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The New Face of Civil Revolution

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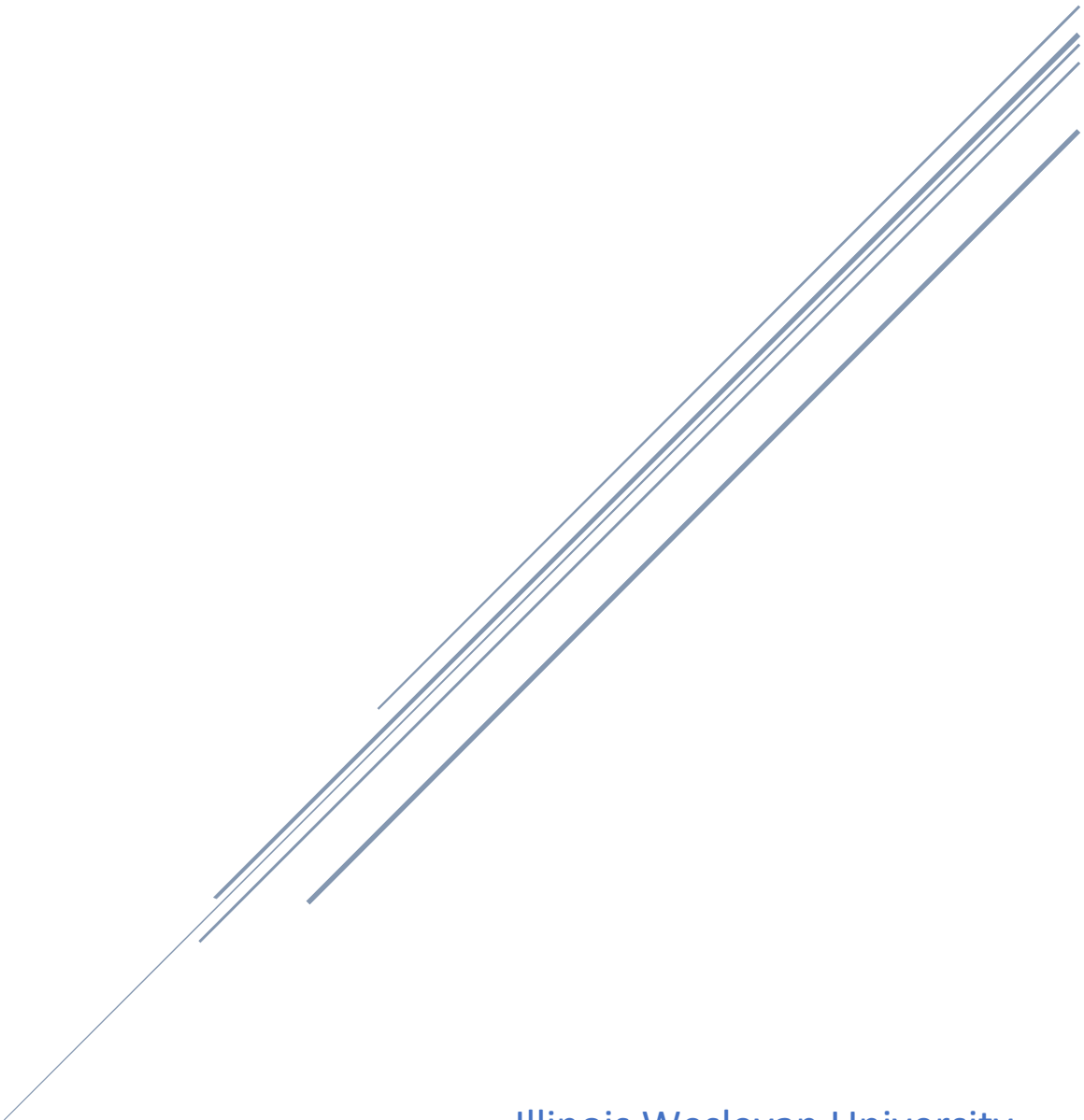
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THE NEW FACE OF CIVIL REVOLUTION

