that white Americans are becoming a numerical minority. And curiosity might have led some analysts touting such claims to at least note that the Hispanics whose growing numbers have been driving this change do not typically regard themselves as a racial minority the way black Americans do. In fact, as often as not they identify themselves on census forms as racially white. Yet the political logic embedded in multiculturalism has overwhelmed common sense and plain honesty, leading intellectual and then political elites across the ideological spectrum to adopt the view that in America the moral claims of all “people of color” are virtually the same.

Making matters worse has been the seeming obliviousness of these same elites to the declining earning capacity and living standards of millions of non-college-educated white Americans. It was just as claims of a majority-minority society became prominent that this demographic began succumbing to drug overdoses, alcohol-induced liver disease, and suicide—what economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton call “deaths of despair”—reflecting “a long-term and slowly unfolding loss of a way of life for the white, less educated, working class.” Just before the millennium, the age-adjusted mortality rate for non-Hispanic whites age 45 through 54 began to increase, thereby reversing a decades-long decline for that cohort. This trend is unique among comparably wealthy nations, and its negative impact on life expectancy at birth for the U.S. population as a whole has taken us into what Case and Deaton tactfully describe as “unfamiliar territory.”

This is not to deny the overall disadvantage of blacks in America, who die younger and are less likely to attend college and secure employment than whites generally. They are also less likely to own their homes and thereby accumulate wealth, and are more likely to live in poverty and be incarcerated than are whites. Nevertheless, since 1970 blacks have registered significant gains in education, wages, income, and wealth. As Case and Deaton point out, from 1970 to 2000 black mortality declined *more* precipitously than did white mortality, and it continued to fall during the first 15 years of this century—just as the mortality of working-class whites started its unprecedented rise.

Yet such gains among black Americans have been unevenly distributed. Some have been able to take advantage of expanded opportunities; many others have not. And in recent years, deaths of despair have also begun to increase among non-college-educated blacks, though they remain at a lower level than those of comparable whites—at least for the time being.

Elsewhere along the rainbow, it is undeniable that Latinos and Asians have had to struggle in a not-always-friendly America. But compared to African Americans, these groups have fared well. While life expectancy for blacks in 2017 was 74.9 years, for Hispanics it was 81.8 years—which was actually higher than the national average of 78.6 years. And the longevity of Asians is greater than that of both Hispanics and whites.

Yet despite such disparities, the multiculturalist mantra of “diversity,” the blurring rhetoric of “people of color,” and the predictions of America turning into a “majority-minority society” have all served to devalue the unique obligation of all Americans to their black countrymen. As political scientist and former Census Bureau director Kenneth Prewitt has noted:

The primary justification for affirmative action—undoing the nation’s legacy of racism—was weakened when the definition of protected groups expanded to include recent immigrants who, of course, were not victims of three centuries of slavery, genocide, contract labor, and systematic, state-sanctioned discrimination.

This is why BLM has not sought to be just another voice in a chorus of minority protest. Instead, the movement has insisted that black Americans be understood as the distinct and primary focus of the

broader movement, and that other minorities—along with whites sympathetic to the cause—must agree to participate not as equal partners, but as “allies.” Indeed, despite the fact that Hispanics have come to be regarded as another racial minority whose grievances and claims are for all intents and purposes identical to those of blacks and whose numbers now dwarf theirs, BLM activists have firmly rejected all efforts to mobilize them under the banner “Brown Lives Matter.”

Thus Barbara Ransby, an African American historian at the University of Illinois at Chicago, characterizes BLM alternately as a “Black-led multiracial mass movement” and “a Black-led class struggle.” Writing in *Dissent*, she elaborates: “[A]ny serious analysis of racial capitalism must recognize that to seek liberation for black people is also to destabilize inequality in the United States at large, and to create new possibilities for all who live here.” Yet it remains to be seen whether white progressives and increasingly visible Hispanics will be satisfied with joining a reputedly leaderless movement that nonetheless relegates them to a supporting role. Nor is it clear that such allies will continue to follow “most Black Lives Matter adherents,” who, according to historian Russell Rickford writing in *New Labor Forum*, “have wholeheartedly embraced the arena of the street.”

