

Spring 2021

## From the Black Panther Party to Black Lives Matter: Lessons from the Arab Spring and the Prospects for Social and Political Change in the Post-Ideological World

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### Recommended Citation

Lewis, Raphael, "From the Black Panther Party to Black Lives Matter: Lessons from the Arab Spring and the Prospects for Social and Political Change in the Post-Ideological World" (2021). *Senior Projects Spring 2021*. 87.

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From the Black Panther Party to Black Lives Matter: Lessons from the Arab Spring and the  
Prospects for Social and Political Change in the Post-Ideological World

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2021

## Dedication

For my parents, who have always inspired me. And for my friends, who entertain my lengthy political exclamations.

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## Introduction

My family and I were visiting some friends at their lake house early in the summer of 2020. At the time, racial injustice was at the forefront of political conversation in America as George Floyd had been killed just a week before our excursion. At the lake house, the current state of politics and the resounding protests made their way into conversation. While everyone agreed that the death of George Floyd was an atrocious example of police brutality, one of the party-goers exclaimed, “Can everyone on Facebook just chill out!” Then he took a sip from his margarita. This moment was very unsettling for me. Not just because of the grossly insensitive nature of the comment, given the pain and suffering of Black victims of police violence, but because it led me to ask this question: why does it seem that some people are completely content to live leisurely in the midst of an ominous and distressing moment? As the sun set, the conversation lightened, and we started a fire on the shore of the lake under the moonlight. But I continued to ponder that question. I couldn’t shake it. Why are we all so content? How can we drink and laugh and dance? I include myself in these concerns. I too drank and I laughed and I danced despite this haunting question.

Furthermore, this kind of social and political indolence extends beyond police violence. Many instances of political injustice and corruption have been revealed to the public which have not led to sustained or effective dissent. In 1971, Daniel Ellsberg, a military strategist who worked in the U.S. government and at the Rand Corporation, leaked a cache of classified documents that became known as The Pentagon Papers. These documents revealed the criminality of U.S. military involvement in the Vietnam War. Not only this, but they exposed that U.S. government officials, including Presidents Johnson, Nixon, and Kennedy had lied to the

American public in an effort to conceal the illegality of the war. While Ellsberg's leaks strengthened the already substantial opposition to the Vietnam War, he himself insists that the leaks did not create the change he had hoped for as the war raged on for four more years after the damning revelations were made public.<sup>1</sup> Why didn't Ellsberg's leaks lead to greater moral and political outrage, the kind of outrage that may have precipitated a quicker end to the devastating war in Vietnam? Did Ellsberg experience a feeling similar to mine?

In 2010, 39 years after Ellsberg leaked The Pentagon Papers, Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning, risking life in prison, leaked thousands of U.S. documents revealing war crimes committed by the U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan. The documents also revealed that the U.S. government reported false information regarding civilian casualties.<sup>2</sup> And in 2013, Edward Snowden leaked damning information regarding mass surveillance by the American Government. The leaks revealed that the American government, under the Patriot Act, had been gathering private information from civilians in violation of the U.S. Constitution.<sup>3</sup> Did either of these leaks create a massive mobilized opposition that held the U.S. government accountable? Do people today even know who Edward Snowden, Julian Assange, or Chelsea Manning are? Do people know about these injustices? And if they did, would they care?

While I recognize that these are broad, impressionistic, and dramatic questions, and while I recognize that they emerge from my own personal sensibilities, I intend to pursue them as a way of exploring the prospects for transformative movements in the current American context.

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<sup>1</sup> The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers. Judith Ehrlich, Rick Goldsmith. Kovno Communications. 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Alex Ward, "Chelsea Manning on Why She Leaked Classified Intel: 'I Have a Responsibility to the Public,'" Vox (Vox, June 9, 2017), <https://www.vox.com/2017/6/9/15768216/chelsea-manning-interview-abc-news>.

