

Black Lives Matter is Not a Civil Rights Movement

December 10, 2015



Black Lives Matter is often called a “civil rights” movement. But to think that our fight is solely about civil rights is to misunderstand the fundamental aspirations of this movement. Today, on International Human Rights Day, we recognize the current struggle is not merely for reforms of policing, anymore than the Montgomery Bus Boycott was simply about a seat on the bus. It is about the full recognition of our rights as citizens; and it is a battle for full civil, social, political, legal, economic and cultural rights as enshrined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

As black activists from two different generations, we understand that the black liberation movement in the U.S.—from its inception as an anti-slavery movement, through the Civil Rights Era, and up to now—has never been only for civil rights. The movement is a struggle for the human rights and dignity of black people in the U.S., which is tied to black peoples’ struggle for human rights across the globe. Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “Since we know that the system will not change the rules, we are going to have to change the system.” This vision is critical to our work, as it highlights that that this struggle is beyond just, “Stop killing us, we deserve to live.” We deserve to thrive, and this requires the full acknowledgement of the breadth of our human rights.

A powerful example was in Baltimore after the death of Freddie Gray in police custody. We saw an uprising to demand justice for Gray and an indictment for the officers. Although activists got the indictment they demanded, they continued to push through the narrative that an indictment was the sole aim of their protest. They elevated issues such as high unemployment and systemic injustice as the true plague within their neighborhoods. Police brutality was just a symptom in a long line of structural injustices and social ills. Groups in New York and Chicago present a public-safety narrative that demands solutions to community challenges comes from the grassroots. This has led to calls for investment in solutions like quality education, restorative justice, mental and emotional health support, and job opportunities. These solutions recognize our humanity and right to self-determination, which are fundamental rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The beautiful thing about the black liberation movement is that it is more than saying “Black Lives Matter.” This period in history is a celebration of intersectionality, which mandates that the full breadth of our humanity be acknowledged and embraced. This means that queer, trans, migrant, formerly incarcerated, disabled and all of us who find ourselves unapologetic about our complexity are more committed than ever to champion the scope of the human rights agenda that we deserve. Ella Baker, an activist of the 1960s, reminded us of the global nature of our struggle when she stated: “Remember, we are not fighting for the freedom of the Negro alone, but for the freedom of the human spirit a larger freedom that encompasses all mankind.” From our vantage point, the

Movement for Black Lives' agenda this International Human Rights Day is for all people. Once achieved, it will create an inclusive democracy that guarantees freedom and justice for all.

Opal Tometi is Nigerian-American, a co-founder of Black Lives Matter and the executive director of the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI), the only national immigrant rights organization for Black people. Gerald Lenoir is the founding executive director of the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI), and former director of San Francisco Black Coalition on AIDS. He is long time leader of the Anti-apartheid global solidarity movement.

Originally published at <http://time.com/4144655/international-human-rights-day-black-lives-matter/>