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USA

Why Black Lives Matter Is Game Change

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“In the two years since its conception, the Black Lives Matter movement has transformed from a powerful, U.S.-based unifier to a globalized movement connecting black and oppressed people all over the world.

“After the acquittal of George Zimmerman in July 2013 in the shooting death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, three black women created #BlackLivesMatter to represent black people who were being terrorized by state-sanctioned violence, poverty and mass incarceration.

“It was a declaration.

“Let’s be clear: The reach of anti-black racism is not confined to the borders of North America. Black Lives Matter has become a transformative outlet for all black people from different historical, cultural, socioeconomic and political identities. It is a source of solidarity for the survivors of colonization, exploitation, capitalism and police brutality.” (Janaya Khan, “Black Lives Matter Has Become a Global Movement,” August 7, 2015, www.TheRoot.com)

The Black Lives Matter Convening took place July 24-26 at Cleveland State University in Cleveland, Ohio. Some 1500 activists and organizers attended. The gathering was uplifting and spirited. As many participants said, “it was ours.” The national conference also included representatives from Canada and the Caribbean.

That white-dominated (aka “mainstream”) media largely ignored the gathering was no surprise. That every 28 hours a Black man, woman or child is murdered by cops or vigilante law enforcement, that 25% of Black women live in poverty, and that the life expectancy of Black transgender women is 35, is not newsworthy.

The defense of Black bodies (men, women and children) is about not simply police brutality and murder, but all the issues facing African Americans and Africans worldwide — the de facto second-class status of Black bodies. Racism is based on a system of profit over equality, of white supremacy over Black lives, and it is global.

The conference workshops and panels discussed these issues of broad economic and social impact. It included Black activists from earlier generations involved in fights for Black Power and militant Black Nationalism. The continuity showed that the Movement for Black Lives understands many of the lessons learned in struggle of those previous generations.

A Way Forward

Organizers and activists respect the establishment Black leadership (NAACP, Congressional Black Caucus). But these figures — whether Al Sharpton, John Lewis or Jesse Jackson — see the new generation as foot soldiers who will eventually recognize that “effective change” comes from using protests to leverage demands within mainstream electoral politics, and integrating into the capitalist system.

The new mostly young activists, however, know that electoral strategy has not stopped state-sanctioned violence or protected Black bodies from discriminatory policies — and from being murdered.

Although I did not attend the Cleveland gathering, it reminds me of the meetings and conferences, some 40 years

ago, that politically and ideologically moved the struggle away from Black electoral politics inside the Democratic Party toward challenging the power of the system itself.

Coming after the victory of the civil rights revolution that overturned legal segregation South and North, that generation identified with Malcom X and his call for independent Black political action and self-organization. Legal equality did not equal full equality and self-determination.

The radical wing of the 1960s movement did frighten the ruling class. The groups were infiltrated by the FBI and cops, and leaders and activists not assimilated into the system were assassinated by armed police forces.

The COINTELPRO campaign launched by the FBI was effective; its “success” convinced many Black leaders that the strategy of mass civil disobedience must be replaced with mass electoralism.

The 1970s and '80s led to an historic number of African Americans elected to city, state and federal offices, and finally Barack Obama as president in 2008. Yet it failed to stop the mass incarceration of Black men, or police terror against Black bodies.

New Movement Dawning

The new movement’s activists and organizers are not judgmental on matters of religious faith, political parties or ideology. The acid test is your activism, confidence, solidarity with other others and willingness to fight back. There is a real optimism that standing up and pushing back can win real reforms and change.

The Cleveland gathering thus marks a game changer and a way forward. It made clear that activists and organizers will use the tools of the internet and social media like Twitter and Facebook. But more significantly it applies the tools of mass civil disobedience, protests and public interventions.

The Movement organizers understand the underlying issue that Black bodies are treated as inferior to white bodies because of the racial construct that is the basis of white supremacy. (In the Old South of “traditional values,” it was the so-called theory that “one drop” of blood makes you Black even if you have blue eyes and blond hair!)

The roots of white supremacist ideology are so deep in “American culture” that Confederate flags can still fly and monuments of pro-slavery “heroes” stand across the South and even the U.S. Capital.

Toward Full Consciousness

The evil of white supremacy and its impact is the main point of Ta-Nehisi Coates’ new best-selling book *Between the World and Me*. Its focus on how Black bodies still suffer from that ideology is an excellent read, and has led many mainstream outlets to interview him since the eruption of Black protests against police terror.

Yet Coates doesn’t outline even modest proposals to fight the racist system. The book is rooted in despair and pessimism about what the Black community can do to reverse the historic discrimination.

Coates states he is not an activist, just a writer. He describes what he feels based on facts and history. “In America,” he says to his teenage son, “it is traditional to destroy the black body — it is heritage.”

Why Black Lives Matter Is Game Change

While not a guide to action, Coates' writings with their brilliance and pessimism nevertheless confirm what the Movement for Black Lives knows, and why this movement is optimistic that struggle is the road to fundamental change.

The reality is that Black awareness and pride is only the first step to full consciousness of racism and inequality, and of the need to join the struggle for change. The end game must be to replace the institutional racism of the capitalist state with one based on human needs before profits — socialism. It is the direction that Malcolm X in his final year of life (1964-5) was coming to, and that Martin Luther King, Jr was moving toward before his assassination (1968).

I'm not saying that's what the leaders and activists of the Movement for Black Lives advocate. Some likely do, but their agreement that the battle against racism and protection of Black bodies must first start with self-organization and unity of African Americans — coming before unity with other ethnic groups — is crucial to building the Movement.

After the assassinations of Malcolm, King, Black Panther Party leaders and many others, an historic National Black Political Convention convened in Gary, Indiana in 1972. Although the forces gathered there divided over the issue of the Democratic Party, its example would help inspire a National Black Assembly and formation of the National Black Independent Political Party in 1980.

"The National Black Independent Political Party," its Charter stated, "aims to attain power to radically transform the present socio-economic order. . . [And] to achieve self-determination and social and political freedom for the masses of Black people. Therefore, our party will actively oppose racism, imperialism, sexual oppression, and capitalist exploitation."

The Cleveland Black Lives Matter Convening was a "game changer" because it made clear the Movement is long term. Whether its next step will add a call for a break with the two-party system, time and struggle will tell.