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Peace and War

Abstract

“The New Face of Civil Revolution” explains how with changing times comes changing platforms of expressing disdain for modern oppression against Black people of the United States of America. By juxtaposing the Black Power Movement and the Black Lives Matter Movement, this article provides a history of the oppression Black people face in America, as well as the many ways that these separate movements operate. Based on diversity of populations served, leadership, and the ways in which these movements gain supporters, this paper ultimately shows that there is currently a call for a new method of achieving equality in the Black community of America. That call is centered around Black Lives Matter, and it is due to the uniqueness of their fight in which all Black people are to be included. This article highlights how much more developed the platform of Black Lives Matter is in comparison to the Black Power Movement, and explains why it is important to support this movement now.

Introduction

The Black Power Movement (BPM) emerged in 1966 as a slogan “Black Power” by Stokely Carmichael, a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and an associate of the Black Panther Party (BPP), in response to the extreme racist climate of the United States of America. The SNCC was a civil rights group created in 1960 by Ella Baker, a member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.¹ They are best known for the freedom rides of 1961 where they travelled the southern states of the USA to register black voters, and for their nonviolent sit-ins in restaurants and other public places in response to Jim Crow laws. The BPP was conceived by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in Oakland, CA, in 1966, as a protector of black neighborhoods. They later came to be seen as radicals and Marxists due to their call for arming blacks, freeing them from all jails, and the removal of black men from the draft at the height of the Vietnam War. These groups and many others called for black nationalism, and more importantly black unity and independence from a system that never allowed them to live their best lives. This movement of many groups, such as the SNCC and BPP, fought to bring black culture to the forefront of the media and provide black people with a national political voice. Many of these groups were often criticized for the violence in the name of self-defense they embodied, but it is hard to say that groups of the Black Power Movement were completely wrong for this violent response to oppression. Ultimately, this movement allowed for groups, such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), to pick up the torch nearly 50 years later, and protest racism and police brutality towards black people like the Black Power Movement had never left.

¹ “Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee,” http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_student_nonviolent_coordinating_committee_s_ncc/ (accessed April 9, 2017).

In the wake of Trayvon Martin's 2012 murder, a great amount of protests erupted in America. Martin was a black 17-year-old boy who was returning to his father's home in Florida after leaving the store to get Skittles and an Arizona Tea. He was profiled by a neighborhood watch member, who was told by local police to leave the situation alone and return to his post. That neighborhood watch member proceeded to engage the situation, which resulted in a fight and eventually the death of an innocent kid. As a result, three women, Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza, created the hashtag Black Lives Matter to reflect on the anti-black racism witnessed during the trial of George Zimmerman, the accused murderer in Trayvon's death, and in so many other African American citizens' experiences in America. Recognizing that their hashtag was bigger than the Internet, the founding women deemed BLM "an ideological and political intervention."² They took inspiration from Black Power groups of the past, but instead decided to include trans, disabled, queer, poor, and many other disadvantaged populations in their fight because they had been left out in past protests. This is a clear reflection of recognizing that intersectionality, the concept of social identities overlapping, plays a major role in Black people's oppression. Because their fight transcends both traditional black nationalism and only fighting for the rights of straight cis men and women, Black Lives Matter is a more suitable national platform for gaining equality for the entire black community than past civil rights factions such as the Black Power movements.