<sup>3</sup> ACLU Staff, "End Mass Surveillance Under the Patriot Act," American Civil Liberties Union (American Civil Liberties Union, May 12, 2015), <https://www.aclu.org/issues/national-security/privacy-and-surveillance/end-mass-surveillance-under-patriot-act>.

This will hopefully address my own personal feelings on the subject, but will also provide an opportunity for me to assess our objective capacities to reimagine and restructure the society we live in. Temporary acts of political disapproval and general social unrest are fairly common, but how often do these moments provoke significant cultural or political transformation and how can we analyze these developments? How does massive social and political mobilization fail to create structural change? Is it a sense of apathy among privileged individuals in society? Is it because of mass thought control from the media and other social institutions? In order to begin to address the questions born from my unsettling feeling, I decided the best way forward would be to search for others who have asked similar questions. It was then that I found Asef Bayat and his analysis of the Arab Spring. Bayat is a sociologist whose recent work examines the cultural, political, and historical conditions surrounding the recent Arab revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia. Bayat includes in his analysis the role of Islam and Marxism in Middle Eastern revolutions such as the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

The Arab Spring was a series of social upheavals in the Middle East that began in 2010. Generally understood as massive popular uprisings in economically stagnant autocratic societies, the Arab Spring saw revolutionary episodes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, Jordan, Morocco, and Syria. These revolutionary moments spread at incredible speed as most of the upheavals began within the same year. Millions of brave revolutionaries protested nonviolently and withstood brutal violence from their respective regimes.<sup>4</sup>

However, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Bayat notes a “remarkable difference from [the revolutions] of the 1970s” in the Middle East.<sup>5</sup> He purports that many of the revolutionary

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<sup>4</sup> Asef Bayat, *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), 8-11.

<sup>5</sup> Bayat, *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*, 11.

movements in the Arab Spring lacked an intellectual and ideological anchor. Typically, revolutions are “informed by certain intellectual productions - a set of ideas, concepts, and philosophies - that come to form the ideational subconscious of the rebels, affecting their vision or the choice of strategies ...” While the English revolution was associated with the philosophies of Thomas Hobbes and John Milton and the American Revolution was influenced by Thomas Paine, the Arab Spring had no such intellectual or ideological foundation. Furthermore, Bayat argues that the Arab Spring lacked political or economic radicalism. Rather than taking a powerful socialist, anti-imperialist, or anticapitalist impulse, “Arab revolutionaries were more preoccupied with the broad issues of human rights, political accountability, and legal reform... an uncritical worldview that would only pay only lip service to the genuine concerns of the masses for social justice and distribution.”<sup>6</sup>

This is how Bayat illustrates the reformist trajectory of the Arab Spring. While the revolutionary moments in Tunisia and Egypt led to the deposing of their autocratic rulers, there was no fundamental restructuring of the original order. The power structures of the old regimes persisted. The reformism was produced by a deficit of political imagination, a deficit that left out of reach many political alternatives. This lack of imagination within the Arab Revolts resulted from the absence of an intellectual or ideological anchor that broke from the mold of neoliberalism. Rather than envision socialist or Islamist utopias, the Arab Spring was circumscribed by neoliberal ideals. Subsequently, the socio-political turbulence of the Arab Spring took the outward form of revolutionary mobilization with the intrinsic limitations that come with merely reformist opposition to the status quo.

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<sup>6</sup> Bayat, *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*, 11.



According to Bayat, after the Cold War neoliberalism became the primary ideological structure which has replaced the more radical ideological alternatives. He describes this development as follows:

Thus, instead of the ideas of egalitarian ethos, fair property relations, welfare state, and popular control that marked the revolutionary discourse of the 1970s Cold War times, there developed in this postsocialist era an upsurge in the notions of the individual, freedom, rights, civil society, free market, and legal reform. The spread of postmodern thought in academia had further constricted efforts to imagine grand ideas, utopian orders, and universal values in a world in which the old utopias (communism, Islamism, national liberation, and revolution) were collapsing, while the postmodern preoccupation with fragmentation ambiguity, and relativism ultimately served to depolarize.<sup>7</sup>

