

# THE POWER OF SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENTS

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### **Black Lives Matter takes the baton from the Civil Rights Movement**

One evening nine years ago 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was walking through a Florida neighborhood with candy and iced tea when a vigilante pursued him and ultimately shot him dead. The killing shocked me back to the summer of 1955, when as a six-year-old boy I heard that a teenager named Emmett Till had been lynched at Money, Miss., less than 30 miles from where I lived with my grandparents. I remember the nightmares, the trying to imagine how it might feel to be battered beyond recognition and dropped into a river. The similarities in the two assaults, almost six decades apart, were uncanny. Both youths were Black, both were visiting the communities where they were slain, and in both cases their killers were acquitted of murder. And in both cases, the anguish and outrage that Black people experienced on learning of the exonerations sparked immense and significant social **movements**. In December 1955, days after a meeting in her hometown of Montgomery, Ala., about the failed effort to get justice for Till, Rosa Parks refused to submit to racially segregated seating rules on a bus—igniting the **Civil Rights Movement** (CRM). And in July 2013, on learning about the acquittal of Martin's killer, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi invented the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, a rallying cry for numerous local struggles for racial justice that sprang up across the **U.S.** The Black Lives Matter (BLM) **movement** is still unfolding, and it is not yet clear what social and political transformations it will engender. But within a decade after Till's murder, the social **movement** it detonated overthrew the brutal "Jim Crow" order in the Southern **states** of the **U.S.** Despite such spectacular achievements, contemporary scholars such as

those of the Chicago School of Sociology continued to view social **movements** through the lens of "collective behavior theory." Originally formulated in the late 19th century by sociologist Gabriel Tarde and psychologist Gustave Le Bon, the theory disdained social **movements** as crowd phenomena: ominous entities featuring rudderless mobs driven hither and thither by primitive and irrational urges. As a member of what sociologist and activist Joyce Ladner calls the Emmett Till generation, I identify viscerally with struggles for justice and have devoted my life to studying their origins, nature, patterns and outcomes. Around the world, such **movements** have played pivotal roles in overthrowing slavery, colonialism, and other forms of oppression and injustice. And although the core methods by which they overcome seemingly impossible odds are now more or less understood, these struggles necessarily (and excitingly) continue to evolve faster than social scientists can comprehend them. A post-CRM generation of scholars can nonetheless able to shift the study of **movements** from a psychosocial approach that asked "What is wrong with the participants? Why are they acting irrationally?" to a methodological one that sought answers to questions such as "How do you launch a **movement**? How do you sustain it despite repression? What strategies are most likely to succeed, and why?"

#### **JIM CROW**

Social **movements** have likely existed for as long as oppressive human societies have, but only in the past few centuries has their praxis—meaning, the melding of theory and practice that they involve—developed into a craft, to be learned and honed. The praxis has always been and is still being developed by the marginalized and has of necessity to be nimbler than the scholarship, which all too often serves the powerful. Key tactics have been applied, refined and shared across continents, including the boycott, which comes from the Irish struggle against British colonialism; the hunger strike, which has deep historical roots in India and Ireland and was widely used by women suffragettes in the U.K.; and nonviolent direct action, devised by Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa and India. They led to the overthrow of many unjust systems, including the global colonial order, even as collective behavior theorists continued to see social **movements** as irrational, spontaneous and undemocratic.

The CRM challenged these orthodoxies. To understand how extraordinary its achievements were, it is necessary to step into the past and understand how overwhelming the Jim Crow system of racial domination seemed even as late as the 1950s, when I was born. Encompassing the economic, political, legal and social spheres, it loomed over Black communities in the Southern **U.S.** as an unshakable edifice of white supremacy.