OFF THE AGENDA, THEN ON AGAIN

Early in Bill Clinton’s presidential term, novelist Toni Morrison dubbed him America’s “first black President.” She largely had in mind Clinton’s personal style rather than his policy priorities, yet those priorities—many of which progressives now vehemently reject—did reflect some of what mattered most to black Americans. A notable example was the tough 1994 crime bill that, despite subsequent criticism, has been widely if begrudgingly acknowledged to have had the support of most black leaders and elected officials at the time of its passage. Indeed, that legislation was one of the last occasions in the 20th century when an issue of direct concern to African Americans was on the nation’s agenda. Perhaps the very last was Clinton’s skillful orchestration of a national “conversation about race,” along with his affirmative-action mantra, “mend it, don’t end it.”

Clinton’s second term was marked by foreign-policy concerns—especially the Bosnian war—and of course the Monica Lewinsky affair. But a booming economy fueled the aspirations of many in a country still

reveling in its Cold War victory over the Soviet Union, including many black Americans who were beginning to register real economic gains. One problem, which many refused to acknowledge, was the swelling number of undocumented migrants streaming across the U.S.-Mexican border, even as those migrants competed with poorly educated, economically marginalized blacks already living in the United States.

Then came the attacks of September 11, 2001. Immigration and border control took on new significance as critical to counterterrorism efforts and national security. The Immigration and Naturalization Service, a beleaguered and often neglected agency of the Department of Justice, was absorbed into the new, high-profile Department of Homeland Security. Law-enforcement agencies redirected their energies away from drug markets and toward terrorism. And Americans became aware of a new minority that had long been present but was easy to overlook: American Muslims, many of whose co-religionists were our adversaries abroad.

The economy eventually rebounded, but as both legal and illegal immigration resumed, that issue became more contentious than ever. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina briefly refocused public attention on the black poor, who had barely been getting by when they were suddenly pushed over the edge in places like New Orleans. Yet shortly afterward, the focus shifted back to Latinos and Muslims. The financial crisis in 2008 disproportionately hurt blacks, but they were hardly the only ones whose lives were thrown into turmoil. And while the election of Barack Obama (our second “first black president”) afforded African Americans a glimmer of hope, it also allowed many whites to believe that the nation had finally turned the corner on its race problem — and to overlook the divergence between the emergent black middle and upper-middle classes and what William Julius Wilson called “the truly disadvantaged.”

For black Americans, Obama’s presidency proved to be more of a watermark than a watershed. Understandably preoccupied with the economy, the increasingly fraught war on terrorism, and health-care reform, Obama did not even focus on Hispanics until the run-up to the 2012 election when, through executive order, he afforded undocumented young people some ambiguous and much-disputed relief with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA. Regarding the challenges facing his own community, Obama tended to uphold the middle-class values by which he had been raised, in essence urging his fellow African Americans to do the same. Whites were gratified; blacks

were ambivalent; and most other domestic-policy concerns remained off the agenda as the special obligation of America to its black citizens was obscured in a haze of rhetoric about “diversity,” “multiculturalism,” and “post-racialism.”

What finally brought some of the distinct concerns of African Americans back onto the agenda was the 2012 shooting of black teenager Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman, a neighborhood-watch captain in Miami Gardens, Florida. The other victim on that February night was multiculturalism — which, unlike Martin, survived the ordeal. For, despite his German surname, Zimmerman’s mother was born in Peru. Indeed, he had long self-identified as Hispanic, a fact that, like photos of Zimmerman, curiously failed to appear in news accounts as frequently as might have been expected.

The media quickly took to referring to Zimmerman as the white man charged with the shooting death of a black teenager. As did Patrisse Cullors, an artist and activist who responded to a Facebook post by Alicia Garza, her longtime friend and fellow activist, decrying Zimmerman’s July 2013 acquittal on second-degree murder and manslaughter charges. Cullors responded with a hashtag — #BlackLivesMatter — that caught the attention of a third associate, Opal Tometi, who spread it further. As the hashtag went viral, the BLM movement was born.

