

Has Black Lives Matter Changed the World?

A new book makes the case for a more pragmatic anti-policing movement—one that seeks to build working-class solidarity across racial lines.

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How should we think about the Black Lives Matter movement, now that three years have passed since the worldwide George Floyd protests? In sympathetic circles, the question does not usually inspire a direct answer, but, rather, a seemingly endless set of caveats and follow-up questions. What constitutes success? What changes could possibly be expected in such a short period of time? Are we talking about actual policies or are we talking about changed minds? I've engaged in this type of back-and-forth on several occasions during the past few years, and, though I believe the protests were, on balance, a force for good in this country, I wonder whether all this chin-scratching suggests a lack of conviction. Why don't we have a clearer answer?

In his new book, "[After Black Lives Matter](#)," the political scientist Cedric Johnson blows right past the sort of hemming and hawing that has become de rigueur in today's conversations about the George Floyd protests. Johnson chooses, instead, to level a provocative and expansive critique from the left of the loose collection of protest actions, organizations, and ideological movements—whether prison abolition or calls to [defund the police](#)—that make up what we now call [Black Lives Matter](#). He agrees that unchecked police power is a societal ill that should inspire vigorous dissent. His problem is more with the "Black Lives Matter" part—not the assertion, itself, which should be self-evident, but, rather, how the shaping of the slogan and its main beneficiaries (Johnson believes these are mostly corporate entities) promoted a totalizing and obscurantist vision of race and power.

Much like Barbara Fields and [Adolph Reed](#), two Black scholars cited in the book, Johnson is a socialist, and his argument is "inspired and informed by the left-wing of antipolicing struggles," which he takes great care to distinguish from what he sees as the more corporatized and popular vision of Black Lives Matter, and the naïvete of the police-abolition movement. He does not dismiss the pernicious impact that racism has upon the lives of people in this country, but he does not see much potential in a movement that focusses on race alone, nor does he believe that it accurately assesses the problem with policing. He writes:

During the 2020 George Floyd protests, the politics of Black Lives Matter seemed especially militant and stood in sharp contrast to the pro-policing, authoritarian posturing and hubris of the Trump administration. The fundamental BLM demand, that black lives equally deserve protections guaranteed under the Constitution, momentarily achieved majority-national support. Through slogans like the "New Jim Crow" and "Black Lives Matter," the problem of expansive carceral power was codified as a uniquely black predicament. Police violence, however, is not meted out against the black population en

masse but is trained on the most dispossessed segments of the working class across metropolitan, small town and rural geographies.

[The police](#), in other words, enact violence against all poor people, because, in a capitalist country like the United States, the police serve primarily to reproduce “the market economy, processes of real estate development in central cities and the management of surplus populations.” Poor rural whites, Black people who live in the inner cities, Latinos in depressed agricultural districts, and Native Americans across the country can all be tagged as surplus, and Johnson argues that this condition has a much more direct and meaningful impact on how they are policed than race does. He also believes that the focus on race serves bourgeois interests, because it reduces the question of inequality in this country to skin color; this, in turn, obviates any discussion about how an improvement in [basic living standards](#)—health care, housing, child care, and education—could make communities safer. If all you have to do is expunge the racism in the hearts of police officers, or, perhaps, just reduce the number of racist patrol officers on the streets, you don’t have to do much about poverty. Or, at the very least, you can pretend that class conflict and racialized police brutality are two separate issues, when, in fact, they are the same thing.

“After Black Lives Matter” should be commended both for the clarity of its message and the bravery of its convictions. Even among scholars on the left who are critical of identity politics, there’s a wide range of responses to popular works such as “[The 1619 Project](#)” or [Ibram X. Kendi’s Antiracist series](#), which seem to focus on race above all other things. Some, like [Olúfémi O. Táíwò](#), level [a more capacious critique](#) of identity politics, even in its most crass and capitalistic forms: though Táíwò may object to the approach and analyses of so-called identitarians, he still sees them as his teammates. Others, like Fields and Reed, are far more dismissive. Johnson certainly falls in this second camp. He rails against “wokelords,” who are keen to shame and confront anyone who may offer up a critique of identity politics; he believes that modern racial-justice discourse “prompts liberal solutions, such as implicit bias training, body cameras, hiring more black police officers and administrators,” which, in turn, “erects unnecessary barriers between would-be allies.”

Johnson argues that, although Black Lives Matter may have dressed itself up in revolutionary clothing, it ultimately still followed the differential logic of a corporate diversity training: one group of people is asked to acknowledge another and fixate on points of difference. “BLM discourse truncates the policing problem as one of endemic antiblackness, and cuts off potential constituencies,” he writes, “treating other communities who have suffered police abuse and citizens who are deeply committed to achieving social justice as merely allies, junior partners rather than political equals and comrades.”