Jim Crow laws, named after an offensive minstrel caricature, were a collection of 19th-century state and local statutes that legalized racial segregation and relegated Black people to the bottom of the economic order. They had inherited almost

nothing from the slavery era, and although they were now paid for their work, their job opportunities were largely confined to menial and manual labor. In consequence, nonwhite families earned 54 percent of the median income of white families in 1950. Black people had the formal **right** to vote, but the vast majority, especially in the South, were prevented from voting through various legal maneuvers and threats of violent retaliation. Blacks' lack of political power enabled their constitutional **rights** to be ignored—a violation codified in the 1857 "Dred Scott" decision of the Supreme Court asserting that Black people had "no **rights** which the white man was bound to respect."

Racial segregation, which set Black people apart from the rest of humanity and labeled them as inferiors, was the linchpin of this society. Humiliation was built into our daily lives. As a child, I drank from "colored" water fountains, went around to the back of the store to buy ice cream, attended schools segregated by skin color and was handed textbooks ragged from prior use by white students. A week after classes started in the fall, almost all my classmates would vanish to pick cotton in the fields so that their families could survive. My grandparents were relatively poor, too, but after a lifetime of sharecropping they purchased a plot of land that we farmed; as a proud, independent couple, they were determined that my siblings and I study. Even they could not protect us from the fear, however: I overheard whispered conversations about Black bodies hanging from trees. Between the early 1880s and 1968 more than 3,000 Black people were lynched—hung from branches of trees; tarred, feathered and beaten by mobs; or doused with gasoline before being set ablaze. This routine terror reinforced white domination. But by 1962, when I moved to Chicago to live with my mother, protests against Jim Crow were raging on the streets, and they thrilled me. The drama being beamed into American living rooms—I remember being glued to the television when Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963—earned the **movement** tens of thousands of recruits, including me. And although my attending college was something of an accident, my choice of subject in graduate school, sociology, was not. Naively believing that there were fundamental laws of social **movements**, I intended to master them and apply them to Black liberation **movements** as a participant and, I fantasized, as a leader.

As I studied collective behavior theory, however, I became outraged by its denigration of participants in social **movements** as fickle and unstable, bereft of legitimate grievances and under the spell of agitators. Nor did the syllabus include the pioneering works of W.E.B. Du Bois, a brilliant scholar who introduced empirical methods into sociology, produced landmark studies of inequality and Black emancipation, and co-founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP) in 1909. I was not alone in my indignation; many other social science students of my generation, who had participated in the **movements** of the era, did not see their experiences

reflected in the scholarship. Rejecting past orthodoxies, we began to formulate an understanding of social **movements** based on our lived experiences, as well as on immersive studies in the field.

### **BUS BOYCOTT**

In conducting my doctoral research, I followed Du Bois's lead in trying to understand the lived experiences of the oppressed. I interviewed more than 50 architects of the CRM, including many of my childhood heroes. I found that the **movement** arose organically from within the Black community, which also organized, designed, funded and implemented it. It continued a centurieslong tradition of resistance to oppression that had begun on slave ships and contributed to the abolition of slavery. And it worked in tandem with more conventional approaches, such as appeals to the conscience of white elites or to the Constitution, which guaranteed equality under the law. The NAACP mounted persistent legal challenges to Jim Crow, resulting in the 1954 Supreme Court decision to desegregate schools. But little changed on the ground.

How could Black people, with their meager economic and material resources, hope to confront such an intransigent system? A long line of Black thinkers, including Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells and Du Bois, believed that the answer could be found in social protest. Boycotts, **civil** disobedience (refusal to obey unjust laws) and other direct actions, if conducted in a disciplined and nonviolent manner and on a massive scale, could effectively disrupt the society and economy, earning leverage that could be used to bargain for change. "Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored," King would explain in an open letter from the Birmingham jail.

The reliance on nonviolence was both spiritual and strategic. It resonated with the traditions of Black churches, where the CRM was largely organized. And the spectacle of nonviolent suffering in a just cause had the potential to discomfit witnesses and render violent and intimidating reprisals less effective. In combination with disruptive protest, the sympathy and support of allies from outside the **movement** could cause the edifice of power to crumble.