The death of Trayvon Martin was not captured on smartphone video, but this technology was soon bringing unprecedented attention to the deaths of black Americans at the hands of police. The list now includes Eric Garner (New York City, July 2014); Michael Brown (Ferguson, August 2014); Laquan McDonald (Chicago, October 2014); Freddie Gray (Baltimore, April 2015); Terrence Crutcher (Tulsa, September 2016); Antwon Rose II (Pittsburgh, June 2018); Breonna Taylor (Louisville, March 2020); and George Floyd (Minneapolis, May 2020).

These are hardly the only such incidents in which African Americans have died at the hands of law enforcement. Nor are all such deaths necessarily the fault of the police. Yet there are striking differences in police killings across racial and ethnic groups. The data here are notoriously unreliable and incomplete, but in his careful book-length study, *When Police Kill*, Berkeley criminal-law scholar Franklin Zimring calculates that in 2015 (a not atypical year), the per-capita national death rate of blacks at the hands of police on service calls and patrol was 2.13 times the rate for Hispanics and 2.3 times that for non-Hispanic whites.

Even starker disparities emerge in a 2016 report by Chicago’s Police Accountability Task Force. Of the 404 lethal and non-lethal shootings by police from 2008 to 2015, 74% were of blacks, 14% of Hispanics, and 8% of whites—this in a city whose overall population is 33% black, 29% Hispanic, and 32% white. The report further notes that of the 1,886 Taser discharges between 2012 and 2015, 76% were against blacks, 13% against Hispanics, and 8% against whites. In 2013, 46% of traffic stops involved blacks, 22% Hispanics, and 27% whites. In the summer of 2014, Chicago police engaged in a much higher number of investigative stops not resulting in arrests than their counterparts in New York City; of those stopped, 72% were African American, 17% Hispanic, 9% white, and 1% Asian. That same summer, Chicago police issued 4,842 dispersal orders directed against gangs, of which 85% involved blacks, 14% Hispanics, and 1% whites.

In his study of police-community relations in Chicago between 2001 and 2003, political scientist Wesley Skogan reports that “[c]ompared to whites, African Americans were 2.5 times as likely to be stopped [either while driving or on foot], while—controlling statistically for age and gender—Latinos were stopped at about the same rate as were whites.” Echoing such findings, sociologist Ronald Weitzer observes that while “[s]ome studies find no significant difference” between black and Hispanic attitudes toward the police, “most find that Hispanics are more satisfied with police than blacks, sometimes substantially so.” Thus, Weitzer concludes that “[t]he evidence *overall* . . . points to a white/Hispanic/black ‘racial hierarchy’ rather than a more cohesive black/Hispanic ‘minority-group orientation.’”

HISPANICS, THE AMBIGUOUS CATEGORY

Police-civilian relations is not the only domain where it is unhelpful and misleading to place blacks and Hispanics in the same “people of color” category. For decades, about half of Mexican-origin individuals (as well as Latinos more generally) have self-identified as “white” on the U.S. census. To be sure, most of the remainder have passed over the other specified race categories, opting to identify as “some other race.” This undoubtedly reflects the mestizo history of Latin America. It may also reflect a lingering sentiment among some Mexican Americans that they are “a conquered people,” stigmatized by their homeland’s defeat and loss of more than half its national territory to Yankee imperialists in the mid-19th century.

Reinforcing this reading of history are the harsh frontier conditions of the American Southwest, where Mexican Americans were largely

isolated until late in the 20th century. Unrelieved stoop labor was the order of the day for much of that era, sustained by steady streams of workers moving back and forth across the relatively open border. Hardly thriving metropolises, the region's cities offered only marginally greater opportunities. Fearsome law-enforcement outfits like the Texas Rangers helped police a system that verged on peonage. And mass-deportation programs during the Great Depression and the early 1950s (the latter dubbed "Operation Wetback" by the government) apprehended and repatriated to Mexico hundreds of thousands of individuals, not insignificant numbers of whom were U.S. citizens.