For Bayat, neoliberalism is not merely a set of economic and political conditions, but it also comprises conditions of political psychology and ideology:

The political clout of neoliberalism lies in its ability to serve as a form of governmentality, in its ability to structure people's thinking to internalize the methods of the market society, considering them to be a commonsense way of being and doing things, against which no concrete alternative is imagined or needed.<sup>8</sup>

Bayat's illustration indirectly speaks to my grievances and frustrations with the current state of American social and political movements. In fact, Bayat also directly mentions the state of American politics with regards to the Occupy Wall Street movement and explains that the Arab Revolutions and the Occupy movements in the U.S. had common roots. Both episodes saw unresponsive governments, the use of new communication technologies for mobilization, unprecedented inequality and precarity, and neoliberal economies, but they occurred in different political contexts. In electoral democracies, these factors led to scattered social and political

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<sup>7</sup> Bayat, *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*, 18-19.

<sup>8</sup> Bayat, *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*, 23.

movements like the various Occupy movements, whereas in mixed autocracies these conditions led to revolutionary mobilization like in the Arab Spring.<sup>9</sup>

His claims regarding neoliberalism and how it has “deradicalized dissent” lay at the heart of my project. However, before we continue, it is essential that I quote at greater length Bayat’s definition of neoliberalism:

I understand neoliberalism both as an economic rationality that solicits contention and as a form of governmentality that cultivates compliance. Since the 1980s, the world has experienced an economic rationality that is distinct from its postwar economies, which were marked in varied degrees by an interventionist state, regulated economy, trade barriers, social subsidies, protectionism, unionized workers, and welfare provisions. . . . In its ideal form, neoliberal normativity considers almost every social institution as if it were a business enterprise. Universities, schools, hospitals, art centers, and even the very state itself are expected to behave like corporations - with internalized hierarchies, working towards unlimited growth and efficiency to produce measurable products for their exchange value and in which the collectivist ideals of solidarity, common good, equality, and real democracy (rather than elections) are dismissed because they are deemed antithetical to the common, caring, sharing (economy), or hospitality into its logic. It commercialized activism, human rights, civil society, gender equality, sustainable development, and poverty reduction, draining their radical intent. Even the idea of “revolution” is up for sale.<sup>10</sup>

Neoliberal sensibility, which has drowned out alternative ideological diagnoses and narratives, is responsible for the lack of transformational trajectory. While social movements and revolutions have seen unprecedented connectivity and mass organization with the internet and modern technology, the radical growth of these movements is stunted by the underlying current of neoliberalism that permeates our society.

This is the main claim that I will examine and apply in my project. Are we in fact living in what Bayat calls a post-ideological time? If so, how does this affect the prospects for