Serving a Multitude of Populations

The Black Power Movement did not effectively serve all marginalized populations of the black community. Specifically, it served straight black men, and throughout most of the

² Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza, "Black Lives Matters," <http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/> (accessed April 8, 2017).

movement put them at the forefront of their protests. For example, the Memphis sanitation workers' protests of 1968 were polarized by picket signs reading "I am a man." Although these men were at the center of the protests, it is important to recognize that black women were often left out of labor protests up until the 1960s and 1970s due to gender assumptions when using terms like "worker" or "organizer." The Black Power Movement is often recognized as being misogynistic and sexist, and examples like the above are not singular.³ Women and many other populations were also left out of the Black Panther Party's 1966 platform, as men were highlighted specifically or the demand would be made by the entire black community. Specifically, in that platform one can see that there is a demand for "freedom for all black men held in federal, state, county and city prisons and jails."⁴ Were women not imprisoned as well at the time of this platform or were they not a priority? Countless examples such as the prior two undermine the struggles of women and of other populations not represented in dialogue for gains in civil rights. Another way in which the Black Power movement limited its reach of political achievement is seen in its nationalistic approach of winning autonomy and independence. One group, the Republic of New Africa, wanted to create their own nation and were willing to fight police and military to achieve their liberation.⁵ There is no problem with wanting to achieve liberation, but there is a problem with advocating for an entire group without recognizing specific issues for certain people. Even though the Black Power Movement may not have intentionally left out women, LGBTQ individuals, the disabled and so on, it belittled those

³Peniel E. Joseph, "The Black Power Movement, Democracy, and America in the King Years," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 4 (2009): 1001-1016.

⁴"What We Want, What We Believe," <https://web.stanford.edu/group/blackpanthers/history.shtml> (accessed April 9, 2017).

⁵Kenyatta Jay Fleming, "The History of Black Nationalism and Internal Factors That Prevented the Founding of an Independent Black Nation-State," ETD Collection for AUC Robert W. Woodruff Library (2008): 5

people's individual struggles as black people by not specifically including them in their fight for civil rights.

Serving all populations of the black community is where Black Lives Matter excels and outpaces the Black Power Movement. Per the Black Lives Matter official site: "Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements."⁶ This statement shows that there is recognition of the fact that to uplift the entire black community, one must include the entire population. You cannot simply lump an entire group into one singular pool and expect for them all to be happy with the results that come afterwards. Black Lives Matter claims that including all black populations into their political fight "is a tactic to (re)build the Black Liberation movement."⁷ The founders and members of Black Lives Matter are cognizant of the fact that they cannot look past what is known as the Black Power Movement, so instead they will continue to build upon what was left behind.

Intersectionality

This leads to the topic of intersectionality: the concept that various social identities overlap and contribute to oppression and discrimination one may experience. For example, two of the founding members of Black Lives Matter are black and queer, and the third is a black woman born with immigrant parents. All that this statement points out is that these women lead

⁶ Cullors, Tometi, Garza, "Black Lives Matter."

⁷ Cullors, Tometi, Garza, "Black Lives Matter."

intersectional lives, and that their activism is rooted in personal experience.⁸ More importantly, the founders of Black Lives Matter and other black people realize that being black is not their only source of oppression. For example, many black women experience discrimination at their places of employment or when seeking employment. These experiences can be due to their hair, the way they speak, or even their skin complexion. What intersectionality does do is encourage discourse about the many identities that people live with. This allows for greater social awareness and political change in disadvantaged communities, all while teaching people about the concept of intersectionality.⁹ Including intersectionality in their fight allows Black Lives Matter to create a tool of advocacy for all black people and at the same time potentially make others aware of the many ways a person can be oppressed.

Leadership

To serve oppressed populations, the leadership put in place must be reflective of the people. The Black Power movement typically put one central male figure in place such as Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Stokely Carmichael. It is impossible to believe that these men were completely relatable to everyone who may or may not have followed their guidance. A pitfall of having these central figures is seen when assassinations, imprisonments, and harassment occur. The Counterintelligence Program for black extremists, or COINTELPRO, is an important example of said harassment towards the many leaders of the Black Power movement. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), COINTELPRO was "...to expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize the activities of black nationalist, hate-type organizations and groupings, their leadership, spokesmen, membership, and supporters,

⁸ Sarah J. Jackson, "(Re)Imagining Intersectional Democracy from Black Feminism to Hashtag Activism," *Women's Studies in Communication* 39, no. 4 (2016): 376.