The Montgomery bus boycott in 1955, which inaugurated the CRM, applied these tactics with flair and originality. It was far from spontaneous and unstructured. Parks and other Black commuters had been challenging bus segregation for years. After she was arrested for refusing to give up her seat, members of the Women's Political Council, including Jo Ann Robinson, worked all night to print thousands of leaflets explaining what had happened and calling for a mass boycott of buses. They distributed the leaflets door to door, and to further spread the word, they approached local Black churches. A young minister named King, new to Montgomery, had impressed the congregation with his eloquence; labor leader E. D. Nixon and others asked him to speak for

the **movement**. The CRM, which had begun decades earlier, flared into a full-blown struggle.

The Montgomery Improvement Association, formed by Ralph Abernathy, Nixon, Robinson, King and others, organized the **movement** through a multitude of churches and associations. Workshops trained volunteers to endure insults and assaults; strategy sessions planned future rallies and programs; community leaders organized car rides to make sure some 50,000 people could get to work; and the transportation committee raised money to repair cars and buy gas. The leaders of the **movement** also collected funds to post bail for those arrested and assist participants who were being fired from their jobs. Music, prayers and testimonies of the personal injustices that people had experienced provided moral support and engendered solidarity, enabling the **movement** to withstand repression and maintain discipline.

Despite reprisals such as the bombing of King's home, almost the entire Black community of Montgomery boycotted buses for more than a year, devastating the profits of the transport company. In 1956 the Supreme Court ruled that state bus segregation laws were unconstitutional. Although the conventional approach—a legal challenge by the NAACP—officially ended the boycott, the massive economic and social disruption it caused was decisive. Media coverage—in particular of the charismatic King—had revealed to the nation the cruelty of Jim Crow. The day after the ruling went into effect, large numbers of Black people boarded buses in Montgomery to enforce it.

This pioneering **movement** inspired many others across the South. In Little Rock, Ark., nine schoolchildren, acting with the support and guidance of journalist Daisy Bates, faced down threatening mobs to integrate a high school in 1957. A few years later Black college students, among them Diane Nash and John Lewis of Nashville, Tenn., began a series of sit-ins at "whites only" lunch counters. Recognizing the key role that students, with their idealism and their discretionary time, could play in the **movement**, visionary organizer Ella Baker encouraged them to form their own committee, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which started to plan and execute actions independently. Escalating the challenge to Jim Crow, Black and white activists began boarding buses in the North, riding them to the South to defy bus segregation. When white mobs attacked the buses in Birmingham and the local CRM leadership, fearing casualties, sought to call off the "Freedom Rides," Nash ensured that they continued. "We cannot let violence overcome nonviolence," she declared.

The sophisticated new tactics had caught segregationists by surprise. For example, when the police jailed King in Albany, Ga., in 1961 in the hope of defeating the **movement**, it escalated instead: outraged by his arrest, more people joined in. To this day, no one knows who posted bail for King; many of us believe that the authorities let him go rather than deal with more protesters. The **movement** continually refined its tactics. In 1963 hundreds of people were being arrested in

Birmingham, Ala., so CRM leaders decided to fill the jails, leaving the authorities with no means to arrest more people. In 1965 hundreds of volunteers, among them John Lewis, marched from Selma to Montgomery in Alabama to protest the suppression of Black voters and were brutally attacked by the police.

The turmoil in the **U.S.** was being broadcast around the world at the height of the cold war, making a mockery of the nation's claim to representing the pinnacle of democracy. When President Lyndon B. Johnson formally ended the Jim Crow era by signing the **Civil Rights Act** in 1964 and the **Voting Rights Act** in 1965, he did so because massive protests raging in the streets had forced it. The creation of crisis-packed disruption by means of deep organization, mass mobilization, a rich church culture, and thousands of rational and emotionally energized protesters delivered the death blow to one of the world's brutal regimes of oppression.