Mexicans in the Southwest were also frequently relegated to segregated schools and public facilities, policies which were obviously not free of ethnic or racial animus. But as sociologists Edward Telles and Vilma Ortiz point out, there was never a "Mexican counterpart to the constitutionally sanctioned separate but equal provision for blacks." In places like San Antonio and Los Angeles, nearly all high schools were mixed Anglo and Mexican. And whenever segregation was the policy, school administrators not unreasonably justified it on account of Mexican students' irregular attendance, limited familiarity with English, and health and hygiene issues due to substandard living conditions — all of which reflected the less-than-optimal circumstances in which migrant farmworker families lived and worked, following the crop cycle and moving back and forth across the border for holidays. Notably, when litigation was brought against segregation of Mexican students, it was *not* premised on racial discrimination, because all parties agreed that Mexicans were by law racially white.

Mexicans had never been enslaved in the United States. Nor were Mexican Americans ever subjected to the "one-drop rule," consigning all persons with any discernible African ancestry to legal and social inferiority. And under the terms of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which concluded the Mexican-American War, Mexican nationals in the newly acquired territories became eligible for American citizenship. Then, too, Mexicans serving in the U.S. military were never relegated to segregated units. Mexican American GIs returning home from World War II were consequently far better positioned than black veterans to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the expanding post-war economy.

Meanwhile, the growing post-war agricultural sector continued to draw migrants from Mexico. As Telles and Ortiz write, "American

capitalists’ desire...for cheap Mexican labor...enabled by Mexico’s proximity and its large labor supply, can largely account for the persistent low status and ethnic retention of Mexican Americans.” It is worth noting, however, that for half a century now, this “capitalist desire” has been sated by the tireless efforts of Mexican American activists and leaders, as well as their liberal Democratic allies, to keep the nation’s southern border as open as possible.

Also supporting such policies have been African American political elites, typically under the rubric of solidarity with other “people of color.” Yet the basis for this solidarity is undermined by the conclusion reached by Telles and Ortiz after examining several different indicators of social mobility and integration. “Mexican Americans,” they write, “intermarry much more than do blacks, live in less segregated areas, and face less labor market discrimination, which suggests a path also different from that of African Americans.”

Such outcomes lead sociologist Richard Alba to observe that “[o]ne of the profoundly rooted patterns in U.S. history is the preference [of native-born whites] for immigrants over native minorities, especially African Americans.” And he cautions that “[t]here is a substantial risk of this pattern repeating itself in the contemporary era.” Demographers Jennifer Lee and Frank Bean express similar concern:

Our research points to a persistent pattern of black exceptionalism in intermarriage and multiracial identification, one that also emerges in studies of residential segregation, educational attainment, racial attitudes, and friendship networks. Although some blacks are closing the gaps on some of these fronts, our research provides evidence that forebodes the continued existence of barriers to full and complete incorporation of many blacks in the United States.

At this point, I must acknowledge a critical source of ambiguity, even confusion, in the evidence cited. My original focus was on Hispanic immigrants, but then it narrowed to Mexicans, who have relatively little African heritage compared with other Hispanic immigrant groups, notably Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Cubans. Yet this ambiguity is hardly accidental. As Berkeley sociologist Cristina Mora explains, the category “Hispanic” (later “Latino”) was devised by political leaders representing Puerto Ricans in the Northeast, Cubans in Florida,

and Mexicans in the Southwest as a way to present themselves before policymakers in Washington as a nationwide racial minority similar to blacks. Mindful of the achievements of the civil-rights movement, Mora concludes that “[w]hatever the label, *Hispanic* or *Latino*, the category is by design ambiguous,” since the goal was to foster “a broader narrative about some sort of vague Hispanic common culture.”

The point is elaborated by sociologist Joan Moore, co-author of *The Mexican-American People: The Nation’s Second Largest Minority*—a multi-year study funded by the Ford Foundation that appeared in 1970. Writing decades later, in 2008, Moore acknowledged that in the 1950s and ’60s, Mexicans “were generally portrayed as one of many American ethnic groups.” But she also emphasized that with their book’s subtitle and findings, she and her colleagues sought to “redefine Mexican Americans in terms of race”—even though “many Mexican Americans rejected the term minority and its implied association with black America.” The researchers’ objectives were clear: “Being a minority had important implications, given the potential role of the federal government. . . . Mexican Americans became beneficiaries of affirmative action, and their barrios became targets in the war on poverty.”

