

The Future of Black Leadership

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What is the future of black leadership? In the wake of the Movement for Black Lives on the one hand and the “election” of Donald Trump (and the forthcoming presidential election) on the other, a range of intellectuals, pundits, activists, and organizers have begun to ask “what next”?

Some suggest that black populations would be better served by organizing around class lines as opposed to purely racial ones. What I want to do in this essay is take a stab at this issue by going backwards. My attempt here is not abnormal by any stretch of the imagination—many who examine black politics with an eye towards problem solving it tend to look backwards. But in many if not most cases that move backwards tends to end at the beginning of the post-civil rights era.

What I’m going to do below is go back a bit further, back to the end of the 19th century. That moment arguably represented one of the best opportunities to build a black institutional apparatus that combined the intellectual arena with the political arena focused on black workers. And to the extent this moment requires anything I’d suggest that it requires “black leadership” far less than it requires a set of institutions that can in turn redevelop a robust democratic political culture as well as generate intellectual leaders and political organizers from black working class communities.

Before I take you to that moment, first I briefly examine what I think the Movement for Black Lives has done for us in combination with Occupy Wall Street, and then address one of the strongest critiques of the movement against police violence.

When we look back on Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall Street—and although some don’t take them in tandem I think we should as they represent related responses to the neoliberal turn. The relationship between police and black populations has historically been contentious, but we do not see significant growth in the carceral state until the late seventies/early eighties. Relatedly this is the moment we begin to see significant increases in inequality. Although the victims of the carceral state are disproportionately black it is worth noting that the poor are even more disproportionately represented among this group than black people are. Because black people on the wrong end of police violence, and people on the wrong end of the economic inequality, had for decades been held

responsible for their own condition, it was difficult if not impossible to get the type of traction required for political action. But in part through egregious murders like those of Michael Brown, Oscar Grant, Eric Garner, and Freddie Gray, in part through the 2008 crash, and in part through technological advances (that made it far easier to mobilize and galvanize communities), we had widespread protest and civil disobedience the likes of which we haven't seen in decades.

Ideationally the movement for black lives specifically changed the way we thought in a few different ways.

It changed the way we thought about black bodies. In the early years of the twentieth century, black elites developed what later scholars called "uplift ideology". One of the most important functions of this ideology for the purposes of this paper was to make clear distinctions between black populations able and willing to uphold the norms and ideals of mainstream (white) society and those unable and willing to do so. This had significant political consequences—during the Civil Rights Movement individuals like Rosa Parks stood out over individuals like Claudette Colvin because Parks upheld the standards and norms of mainstream society even as she violated Jim Crow segregation laws, while Colvin (who was unmarried, younger than 20, and pregnant) did not. The majority of the victims of police violence were individuals who arguably did not uphold mainstream societal norms, and the human rights approach activists took on their behalf turned the idea of respectability on its head. Leadership in traditional civil rights organizations tended to be male, straight, and Christian, and as a partial result tended towards the charismatic. The leadership of many if not most of the organizations broadly considered part of the Black Lives Matter movement tended to be not only female, but queer. The victims no longer had to be perfect. The leaders no longer had to be straight. With these two moves the movement expanded what Cathy Cohen calls the "boundaries of blackness" in important ways.

It changed how we thought about black institutions. One of the reasons that leadership of the civil rights organizations tended to be male, straight, Christian, and charismatic was because of the role individual black churches played in the movement—the churches involved were the closest thing blacks had to autonomous organizations. However as a partial byproduct of relying on these institutions civil rights movement organizations tended to reproduce these churches institutional culture, and as a result focused (with exceptions like SNCC) more on mobilizing individuals than developing their capacity to organize themselves. The bulk of the various organizations that constitute the Movement for Black Lives tended to be non-hierarchical, in fact taking something close to an anti-institutional position, being incredibly wary of charismatic leadership, and wary of traditional institutional structures in general.

Finally, in as much as culture plays a critically important role in communicating ideas about politics, the market, and civil society, arguably black lives matter has indelibly changed popular culture. In the music of Kendrick Lamar, DeAngelo, Kamasi Washington, Beyonce, JayZ, in the movies of Ryan Coogler (who just signed on to film a movie about the life and death of Fred Hampton), in the actions of athletes like Colin Kaepernick, LeBron James, and others, we see a black popular culture far less interested in reproducing some of the elements of the neoliberal turn than before.