What emerges from “After Black Lives Matter” is a type of pragmatism, one that looks to build solidarity across racial lines. White people, especially poor white people, are also killed by the police, as are poor Latinos and poor Asians. Any change—whether revolutionary, legislative, or reformative—will require a critical mass of people who feel that their own interests are at stake in an anti-policing movement. Black Lives Matter, Johnson argues, may have been effective in getting people out on the streets because of its manipulation of digital platforms, but it also had wide appeal because it did not truly challenge the capitalist, neoliberal order. The reason so many corporations, for example,

were so quick to offer funds for Black creators or anti-racism efforts wasn't that they felt intimidated by what was happening in the streets, but because they saw a shift in how the country felt about race and quickly moved to adjust their optics without touching the underlying exploitative practices. In the summer of 2020, oil companies, multinational banks, the C.I.A., the N.F.L. all came out with commitments to Black Lives Matter. Johnson sees this as "an instance of ideological convergence—between the militant racial liberalism of Black Lives Matter and the operational racial liberalism of the investor class." A truly transformative movement, then, would be broad and inclusive in its messaging, and also radical in its critique and democratic in its methods.

Johnson's pragmatism also extends to the debates around defunding or abolishing the police. He reminds the reader that, at certain points in American history, "state coercion was necessary to secure racial justice." Desegregation, for example, required the support of federal marshals and National Guardsmen, even if it also was opposed, violently, by the local law enforcement. Johnson advocates, instead, to "right-size" and "demilitarize" the police, but argues that "it seems rather naive to think that a complex, populous urban society can exist without any law enforcement at all, especially in those moments when forces threaten social justice and even the basic democratic rights of citizens."

Johnson's own prescription is to "abolish the class conditions that modern policing has come to manage." He argues that any real change to policing will not come from a "mass rejection of racism," but instead a "shared vision of the good society." Eliminating racism, Johnson concedes, is a worthwhile goal, but the essentialist vision of race and the way that it narrows down the conversation about change in society down to one group—namely, Black Americans—will always be limited to the oppressed-and-ally relationship, which creates barriers instead of searching for common grievances. The alternative, Johnson argues, is "broadly redistributive left politics centered on public goods" that would ultimately allow for "powerful coalitions built on shared self-interests" to emerge.

I am sympathetic to Johnson's critique, not only because I also see [the limits of identity politics](#) but also because I have seen the needlessly divisive and dispiriting ideology of racial essentialism in action at protests around the country. I've written about many of [these instances](#) in the past, whether the "wall of white allies" I saw in Minnesota or the harsh reprimand a white protester received from a Black organizer for daring to talk to a reporter. (Her offense, as far as I could tell, wasn't speaking to the press, but, rather, "centering herself.") These types of instances, which weren't exactly common, but did recur during my years of reporting on protests, may have been interesting on an intellectual level—seeing theory in action is always a bit thrilling. But they also convinced me that not much action could come from a movement that endlessly polices its own "allies." I do not think people stay allies for very long, but I do believe that they act in their self-interests for a lifetime. Therefore, if one is committed to profoundly changing policing, the work will require convincing as many people as possible that they, too, can be abused and killed by the police.

The demonstrations of 2020 gave rise to other forms of solidarity, highlighting the differences between working-class solidarity and the types of identity politics that only ask for small reforms. Photograph by Steven John Irby for The New Yorker

But there's also a profound contradiction that I haven't quite been able to square in my own head, and perhaps never will. Johnson is correct in saying that Black Lives Matter, by

explicit design, elevated the concerns of Black people over those of others who may have been targeted by the police. But it was this message, and not a broader anti-capitalist critique, which has captivated millions of people for almost a decade now. This message was the one that ultimately resonated, not only in the United States but also in protests around the world.

There were people I saw in every march I attended, from Ferguson to the Floyd protests, who truly did believe that they were doing revolutionary work in the name of Black Lives Matter. In the summer of 2020, I saw nervous first-timers who had no love for corporate remediations on race and were ready to leave their homes and march out into the streets. It is the job of scholars and critics, like Johnson and me, to think about what it all might have meant, yet I don't think it's really possible to take an event as large as the summer of 2020 and make such a broad, declarative assessment of the political motivations behind all of it.

Early in the book, Johnson makes the distinction between organized power and mass mobilization. The sheer size and diversity of the Floyd protests pointed to the latter—something he says is “much easier now with the endless opportunities for expressing discontent provided by social media, online petitions, memes and vlogging.” In describing the difference, Johnson is asking the profound political question of the past twenty years: Does the ephemeral nature of social media dilute the power of street protest? Does it turn everything into online [symbolology](#), and give the people who show up a false sense that they have accomplished something real?

I wonder, perhaps naïvely, whether we simply need more time to accurately gauge the gains of the summer of 2020. A group of unpopular activists was able to overturn [Roe v. Wade](#) after fifty years of planning and organizing. The actual mechanisms for change may have wound through the courts, but anti-abortion activists still had to create the circumstances, whether by influencing conservative legal scholars, fostering their own like Amy Coney Barrett, or even just keeping things together through decades of opposition.

On the left, social movements find their inspiration and fuel from protests, and it's worth giving credit where it's due: if not for Black Lives Matter, millions of people might not have explicitly come out into the streets of America to protest the conditions that give rise to police violence. And the demonstrations of 2020 also gave rise to other forms of solidarity. Under the banner of the George Floyd protests, many labor unions, including the Oakland chapter of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, staged their own actions. These exposed attendees to the differences between working-class solidarity and the types of neoliberal identity politics that only ask for small reforms that do not challenge wealth inequality or even the criminal-justice system in any profound way. Perhaps there is a way to excise the bad part of these mass protests from the good, and still maintain a mass presence on the streets. But, if there is, I have yet to see it in action. ♦