

The Movement for Black Lives Is Different This Time

July 4, 2020



Daniel Del Toro

[This article is forthcoming in the Summer 2020 issue of *New Politics*.]

Late May and early June saw the biggest wave of mass rebellion in the United States since the 1960s. Protests erupted in every major city and in all fifty states, demanding an end to racist police brutality. The character of these uprisings has been less like protests and more like rebellions, with tens of thousands of people taking to the streets, blocking highways, and burning and destroying police cars along with other symbols of economic and racial oppression. At the time of writing, in New York City alone 47 police cars have been damaged or burned.¹ More than 11,000 people have been arrested across the country.² And, in Washington DC, protests outside the White House temporarily forced Trump to flee to his bunker—allegedly to “inspect” it and not in abject fear of the riots.³

Meanwhile, the police, who already function as an occupying force in poor and Black neighborhoods, have responded as if they are at war, spraying tear gas and launching rubber bullets, even when confronted by peaceful protesters. In Dallas, a protester lost his eye after being hit by a “nonlethal” police projectile, as did a journalist in Minneapolis who was hit by a “foam” bullet and another one in Fort Wayne, Indiana, who was struck by a tear gas canister.⁴ In Louisville, police killed 53-year-old protester David McAtee, leading to the firing of the city’s chief of police.⁵ In Brooklyn, corrections officers at the Metropolitan Detention Center killed Jamel Floyd, who died after officers pepper-sprayed him in his cell.⁶ Cops regularly kill Black people with impunity even when there is no social unrest. There is little reason to believe they will stop unless we make them.

Police killings of Black people are the sharp edge of American racism. They are the starkest testament to how little Black life matters in a society that devalues Black people in every other arena. Thus, the immediate cause of this rebellion is the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police. The viral video of Floyd's death depicts an officer kneeling on his neck for nine minutes while Floyd repeatedly gasps, "I can't breathe." It is lost on no one that these are the same words Eric Garner uttered six years ago as a New York police officer choked him to death. Nothing has changed significantly in those six years to stop police from killing Black people, who are more likely to be viewed as a threat, even when unarmed.

In many ways, this rebellion feels like a repeat of 2014, during which nationwide protests were organized in response to the police murder of Michael Brown and the subsequent rebellion in Ferguson, Missouri. Then as now, a succession of similar deaths at the hands of police made it devastatingly clear that Black people acting in entirely ordinary ways are, nevertheless, treated as uniquely criminal and dangerous: Ahmaud Aubrey was followed and lynched by racist vigilantes while out jogging;⁷ Breonna Taylor was killed while sleeping in her apartment.⁸ George Floyd was killed for having allegedly used a counterfeit \$20 bill, a crime of poverty at a time when tens of millions have lost their jobs due to the pandemic and food lines around the country stretch for blocks.⁹ Meanwhile, Black people have been brutalized for violating social distancing orders and are more likely to face fines and arrest than their white counterparts.¹⁰ Pandemic aside, one could easily dust off a protest sign from six years ago without anyone batting an eye. It is damningly obvious that while large sectors of society were put on pause due to the health crisis, everyday racism was not.

Yet, these protests are not just about police brutality. They are also a reaction to the utter failure of state governments and the Trump administration to respond to the horrific death toll and economic devastation caused by the pandemic. There is now a bipartisan push to reopen the economy, even as deaths due to COVID-19 continue to rise in a third of U.S. states.¹¹ Virtually every medical expert has made clear that if we rush to reopen, many more people will die, and the ruling class has decided that this is a price they are willing to pay.

That price is not being felt equally. There is ample evidence that the pandemic is disproportionately impacting Black communities around the country, with one study finding that Black people are dying from COVID-19 at a rate nearly three times higher than whites.¹² This is no coincidence. The United States' historic and ongoing forms of anti-Black racism ensure that Black people are concentrated in low-wage jobs, are less able to work from home, and are denied access to adequate health care.¹³ And on top of all this, racist police brutality has continued unabated. Black people cannot catch a break, not even at a moment when the whole country should be focused on how to protect our collective well-being and safety. This is nothing new.



I CAN'T BREATHE JUSTICE FOR GEORGE FLOYD SOLIDARITY WITH MINNEAPOLIS

What is new is that today's protests have been more militant and have spread more rapidly than those that occurred at the height of the Black Lives Matter movement, and they are occurring in defiance of curfews and stay-in-place orders imposed by mayors and governors. Today's protests appear to be more multiracial, although most are decisively being led by young Black people and not by any existing organizations. What's more, police repression has failed to dampen the turnout or win public sympathy. Instead, the protests are widely seen as justified, with one Reuters poll showing 64 percent of Americans support them.¹⁴ If the previous upsurge of anti-racist struggle helped expose the systemic racism of policing and the criminal "justice" system, then today's protests are delegitimizing the economic and political actors who enable and abet those systems. After all, when the government responds this quickly to quell mass protest but cannot find the will or resources to fight a mass pandemic, it is clear that our health and safety are not its priority.

As with other aspects of the pandemic, demands that were once confined to small pockets of anti-racist activists and the radical left are suddenly on the table. The call to #defundthepolice has become a central demand of the protests, as many draw the connection between bloated police budgets and the drive to cut back resources for health care, education, and adequate housing. There is a greater willingness to question the notion that armed agents of the state are the best response to a wide range of social problems, from mental illness to poverty and crime, or that police are necessary to keep us safe.¹⁵ In a move that would have seemed inconceivable two weeks earlier, on June 2 the Minneapolis Public School Board voted unanimously to terminate its contract with the city's police department.¹⁶ Portland, Oregon, followed.¹⁷ On June 7 the Minneapolis City Council vowed to disband the police force entirely.¹⁸ We are not in a revolutionary situation in the United States, and we are far from a point where demands to abolish the police altogether are commonplace. But perhaps we're not as far as one might think. None of this would have happened without the rebellion.