These ideational shifts were accompanied by political shifts. At the state and local level a number of individuals have been elected to office on what could be called Movement for Black Lives platforms. In centers of activism like Ferguson and Baltimore we saw significant turnover in City Council elections. In Chicago, Cleveland, Saint Louis, and Philadelphia, voters removed prosecutors unwilling to take police brutality seriously. Individual police officers have begun to be successfully prosecuted for police violence, and police corruption in places like Baltimore and Chicago has begun to be dealt with, this in addition to Justice Department consent decrees generated partially by activists and organizers. Finally, for the first time in decades the Democratic Party was forced to

move away from the tough on crime approaches it began to embrace aggressively in the late eighties and early nineties.

These changes are not radical by any stretch, but in comparison to the decades before—we used to write about the Reagan-Bush years, but in a way we’re talking about the Reagan-Bush-Clinton-Bush years—what we saw constituted change. However, over the same period we’ve seen the presidency of Donald Trump and a marked increase in racial terrorism. As a partial result we’ve seen a decrease in Movement for Black Lives activism, as well as a decreased focus on black activism and organizing more generally.

Where do we go from here?

Some, like Adolph Reed and Cedric Johnson suggest that a multi-racial class coalition be developed, one that takes organizing around the types of structural violence committed against working class populations more broadly seriously. For them, doing so would have a few benefits. Intellectually it would move us away from the types of transhistorical approaches towards race and racism that has some thinking that contemporary forms of police violence are uniquely anti-black and can be traced neatly back to the Jim Crow order if not before. Police victims do tend to be disproportionately black, but they are far more likely to be poor than they are to be black—indeed while we can point to instances like that of Henry Louis Gates, who was accosted by Cambridge police officers while trying to get into his own home, we cannot point to an instance of police violence meted upon a black professional that comes close to that meted upon an Eric Garner or a Freddie Gray. Politically it would allow for a more robust political movement that can generate substantive changes not just in the carceral state but in the neoliberal state more broadly. Although I do believe we should take Occupy Wall Street and the Movement for Black Lives in tandem, activists organizing against police violence have not been as robust in examining economic inequality. Finally, and relatedly doing so would enable blacks to move more aggressively against the type of black class politics that often sees what could be called “the black agenda” co-opted by a strata of black professionals and managers in such a way as to render it useless for progressive (much less radical) change.

I agree that intellectually we would do much to move past the types of New Jim Crow approaches that characterize some forms of black activism in this moment. It not only gets the story wrong, but it leads to a form of politics that moves us backwards not forwards. I agree that activists need to better connect contemporary police violence to the types of economic violence associated with the neoliberal turn. While we definitely cannot solve police violence with the types of technological fixes proposed by elites—cameras won’t solve our problems—we also cannot solve police violence without tackling economic inequality. Finally I agree that the black political agenda to the extent one can be said to exist, has been dominated by class concerns.

With this said, neither Reed or Johnson fully reckon with hypersegregation. The areas that have served as the center of the movement for black lives, Ferguson, Baltimore, Cleveland, Chicago, are areas defined not just by racial segregation but by race and class segregation. Further the standard labor condition in these spaces is not under-employment but long term unemployment. Moreover, not just long term unemployment, but long term unemployment structured by carceral state employment. The neighborhood Freddie Gray was murdered in spends more money incarcerating its residents than any other neighborhood in the state of Maryland.

(What does this mean?)

First it means that the black populations hardest hit by police violence are in some real ways uniquely cordoned off from other poor populations. Because the populations in these areas aren’t working in the formal economy, they aren’t in the types of workplaces in which bonds of labor

solidarity can be easily established with other populations. And as they live in hyper segregated neighborhoods these neighborhoods by definition are not ones that easily allow for bonds of solidarity to be established with white populations outside of them. The police violence meted upon these populations represent a combination of attempts to keep them away from capital (the police district Freddie Gray was murdered in abuts the central business district) and to expropriate fines and fees from them to bolster dwindling municipal coffers (before the Justice Department decree Ferguson collected more than 20% of its municipal revenue from fines and fees).