⁹ Jackson, "(Re)Imagining...", 376.

and to counter their propensity for violence and civil disorder.”¹⁰ This statement shows how the United States government targeted these leaders and groups to destroy their cries for justice. Being able to point out leaders and expose them to harassment was due to both the ways in which these Black Power Movement groups were organized and to systemic racism, which is not completely those groups fault. An even more important point to see is that harassment, assassinations, and imprisonments constantly put the people in a search for the “one.” The “one” refers to those powerful male figures that often are heralded as the people who will guide the oppressed to what Dr. King called the “mountain top.” Few people are willing to put that much pressure on themselves, as it takes a lot of responsibility and selflessness. Central leadership may have been the preferred method during the Black Power Movement, but many assassinations, imprisonments, and harassment during the time shows that relying on those figures was not the smartest choice.

In the Black Lives Matter Movement, leadership has taken on a new face. A prime difference between BLM and the Black Power Movement is seen in the lack of central leadership in BLM. Due to this there are different chapters nationwide with different leaders and qualifications for membership. This allows for the development of more than one prominent figure in the organization, and it also relieves the others of the pressure that many Black Power leaders may have experienced. Allowing for multiple chapters and separate leadership consequently shows that this movement is bigger than one face and that people of all demographics can lead. This is specifically seen in BLM starting with the founding members. As stated earlier, two of the women identify as queer, and the other has immigrant roots. This leads directly into the topic of a new face of leadership mentioned, and away from the typical straight

¹⁰Federal Bureau of Investigation, United States, COINTELPRO Black Extremist (Washington, DC: 1967), 3.

male overseeing the entire program such as in the Black Power Movements. With individual experiences of being queer and women, they bring a perspective never displayed in efforts towards equality for black people. Although they bring a new perspective these women still face adversity as seen by this statement: "...being Black queer women in this society (and apparently within these movements) tends to equal invisibility and non-relevancy."¹¹ Alicia Garza, one of the founders of BLM, made that statement to reflect on the discredit and lack of respect for their contributions in this movement as queer leaders. Having diversity in leadership prevents things like COINTELPRO from happening to BLM, as there is no trickledown effect of removing a single, central leader. What I mean by a trickledown effect is that many movements can lose focus on the cause for fighting when their main source of leadership is removed. Ultimately, BLM's advocacy for diversity in leadership will expand their system of support, and allow for a longevity the Black Power Movements did not experience.

Gaining Supporters

Gaining support during the Black Power movement was helped by technology but repressed by government interference. Technology, such as television, aided the many groups of the Black Power Movement as a tool for of sharing the struggles of black people across the country. Being able to see people march in Selma, Alabama, or see people be abused by police and fire hoses allows a person to step into the shoes of the oppressed. This emotional component of television potentially influenced millions of Americans to stand in solidarity with black people nationwide. Without television, the Black Power Movement may not have had the great impact it

¹¹Janell Hobson, *Are All the Women Still White?: Rethinking Race, Expanding Feminisms* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 24

had on most people of America.¹² On the other hand, government interference could have influenced potential supporters to steer away from helping Black Power groups. COINTELPRO has been mentioned before, but it is important to realize that this program single handedly destroyed the foundation created by the groups of this period. The Black Power Movement is comparable to the “Red Scare” of Communism during the 1950s. In the same way that people were criminalized and ostracized during the “Red Scare,” people were targeted for being members of Black Power and Nationalist groups during the late 1960s. It is easy to see how assassinations and fear of jail would keep new members from joining these groups. Per the FBI at the time, “any excuse for arrest was promptly implemented by arrest.”¹³ This statement was directed at the Revolutionary Action Movement, an organization influenced by Malcolm X, and based out of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. At the same time, this easily could be the language used against the many other organizations of the period. Overall, the impact that television had on the Black Power Movement was tremendous, but government interference undermined and limited the growth of membership for these organizations.