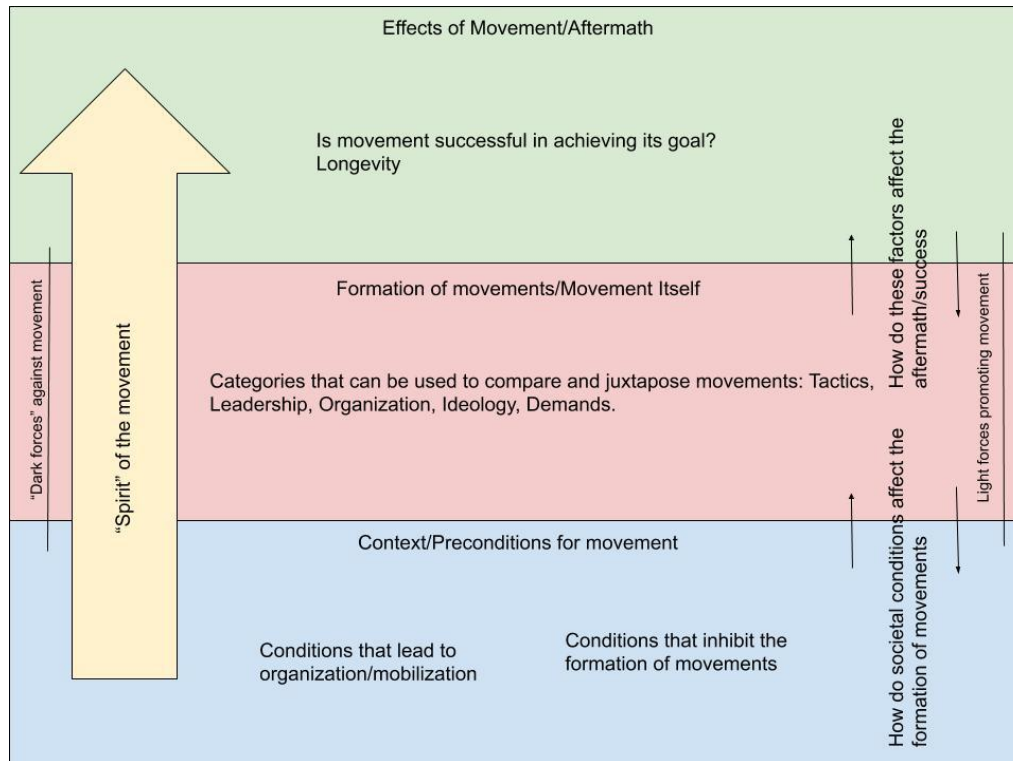
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<sup>9</sup> Bayat, *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*, 17.

<sup>10</sup> Bayat, *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*, 23.

achieving significant political change? I will examine Bayat's claims about the deficiency of ideological foundations, which leaves room for only reformist political movements, by conducting a focused and multifaceted examination of The Black Panther Party, which formed in the ideological era (before 1980), and the Black Lives Matter movement, which is currently operating in the post-ideological era (after 1980). To do this I have established my own guidelines to represent and understand the factors that aid or inhibit mobilization and collective action. I intend to use these guidelines as a way of testing Bayat's ideas about reform, transformation, and their relationship with ideology. These observable factors will hopefully help me determine if Bayat's argument is a satisfying answer to my present concerns.

These guidelines are broken down into three distinct phases: the contextual conditions from which a movement is formed (pre-movement phase), the formation and structure of a movement itself through descriptive categories (movement phase), and the aftermath, legacy, and effects of the movement (post-movement phase). In each of these phases there are forces and conditions that promote movements and inhibit movements.



In the pre-movement phase these forces inhibit the emergence of a movement or discourage, directly or indirectly, anything that might lead to mobilization. These are the most difficult factors to characterize as they usually do not take on a direct form. How can something inhibit the formation of a movement if it has yet to form? However, despite their hidden nature, I do believe that these factors exist and can be described. For example, before the protest of the Vietnam War intensified in the late 60s, information regarding the status of the offensive was withheld. This is potentially an inhibiting force as the opposition to the Vietnam War may have taken a different form if the reality of the conflict was truthfully communicated to the American public. Lying to the public about the details of a conflict is an example of potential forces that might suppress an opposition movement. How can people protest something that they are unaware of?

In the second phase, the movement itself, these obstructions become much easier to track. The FBI in the 1960s ran a program called COINTELPRO, a covert operation to infiltrate, undermine, and dismantle a number of social movements. This included assassinations in the Black Panther Party and wiretapping Martin Luther King, Jr.'s home.<sup>11</sup> These are just the most famous examples of COINTELPRO, which was responsible for attacking a number of movements including the American Communist and Socialist Parties. They carried out over 200 hundred operations aimed to disperse and control the social movements of the 1960s.<sup>12</sup>

Lastly, there are forces that seek to tarnish the legacy of popular radical movements in order to limit or neutralize their potential revival in the future. The misrepresentation of a movement's message in the aftermath is one force. One example of this, is the common historical representation of the Black Panther Party(BPP), on the one hand, and the more mainstream civil rights movement championed by Martin Luther King Jr. on the other hand. In both cases, popular historical representations leave out key components of the movements. King's legacy is associated only with race relations, and the BPP is known simplistically as the militant wing of the Civil Rights Movement. These representations leave out the radical critique of power that gave each mobilization its characteristic momentum. This kind of simplification or misrepresentation not only diminishes the significance of these movements, but it dampens the revolutionary spirit of the black tradition. I understand this is a broad claim, but it is important to note the lasting effects that can occur when a history is falsely recounted and that this is an example of an inhibiting factor in the post ideological era.