There are instances of police brutality involving whites—police have murdered more whites than blacks over the past decade or so—however these other instances have rarely resulted in white protest. This is, in significant part, a spatial matter—given the reality of rural spaces it would seem to be difficult if not impossible to generate the types of political protest that would bring widespread attention to a given instance of rural police violence. More importantly, because the areas poor whites live in do not appear to be beset by the types of concentrated policing the areas poor blacks tend to live in whites simply don't see police violence as an issue. They may see state encroachment as an issue, but this does not tend to translate into antagonism towards police in general nor towards individual acts of police violence. In fact given the economic opportunities the carceral state may provide for poorer whites (in the form of prison and police employment) their support for police and the carceral state in general may be significant.

Over the past few years we've seen a resurgence in conversations about populism. I suggest that the populist movement might give us some traction as to how to think about this.

A quick primer. The civil war, won by the North as a result of the "great strike", brought about and exacerbated two important changes. First, it further spread the democratic impulse brought about by extending the right to vote to non-propertied men in the 1830s by giving black men the right to vote and by giving blacks full political citizenship. Second, it brought about significant economic changes by first moving to a paper currency and then to a hard currency. The first change led to some of the first broad attempts to enact what Du Bois would call an abolitionist democracy, using taxing power to create some of the nation's first public schools and what could be thought of as a progressive government. The second change, alongside the 1877 Hayes-Tilden Compromise, significantly exacerbated the economic hardship faced by individuals in the agricultural sector, as the shift to a hard currency reduced the power of debtors in favor of creditors.

The industrial and communication sectors grew during these changes. Industrial workers and agricultural workers alike began to feel the pinch generated by reduced currency (which increased their debt) and by poor working conditions. Industrial workers sought to use the strike to bring about better working conditions. Agricultural workers at first sought to create cooperatives that would give them better negotiating power, but came to realize that the cooperatives they wanted to create had little weight without political power. And came to realize they had common cause with industrial workers in the north and the spreading west. Realizing that the only way they could accumulate the political and economic power they needed was by organizing a broad political movement they created the People's Party, with a platform that called for a silver backed currency, term limits, direct elections for senators and presidents, state ownership of the telegraph, and worker's rights (among other things).

The People's Party had a brief but significant effect on American politics. People's Party candidates either by themselves or on fusion tickets won important victories throughout the south. But in the face of growing opposition and an attempt by the democratic party to co-opt much of the populist movement's energy (with only a little bit of the platform) the People's Party gave way to a white supremacist movement that ended up transforming the South and hamstringing progressive politics in the south for generations.

Many recognize the role race played in the end of the populist movement, but few recognize the importance not just of race but of black populism in the beginning of the populist movement. It is here I want to turn.

At the same time white agricultural workers in the south began to create worker cooperatives and white workers in the north began to create the first industrial unions, black workers in the north and the south began to organize as well. Black workers in the north joined the Knights of Labor by the thousands, creating their own chapters in instances and joining pre-existing white ones in others. Black workers in the south created their own cooperatives. In as much as there were far more black workers in the south than in the north—the great migration was a few decades away—it was this move that became tremendously important. The “Colored Wheels” black workers created generated the backbone of what would become the Colored Farmers’ Alliance. This organization, like its white counterpart, had a few moving parts. It was formed of individual chapters each comprised of dues paying members. Its leadership was elected by these chapters and held accountable by them. It had a communication organ that spread information about the activities of various chapters. Finally, it developed a network of cooperatives that enabled members to reduce costs and increase profits of their agricultural labor. The success of the populist movement in general depended upon this segment of workers—black workers constituted a significant portion of the agricultural worker sector in general as a result of slavery. Both the transition into the People’s Party and the electoral victories the People’s Party ended up getting came largely from the support given by black members. With the death of the people’s party came the rise of the Jim Crow regime designed not primarily to segregate blacks, but primarily to concentrate political and economic power within the hands of planters through segregating and disfranchising blacks. One of the primary byproducts of this regime was the development of a political culture within black communities that increasingly focused on extra-political means of generating political accountability.