These new designations and their ambiguities proved useful to many different actors. In Washington, and increasingly in state capitals, policymakers and politicians were able to consolidate dealings with “Latinos” when convenient while also engaging in side bargains with the specific subgroups when opportune. Even before “diversity” became their new mantra, university administrators and other institutional leaders recognized that affirmative-action goals and quotas could be finessed by focusing on Asians and especially Latinos, whose disadvantages were seen as less daunting than those of African Americans. In essence, a new form of color-blindness emerged, one that discerned no difference between black and brown.

Unsurprisingly, Democrats were more adept at negotiating these waters than Republicans. But the latter got the hang of it, especially when it became clear that corporate America was not willing to buck the tide. Under such banners as “the Opportunity Society” and “the Faith-Based Initiative,” the GOP learned to address “minorities” while focusing on some more than others.

The great irony here is that black elites bought into this paradigm. They did so partly out of a need to acquire allies, whether in the corporate

sector, in academia, or especially in the barrio; and partly in the hope of heading off, or at least blunting, potential conflict with growing numbers of Hispanic immigrants. Black leaders at the local level — not to mention the typical taxi driver in, say, Washington, D.C. — dissented, sometimes loudly. But such views were not taken seriously, or were simply silenced.

One of the few black intellectuals to dissent was sociologist Orlando Patterson, who in 2001 wrote an op-ed for the *New York Times* faulting analysts of the 2000 census for embracing the “false assumption that whites are becoming a minority in the nation their ancestors conquered and developed.” Citing evidence about Hispanics similar to that adduced here, Patterson presciently warned that “the very worst thing that journalists, analysts and commentators can do is to misinform the white majority that it is losing its majority status.”

POLITICS OF ADDITION AND SUBTRACTION

These are the cross currents into which BLM has waded, or perhaps more appropriately, from which it has emerged — like the amorphous, shape-shifting, organizationally invertebrate phenomenon that it is. According to Cullors, Garza, and Tometi — the three women who have emerged as its “spokespersons” — BLM is not a movement but a leaderless, decentralized “network,” whose protean emanations reach out and respond to developments on multiple fronts. Yet BLM rose to prominence around a single issue — the uniquely high incidence of deadly encounters between African Americans and police. In fact, its most prominent supporters have been highly critical of the black officials on whose watch these have occurred — and who have allowed black issues to be submerged in a rainbow of other colors.

One such critic is Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, assistant professor of African American studies at Princeton and contributor to the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker*. In her 2016 book, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, Taylor dismisses the black political establishment as “a class for itself.” Describing Ferguson, Missouri — where Michael Brown was killed by white police in 2014 — as being 67% black but having virtually no black officeholders, she compares it to Baltimore, Maryland, where in 2015, Freddie Gray died from a severed spine while in police custody. That death, subsequently ruled a homicide, led to what Taylor refers to as “the Baltimore rebellion,” resulting in a 10-day state of emergency.

Yet as Taylor points out, three of the six officers involved with Gray's death were black; the trials of all six ended in acquittals, mistrials, and dropped charges, with one black officer tried before a black judge by a black prosecutor. She also notes that at the time, Baltimore's mayor, police commissioner, public-school superintendent, city-council president, and half of the city-council members were black. "If the murder of Mike Brown and the rebellion in Ferguson were reminiscent of the old Jim Crow," Taylor declares, "then the murder of Freddie Gray and the Baltimore uprising symbolize the new Black political elite." Insisting that whatever justice was wrought from this tragedy was due to pressure exerted on the prosecutor by BLM activists, she offers this bleak conclusion:

The development of the Black political establishment has not been a benign process. Many of these officials use their perches to articulate the worst stereotypes of Blacks in order to shift blame away from their own incompetence. . . . The utility of Black elected officials lies in their ability, as members of the community, to scold ordinary Black people in ways that white politicians could never get away with.

Taylor's critique extends to national black leadership, "a scant forty miles" down the road from Baltimore. And lest there be any doubt, she specifically indicts the first black president, the first black woman to be appointed attorney general, and what in 2015 was the highest number (48) of black representatives and senators in American history. She is equally critical of media figures such as Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton. From the BLM perspective, all of these people constitute "the civil rights establishment," an elitist coalition of "clergy, lawyers and litigators" that has failed the black poor and working class.