### **FRAMEWORKS**

As I conducted my doctoral research, the first theories specific to modern social **movements** were beginning to emerge. In 1977 John McCarthy and Mayer Zald developed the highly influential resource mobilization theory. It argued that the mobilization of money, organization and leadership were more important than the existence of grievances in launching and sustaining **movements**—and marginalized peoples depended on the largesse of more affluent groups to provide these resources. In this view, the CRM was led by **movement** "entrepreneurs" and funded by Northern white liberals and sympathizers.

At roughly the same time, William Gamson, Charles Tilly and my graduate school classmate Doug McAdam developed political process theory. It argues that social **movements** are struggles for power—the power to change oppressive social conditions. Because marginalized groups cannot effectively access normal political processes such as elections, lobbying or courts, they must employ "unruly" tactics to realize their interests. As such, **movements** are insurgencies that engage in conflict with the authorities to pursue social change; effective organization and innovative strategy to outmaneuver repression are key to success. The theory also argues that external windows of opportunity, such as the 1954 Supreme Court decision to desegregate schools, must open for **movements** to succeed because they are too weak on their own.

Thus, both theories see external factors, such as well-heeled sympathizers and political opportunities, as crucial to the success of **movements**. My immersive interviews with CRM leaders brought me to a different view, which I conceptualized as the indigenous perspective theory. It argues that the agency of **movements** emanates from within oppressed communities—from their institutions, culture and creativity. Outside factors such as court rulings are important, but they are usually set in motion and implemented by the community's actions. **Movements** are generated by grassroots organizers and leaders—the CRM had thousands of them in multiple centers dispersed across the South—and

are products of meticulous planning and strategizing. Those who participate in them are not isolated individuals; they are embedded in social networks such as church, student or friendship circles.

Resources matter, but they come largely from within the community, at least in the early stages of a **movement**. Money sustains activities and protesters through prolonged repression. Secure spaces are needed where they can meet and strategize; also essential are cultural resources that can inspire heroic self-sacrifice. When facing police armed with batons and attack dogs, for example, the protesters would utter prayers or sing songs that had emerged from the struggle against slavery, bolstering courage and maintaining discipline.

The indigenous perspective theory also frames social **movements** as struggles for power, which **movements** gain by preventing power holders from conducting economic, political and social business as usual. Tactics of disruption may range from nonviolent measures such as strikes, boycotts, sit-ins, marches and courting mass arrest to more destructive ones, including looting, urban rebellions and violence. Whichever tactics are employed, the ultimate goal is to disrupt the society sufficiently that power holders capitulate to the **movement's** demands in exchange for restoration of social order.

Decades later cultural sociologists, including Jeff Goodwin, James Jasper and Francesca Polletta, challenged the earlier theories of resource mobilization and political process for ignoring culture and emotions. They pointed out that for **movements** to develop, a people must first see themselves as being oppressed. This awareness is far from automatic: many of those subjected to perpetual subordination come to believe their situation is natural and inevitable. This mindset precludes protest. "Too many people find themselves living amid a great period of social change, and yet they fail to develop the new attitudes, the new mental responses, that the new situation demands," King remarked. "They end up sleeping through a revolution." But such outlooks can be changed by organizers who make the people aware of their oppression (by informing them of their legal **rights**, for example, or reminding them of a time when their ancestors were free) and help them develop cultures of resistance.

Collective behavior theorists were **right** that emotions matter—but they had the wrong end of the stick. Injustice generates anger and righteous indignation, which organizers can summon in strategizing to address the pains of oppression. Love and empathy can be evoked to build solidarity and trust among protesters. Far from being irrational distractions, emotions, along with transformed mental attitudes, are critical to achieving social change.