The most important aspect of the Jim Crow regime was its disfranchising black (and many white) voters. These citizens couldn’t vote, serve on juries, elect representatives, articulate and fight for policy. This dynamic concentrated political power in the hands of the Democratic Party and then within the Democratic Party the planter class, who used their power to stave off union development and any instance of progressive government that might benefit working class citizens in general and black citizens (regardless of class) in particular. Furthermore though, in as much as black communities were still large enough to require some means of management, a black broker class developed comprised largely of black religious and educational leaders. This broker class received much of their social power from their ability to not only provide services to black communities in a segregated economy, but for their ability to negotiate between white economic and political elites and black communities. Arguably what peace existed during the south at this time existed in part because this broker class was able to often garner and distribute enough resources to black communities on behalf of blacks while at the same time “cooling out” radical elements in black communities on behalf of whites.^[1] Even as we now have thousands of black elected officials and in the 2008 and 2012 elections blacks outvoted whites for the first time, what could be called “a black agenda” still reflects the residue of this period.^[2]

It is this dynamic that Cedric Johnson and Adolph Reed (among others) rightly critique, hand in hand with the transhistorical framework many in the movement adopt when describing the causes of police violence. If the Movement for Black Lives continues to think of police violence primarily in racial terms then it not only opens itself up to the possibility of intra-racial cooptation, working class black populations are opened up to the possibility of yet more brokerage. Indeed, to an extent we saw this happen during the last Obama term. However, what they ignore is that the police violence meted upon urban communities segregated by race and class is disproportionately meted out upon these communities where they live as opposed to where they work. To conduct the type of political

movement that would transform the nation we require a political infrastructure that would have every black neighborhood, every block, every household politicized. Doing so would not just allow for expanded mobilization against the types of egregious murders that police have been causing, it would allow for the development of a cadre of leaders who can self-organize both against these egregious murders and against the types of routine state violence and corruption that ends up hurting poor black populations the most, and it would give black working class populations the ability to shape what we think of as “the black political interest” in their favor. And it would give black working class populations the ability to work across racial lines with other communities beset by equally pressing issues.

Looking backwards to the Populist Party, we did have a brief moment in which black and white workers came together on behalf of their shared economic interests, and in doing so radically expanded the what was politically possible in an America that was barely 100 years old. However what also stands out about that period is that blacks were the victims of a particular form of state violence that whites tended to ignore.

Now I recognize that this attempt to look backward is fraught. The populist moment happened long before the nation industrialized, long before cities much less metropolitan areas became the central space of American development. It happened long before advances in communication technology—the telegraph was barely being used and the telephone was decades away. It happened long before advances in transportation technology. Finally, it happened a few decades before unions took hold. Yet and still I think the fundamental aspects—the fact that blacks and whites had common economic ground but very different relationships with the state on the issue of racial violence, the fact that blacks were able to create local groups that organized around their interests but that these groups were fraught with intra-racial class tension—point us both to the continued necessity of multi-racial class based organizing and intra-racial class based organizing.

Notes

[1]. Truth be told southern blacks and blacks in general were not bereft of a political infrastructure. Two decades after the end of the populist movement we see a significant increase in black only organizations. But these organizations were largely populated by black middle and upper income men and women. The black fraternities and sororities mostly created between 1906 and 1922 by definition excluded individuals without a college education. Neither the NAACP nor the Urban League were exclusive but its leadership (when not white) was primarily upper class. Both the United Negro Improvement Association and arguably the African Blood Brotherhood stood as exceptions, but the UNIA largely eschewed formal politics and was stridently capitalist while the African Blood Brotherhood was not an organization with a large membership base.

[2]. The political infrastructure I note above as important as it became during the civil rights years skewed what could be called a black political agenda towards the interests of middle to upper class blacks, and then created a leadership class that had few formal mechanisms of accountability. Indeed thinking about the post-civil rights era we can almost draw a straight line between individuals like Jesse Jackson jr., Louis Farrakhan, and Al Sharpton, to the largely unaccountable broker dynamic, and thinking about the post-post civil rights era we can draw a straight line between Barack Obama’s presidency and this dynamic. A number of instances stand out, but I’ll point to one—after a wave of police killings a number of prominent black intellectuals visited the White House to get Obama to be more aggressive. Obama deployed Al Sharpton to tell the group in no uncertain terms that it was their responsibility to support Obama, not the other way around.

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