There is obviously some truth in this indictment—and in BLM's insistence on the need for social and cultural change of the sort that transcends electoral politics. But the change advocated by Cullors, Garza, and Tometi is problematic. As emphasized by Ransby, "[t]his movement has . . . patently rejected the hierarchical hetero-patriarchal politics of respectability." Cullors and Garza both identify as queer, and as Taylor proudly declares, "the face of the Black Lives Matter movement is largely queer and female." BLM does not categorically reject electoral politics, but these spokespersons are certainly skeptical of those who

engage in it. According to Taylor, BLM adherents are attuned to “the futility of organization,” especially “the top-down control of the civil rights establishment,” and are therefore much more enthusiastic about “mass mobilizations, street demonstrations, and other direct actions.”

At the heart of this critique of the civil-rights establishment is BLM’s condemnation of the male-dominated black church. As Ransby affirms about events in Ferguson in the wake of Michael Brown’s death: “In a different time, the local male clergy would have been in the forefront. But this time was different . . . As progressive activist and St. Louis minister Rev. Osagyefo Sekou, who was a core organizer during the Ferguson protests, put it, ‘I take my orders from 23-year-old queer women.’” Yet black female preachers are not encouraged to step forward, either. It would not be accurate to say that BLM is irreligious; there is even a hint of ancestor worship in Ransby’s tribute to the organizers’ “building political altars, paying homage to the wisdom of grandmothers and grandfathers.” But it is certainly not conventionally Christian.

If BLM has a specific mission, it is outreach to black gays, black lesbians, black queers, black trans folk, and so on — including looters. Ransby notes that “[o]rganizers have eschewed values that privilege the so-called best and brightest, emphasizing the needs of the most marginal and often-maligned sectors of the Black community.” BLM activists do not just offer support to such individuals; they regard them as the vanguard of the cultural change necessary to transform black America — and presumably the rest of us.

If BLM has a central teaching, it is intersectionality. Defined as the examination of how divergent but overlapping identities (race, sex, gender, class, ethnicity, etc.) render individuals susceptible to different modes of discrimination and/or privilege, intersectionality is most frequently linked to a series of law-review articles published in the 1980s and ’90s by Columbia University law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw. Yet it is seldom noted that Crenshaw developed this perspective while conducting field research on domestic-violence shelters in minority communities in Los Angeles. Her interviews with direct-care providers in the shelters alerted her to the disconnects between their priorities and those of social-service bureaucrats higher up the food chain. So, for example, black queer women being abused by their lovers might well require different services than black women being beaten by their boyfriends or husbands.

In other words, intersectionality derives not only from an activist lawyer’s tactical focus on litigating narrow points of law, but also from

a service provider's preoccupation with targeting resources to the needs of specific clienteles. What's missing is the *political* calculus necessary to bring groups with diverse needs and interests together into a coalition capable of delivering resources to all its various members. The former are processes of subtraction; the latter of addition.

Feminist theorists have sought to address this problem by developing the notion of "strategic intersectionality," which would presumably translate into what one BLM ally has called for: sanctuaries serving "not only undocumented people, but also non-immigrant Muslims, LGBTQIA people, Black and Indigenous folks and political dissidents." To be sure, any successful political actor must somehow juggle the contradictory forces of subtraction and addition. Yet declarations like this suggest that things may not add up politically for BLM.

Of greater concern is BLM's revival of the polemic against Daniel Patrick Moynihan for having called attention to the challenges confronting fatherless, female-headed black families. In this new iteration of the old critique, the offender is Barack Obama, whom Taylor criticizes for having urged his fellow black Americans during his 2008 election campaign to take

full responsibility for our own lives—by demanding more from our fathers, and spending more time with our children, and reading to them, and teaching them that while they may face challenges and discrimination in their own lives, they must never succumb to despair or cynicism; they must always believe that they can write their own destiny.