Some on the left have argued that the political radicalization of the last few years is primarily attributable to the 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns of Bernie Sanders.¹⁹ This same cohort tends to downplay the role of social movements in shifting consciousness, locating the main expression of this radicalization in Sanders' campaign as a socialist and the growth of the Democratic Socialists of America. But this latest wave of anti-racist protest suggests that the radicalization goes much deeper than either the Sanders campaign or the DSA alone. If anything, the immediate, national response and the composition of these protests point to the significance of the Black Lives Matter movement in changing consciousness about the role of the police and the need for transformative, radical change. One sign of this growing consciousness is that 74 percent of Americans view Floyd's death as an issue of racial injustice—a 30-point increase over how Americans responded following the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner.²⁰ Today, militant

protests against police brutality have fundamentally changed the terrain of struggle and revived mass action as the way to win social change. The speed with which prosecutors charged all four officers involved in George Floyd's murder, as compared to the months it took before Ahmed Aubrey's killers were even arrested,²¹ can be attributed to this fact: Minneapolis fought back.

That said, there are significant challenges to realizing the radical potential of this moment that we need to think through collectively. First, how can we make protests safer during a pandemic? The entire logic of protest runs counter to the requirements of social distancing, given that our power and safety lies in numbers. We will need to continue to build on creative methods of protest, like car caravans and virtual rallies, to amplify our physical presence in the streets and to navigate the danger of a possible resurgence of COVID-19 in the fall.



Daniel Del Toro

Second, Trump has doubled down on positioning himself as the president of law and order. He has given a green light for cops to use the utmost force, calling for looters to be shot²²—a power he may not have, but which nevertheless puts a target on our backs.²³ For now, the Pentagon has bucked Trump's orders to send in the army. However, there is another danger that Trump has created with the charge of "outside agitators." This effort to separate the "good" protesters from the "bad" protesters—such as Antifa, which Trump has threatened to designate as a terrorist group—is in fact designed to condemn us all. We should reject any such attempts to divide the movement. At the same time, it is unlikely that we will be able to sustain the current level of open rebellion without creating space for more of us to come out in large numbers, including those who are undocumented or otherwise cannot risk arrest. Strength in numbers helps us to better stand our ground, while greater preparation and coordination can be among our best safety measures against police violence.²⁴ There is a lot to be learned from international struggles, as evidenced by the militants from Hong Kong, who have tweeted out from their own pro-democracy struggle advice on how to resist teargas and out-manuever police.²⁵ We must share their lessons, too.

Finally, despite the nascent grass-roots organizations that have formed since 2014, there remains a vacuum of spaces where new layers of activists—particularly the Black youth leading these

struggles—can contribute to developing long-term strategy through the ebbs and flows of protests. We will need to develop networks and infrastructure that can better coordinate national actions, campaigns, and demands, as well as share the lessons of our successes and failures across the country. There have been many inspiring examples of the role that organized labor can play in this fight. In Minneapolis and New York City, bus drivers and their unions refused to transport arrested protesters to COVID-filled jails.²⁶ Rank and file educators, parents, students, and racial justice advocates are challenging the United Federation of Teachers, which refused to demand cops out of schools or to criticize liberal politicians for their complicity.²⁷ Ultimately, activists and labor militants must find ways to connect labor actions against racism to the fight against a reopening that will only result in more deaths. Instead, we must insist on a humane response to the pandemic that addresses the communities most impacted by COVID-19, while taking power and funding away from the police. This goes hand-in-hand with the demand to make the real looters pay: We must tax the rich and insist that this country, founded on genocide and slavery, finally pay its due in reparations. While mainstream media have fixated on incidents of “looting” and property destruction, the wealthiest Americans became \$400 billion richer during the pandemic.²⁸ At a time when 40 million people are unemployed, this only serves to highlight the fact that this capitalist society puts a greater value on profit than on human life. The rebellion against racist police brutality has exposed these deadly priorities like no other force. All of us participating with rage and hope must take this struggle as far as it can go.

Notes

1. New York Times, May 31st, 2020
2. BuzzFeed, June 2nd, 2020
3. CNN, June 3rd, 2020
4. CBS, June 4th, 2020, New Republic, June 4th, 2020, The Hill, June 1st, 2020
5. CBS, June 2nd, 2020
6. ABC, June 4th, 2020
7. New York Times, June 4th, 2020
8. Mother Jones, May 20th, 2020
9. Vox, May 9th, 2020
10. Vox, May 8th, 2020
11. New York Times, June 6th, 2020
12. Guardian, May 20th, 2020
13. Economic Policy Institute, March 19th, 2020
14. Reuters, June 2nd, 2020
15. New York Times, June 5th, 2020
16. Guardian, June 1st, 2020
17. The Oregonian, June 4th, 2020
18. Guardian, June 7th, 2020
19. Jacobin, April 12th, 2020
20. ABC, June 5th, 2020
21. New York Times, June 4th, 2020
22. TIME, May 29th, 2020
23. Democracy Now, June 5th, 2020
24. New Politics, May 31st, 2020
25. GQ, June 4th, 2020
26. Business Insider, June 1st, 2020
27. New York Daily News, June 6th, 2020
28. Forbes, May 21st, 2020