### **BLACK LIVES**

On April 4, 1968, I was having "lunch" at 7 p.m. at a Chicago tavern with my colleagues—we worked the night shift at a factory that manufactured farming equipment—when the coverage was interrupted to announce that King had been

assassinated. At the time, I was attracted by the Black Panthers and often discussed with friends about whether King's nonviolent methods were still relevant. But we revered him nonetheless, and the murder shocked us. When we returned to the factory, our white foremen sensed our anger and said we could go home. Riots and looting were already spreading across the **U.S.**

The assassination dealt a powerful blow to the CRM. It revived a longstanding debate within the Black community about the efficacy of nonviolence. If the apostle of peace could so easily be felled, how could nonviolence work? But it was just as easy to murder the advocates of self-defense and revolution. A year later the police entered a Chicago apartment at 4:30 a.m. and assassinated two leaders of the Black Panther party.

A more pertinent lesson was that overreliance on one or more charismatic leaders made a **movement** vulnerable to decapitation. Similar assaults on leaders of social **movements** and centralized command structures around the world have convinced the organizers of more recent **movements**, such as the Occupy **movement** against economic inequality and BLM, to eschew centralized governance structures for loose, decentralized ones.

The triggers for both the CRM and BLM were the murders of Black people, but the rage that burst forth in sustained protest stemmed from far deeper, systemic injuries. For the CRM, the wound was racial oppression based on Jim Crow; for BLM, it is the devaluation of Black lives in all domains of American life. As scholar Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor and others point out, when BLM was emerging, over a million Black people were behind bars, being incarcerated at more than five times the rate of whites. Black people have died at nearly three times the rate of whites during the COVID-19 pandemic, laying bare glaring disparities in health and other circumstances. And decades of austerity politics have exacerbated the already enormous wealth gap: the current net worth of a typical white family is nearly 10 times that of a Black family. For such reasons, BLM demands go far beyond the proximate one that the murders stop.

The first uprisings to invoke the BLM slogan arose in the summer of 2014, following the suffocation death of Eric Garner in July—held in a police chokehold in New York City as he gasped, "I can't breathe"—and the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., in August. Tens of thousands of people protested on the streets for weeks, meeting with a militarized response that included tanks, rubber bullets and tear gas. But the killings of Black adults and children continued unabated—and with each atrocity the **movement** swelled. The last straw was the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 in Minneapolis, Minn., which provoked mass demonstrations in every **U.S.** state and in scores of countries. Millions of Americans had lost their jobs during the pandemic; they had not only the rage but also the time to express it.

By fomenting disruptions across the globe, BLM has turned racial injustice into an issue that can no longer be ignored.

Modern technology facilitated its reach and speed. Gone are the days of mimeographs, which Robinson and her colleagues used to spread news of Parks's arrest.

Bystanders now document assaults on cell phones and share news and outrage worldwide almost instantaneously. Social media helps **movements** to mobilize people and produce international surges of protests at lightning speed.

The participants in BLM are also wonderfully diverse. Most of the local CRM centers were headed by Black men. But Bayard Rustin, the **movement's** most brilliant tactician, was kept in the background for fear that his homosexuality would be used to discredit its efforts. In contrast, Garza, Cullors and Tometi are all Black women, and two are queer. "Our network centers those who have been marginalized within Black liberation **movements**," the mission statement of their organization, the Black Lives Matter Global Network, announces. Many white people and members of other minority groups have joined the **movement**, augmenting its strength.

Another key difference is centralization. Whereas the CRM was deeply embedded in Black communities and equipped with strong leaders, BLM is a loose collection of far-flung organizations. The most influential of these is the BLM network itself, with more than 30 chapters spread across the **U.S.**, each of which organizes its own actions.

The **movement** is thus decentralized, democratic and apparently leaderless. It is a virtual "collective of liberators" who build local **movements** while simultaneously being part of a worldwide force that seeks to overthrow race-based police brutality and hierarchies of racial inequality and to achieve the total liberation of Black people.

#### **WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS**

Because societies are dynamic, no theory developed to explain a **movement** in a certain era can fully describe another one. The frameworks developed in the late 20th century remain relevant for the 21st, however.