Advanced technology has allowed the Black Lives Matter Movement to grow in ways unfathomable by past Black Power Movements. Through social media this movement was created as a trending hashtag on Twitter in 2013. With the spread of the hashtag across Twitter came a lot more attention and more supporters. An important aspect of social media is the ability to share videos and photos. As seen with the many examples of police brutality, such as the cases of Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and Philando Castile, being caught on film adds an emotional component to the movement that has never before been achieved. The privilege to reach in your

¹²“The Role of the Television in the 1960’s US Civil Rights Movement,” December 2, 2015, <https://onlinemind.org/2015/12/02/the-role-of-the-television-in-the-1960s-us-civil-rights-movement/> (accessed April 15, 2017).

¹³Federal Bureau of Investigation, United States, COINTELPRO Black Extremist (Washington, DC: 1967), 7

pocket and see the horrors of police brutality on your phone could make people feel inclined to say and do something about the issues going on in their communities. As a result, more voices begin to state their opinions, and consequently more leaders emerge to aid in the fight of BLM. Many teenagers who have felt that they had no voice before have found a home of social advocacy in the social media realm through the hashtag Black Lives Matter. Another benefit of social media used by BLM is the speed in which the information can disseminate. It was impossible for the Black Power movement to reach millions of people globally in a matter of minutes, but for Black Lives Matter it is a powerful tool that has allowed it to grow and gain supporters worldwide. Using the Internet as a tactic to voice opinions, share gruesome videos of brutality, and gain supporters is an unrivaled move taken by the founders and members of Black Lives Matter. It is important to recognize that BLM still has television as a source of marketing for their work. Depending on the news outlet, the coverage could be positive or negative; either way, it sheds light on the movement. It is hard to ignore and discredit the cause of BLM to fight for justice when the reasons are seen on the phone in your pocket and the television set in your living space and bedroom. This technology has created a movement that cannot be ignored, and if one chooses to do so, it is a disservice to black people nationwide who feel that they have been marginalized for centuries in this country.

Conclusion

As a final point, Black Lives Matter has demonstrated that serving many populations, having non-traditional leadership, and using innovative technology in social media has ensured that they are able to grow beyond the Black Power groups of the past. Intersectionality is a concept well at work in this movement, and it has allowed the movement to help all black demographics. In no way though does this research paper serve to discredit the work of the many

Black Power and Nationalist groups of the past. Without them Black Lives Matter would not exist as well as many other movements of the past. A great issue to recognize is that the same problems of police brutality, racism, inequality, poverty, and so on, still affect the black community nearly 50 years after the Black Power Movement began. It is time to begin looking at the systems and barriers put in place to keep such a large and pivotal community of people below the ranks of society. This fight for equality has gone on for many decades and while, there has been progress, many of the same problems of the Jim Crow era still plague the black community. In the end, regardless of the skillset of the movement of whatever period being discussed, whether it is BLM or the BPM, we all must recognize that there is still work to be done and we all must stand in solidarity of marginalized groups, particularly black people in this case.

#BlackLivesMatter

Notes

1. “Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee,”
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2. Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza, “Black Lives Matters,”
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3. Peniel E. Joseph, “The Black Power Movement, Democracy, and America in the King Years,” *American Historical Review* 114, no. 4 (2009): 1001-1016.
4. “What We Want, What We Believe,”
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5. Kenyatta Jay Fleming, “The History of Black Nationalism and Internal Factors That Prevented the Founding of an Independent Black Nation-State,” ETD Collection for AUC Robert W. Woodruff Library (2008): 5
6. Cullors, Tometi, Garza, “Black Lives Matter.”
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8. Sarah J. Jackson, “(Re)Imagining Intersectional Democracy from Black Feminism to Hashtag Activism,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 39, no. 4 (2016): 376.
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10. Federal Bureau of Investigation, United States, COINTELPRO Black Extremist (Washington, DC: 1967), 3.
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