By contrast, BLM places the responsibility for achieving racial justice and a better life for black people squarely and exclusively on white America. Yet who exactly is "white" is unclear. Asian Americans apparently are, since they are not people of color—at least according to Nikole Hannah-Jones of the 1619 Project. As suggested above, over time Latinos are increasingly likely to regard themselves, and be regarded by others, as white as well. Perhaps at such a juncture, BLM's self-understanding as the vanguard of "a Black-led class struggle" will come to the fore, reinforced by what up to now has been merely a *frisson* of Marxist rhetoric.

Most of the credit for BLM's visibility belongs to social media, with its capacity to reach and even mobilize huge audiences. But such technology has its limitations. As Turkish scholar and activist Zeynep Tufekci

argues in her recent book, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*, mass demonstrations organized via social media are prone to “tactical freeze”—an incapacity “to adjust tactics, negotiate demands, and push for tangible policy changes”—and consequently fail to deliver results. Movements like the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street were relatively easily built through social-media networks, resulting in massive protests attracting the attention of crucial elites. But as Tufekci shows, the fact that participants did not have to engage in the time-consuming, often tedious work of building relationships and organizational ties deprived them of what was needed to maintain discipline, articulate agendas, and achieve real, lasting change.

Strikingly, Tufekci’s model of a successful mass demonstration is the August 1963 March on Washington, which would not have occurred without the tireless work and organizational genius of the legendary Bayard Rustin. As it happens, Rustin is featured in BLM’s pantheon—along with the Black Panthers, Angela Davis, and Assata Shakur, a former member of the Black Liberation Army and a convicted felon who escaped from a New Jersey prison and, in 1984, was granted political asylum in Cuba. Presumably, Rustin is so honored not only because of his lifelong activism, but also because of his struggles as a pacifist and gay black man in mid-20th-century America. But the mere mention of Rustin’s dedication and seriousness of purpose comes perilously close to making the individuals who look and act like BLM’s leaders but refuse to take responsibility for their roles appear . . . well, unserious.

Another renowned figure with whom BLM has had to reckon is the late John Lewis, congressman and disciple of Martin Luther King, Jr., and arguably the last direct link to King’s movement of non-violent Christian moral restraint and discipline in service to the cause of persuading all Americans to live up to the ideals of their nation’s founding. Given BLM’s critique of the civil-rights establishment, relations between Lewis and the movement were strained. Yet in his final days, Lewis visited the section of 16th Street not far from the White House, where a few weeks earlier, Washington mayor Muriel Bowser had authorized the words “Black Lives Matter” to be painted on the pavement. Whatever his reservations about BLM, Lewis was clearly trying to build a bridge between the civil-rights movement and future generations of black Americans. But that structure is strikingly fragile, and the chasm it spans increasingly threatening.

HOW MOVEMENTS MATTER

By attacking and denouncing the black church, BLM cuts itself off from the wellsprings of moral energy that ended legal segregation in America. Seeking to delegitimize the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, the 1619 Project similarly devalues the very political capital against which Reverend King presented a long-overdue promissory note on behalf of America's black citizens. Taken together, these developments threaten to deprive BLM and other such endeavors of any comparable source of ethical teaching or political legitimacy. BLM's many amorphous, networked, and transgressive manifestations may have struck a chord among Americans of diverse backgrounds and orientations. But that is only because the unique and compelling claims of black Americans remain to reckoned with.

To squarely address this challenge, Americans must distinguish the unique historical circumstances and enduring obstacles confronting black Americans from the impediments and barriers facing other historically disadvantaged, marginalized groups in contemporary America. They are not equivalent to those experienced by African Americans. And addressing them as if they were has helped to fuel a fearsome reaction among many white Americans, who not only have their own stories of hardship but who now see their values and their living standards deteriorating.

In an era when America's institutions, especially its religious and political institutions, are stressed and embattled, BLM has little real substance to offer the millions of ordinary black men and women struggling to hold it together — and even less genuine help for the most disadvantaged among them. As for the non-black majority, BLM has come to mean either confrontations at brunch, disruption in the streets, or fading signs poking through the snow on suburban lawns. Not only does BLM lack any coherent agenda or program, it also has no belief in, or desire to appeal to, the higher selves of fellow Americans. Will this leaderless movement prove capable of marshalling the social, political, and spiritual forces needed to fulfill America's special obligation to the descendants of those it enslaved? Regrettably, the answer is no.