Modern **movements** are also struggles for power. They, too, must tackle the challenges of mobilizing resources, organizing mass participation, raising consciousness, dealing with repression and perfecting strategies of social disruption. BLM faces many questions and obstacles. The CRM depended on tight-knit local communities with strong leaders, meeting in churches and other safe spaces to organize and strategize and to build solidarity and discipline. Can a decentralized **movement** produce the necessary solidarity as protesters face brutal repression? Will their porous Internet-based organizational structures provide secure spaces where tactics and strategies can be debated and selected? Can they maintain discipline? If protesters are not executing a planned tactic in a coordinated and disciplined manner, can they succeed? How can a **movement** correct a course of action that proves faulty?

Meanwhile the forces of repression are advancing.

Technology benefits not only the campaigners but also their adversaries. Means of surveillance are now far more sophisticated than the wiretaps the fbi used to spy on King.

Agents provocateur can turn peaceful protests into violent ones, providing the authorities with an excuse for even greater repression. How can a decentralized **movement** that welcomes strangers guard against such subversions? Wherever injustice exists, struggles will arise to abolish it. Communities will continue to organize these weapons of the oppressed and will become more effective freedom fighters through trial and error. Scholars face the challenge of keeping pace with these **movements** as they develop. But they must do more: they need to run faster, to illuminate the paths that **movements** should traverse in their journeys to liberate humanity.

#### **FROM OUR ARCHIVES**

Born Unequal. Janet Currie; October 2020.

"GET YOUR KNEE OFF OUR KNECKS" was the slogan for a protest at the National Mall on August 28, 2020, the 57th anniversary of the historic March on Washington led by King. The event honored the **Civil Rights Movement** while acknowledging the challenge of eradicating systemic racial and economic injustice in the **U.S.**

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): **CIVIL RIGHTS** supporters march from Selma to Montgomery in Alabama on March 9, 1965, in a campaign to register Black voters. Days earlier a similar group of nonviolent protesters had been brutally beaten by state troopers at the Edmund Pettus Bridge. This time Martin Luther King, Jr., who led the march, avoided confrontation and asked the campaigners to kneel and pray at the site of the attack before walking back to Selma, in an effort to morally pressure President Lyndon B. Johnson to extend federal protection to the peaceful protest.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): **BLACK LIVES MATTER** activists march across the George Washington Bridge in New York City on September 12, 2020, to protest systemic injustices, including the killings of Black people by police.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): **VOTING RIGHTS** activists march 54 miles from Selma to Montgomery in 1965. The third attempt to reach Montgomery succeeded on March 25 with the protection of the federal government. The heroism and discipline of the protesters, who endured violent attacks without retaliation or retreat, enabled the passage of the Voting **Rights** Act that August.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): **BLACK STUDENTS** from Saint Augustine College sit at a lunch counter reserved for white customers in Raleigh, N.C., to challenge racial segregation in February 1960. Many participants in these protests were assaulted or arrested.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): **ROSA PARKS** refused to relinquish her seat to a white man on a bus in Montgomery, Ala., in December 1955, triggering the **Civil Rights Movement** of the 1950s and 1960s.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): **POSTER** at a Selma-to-Montgomery march in 1965 protested the killings of Black people by police.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): **MORE THAN 200,000** people participated in the March on Washington on August 28, 1963,

where King articulated the aspirations of millions with his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): BAYONETS wielded by police officers halt unarmed protesters seeking to reach city hall in Prichard, Ala., in June 1968, months after King's assassination in Memphis, Tenn., in April.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): GEORGE FLOYD'S murder by a police officer in Minneapolis, Minn., on May 25, 2020, triggered the largest protests in **U.S.** history, including this one in New York City the following June.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): GRIEVOUS INJURIES sustained by 25-year-old Freddie Gray of Baltimore, Md., during his arrest on April 12, 2015, sparked this standoff in front of a police station. Gray died the day after the protest.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): CHANTING "Wake up, wake up! This is your fight, too!" a demonstrator summons bystanders to a Black Lives Matter protest in Brooklyn, N.Y., on June 12, 2020.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE)

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