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<sup>11</sup> "Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)," The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, May 21, 2018, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/federal-bureau-investigation-fbi>.

<sup>12</sup> Aaron J. Leonard Conor A. Gallagher et al., "Newly Obtained FBI Files Shed New Light on the Murder of Fred Hampton," Jacobin, February 3, 2021, <https://jacobinmag.com/2021/03/newly-obtained-fbi-files-shed-new-light-on-the-murder-of-fred-hampton/>.

While this framework will help organize the way in which I will describe these social and political movements, my project does not strictly adhere to its structure. Rather, the framework serves as a set of guidelines for my analysis. To demonstrate, and to begin my assessment of Bayat's claims in the American context, I will first launch an exploration of the Black Panther Party utilizing this framework.

## Chapter 1: The Black Panther Party

Accepting the premise that we are living in a post-ideological world, and that this is the underlying reason for the lack of radical and transformative trajectories of social and political movements today, specifically the Black Lives Matter movement, I will begin by examining a social movement that occurred in the U.S. during the so called ideological period. Given my unsettling feeling regarding the state of American politics and the hope for a transformational political movement, I will start by examining the kind of movement that has the potential for a transformational trajectory, at least in Bayat's analysis. Because my assessment for whether a social or political movement is transformational rests on whether it possesses within it an ideological structure that challenges the prevailing order of power and authority, and because this intellectual anchor determines whether real political change can occur, it is vital that I explain what "transformation" or "real change" looks like. According to Bayat, transformational movements develop blueprints for an alternative political order and challenge existing institutions of power. Revolutionary movements can form proxy governments with alternative structures of power that challenge the state's ability to govern and control territories and individuals. This creates "dual power" between the opposition and the regime. On the other hand, reformist strategy usually aims to exert pressure on the regime to implement reforms while utilizing existing institutions of the state.<sup>13</sup>

The Black Panther Party (BPP) is an excellent case study to examine Bayat's framework because its political mobilization attracted significant state counterinsurgency measures from the state, which may suggest that it posed a credible challenge to existing systems of power.

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<sup>13</sup> Bayat, *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*, 155.

Furthermore, there are clear indications that the BPP cultivated its own spheres of authority. The Black Panther Party declared independent self-governance in ways that contested the monopoly of state power, often referring to the United States government as an illegitimate occupying state. There are also reformist elements of the BPP, which registered as a political party and applied pressure on elected officials. Bayat's transformational/reformist dichotomy fits nicely in an analysis of the Black Panther Party because there are both transformational and reformist elements within the movement and it has clear ideological influences.

The Black Panther Party was part of a constellation of revolutionary movements in the 1960s that characterized "all [of] society as a battleground."<sup>14</sup> In some ways, I am mirroring the structure of Bayat's analysis of the Arab Spring. However, rather than provide an analysis of the revolutionary effectiveness of the (post-ideological) Arab Spring compared to the (ideological) Iranian Revolution of 1979, I will provide a summary of the growth of the (ideological) Black Panther Party, and the (post-ideological) Black Lives Matter movement. While both BLM and BPP occupy different political moments, there are many notable similarities between their respective contexts. Most obviously, both arise at times where race seems to be at a boiling point in public discourse and imagination. Both movements were punctuated by a slew of riots and protests against police brutality and racial disparities more generally. Given that one movement occurred in the ideological period, and the other in the post-ideological, there should be notable differences between the way these movements emerged and grew both ideologically and materially.

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Jama Lazerow and Yohuru R. Williams, *In Search of the Black Panther Party New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 61.



The origins of the Black Panther Party can be traced back to World War II, which caused a massive migration of Black people from the South to a variety of industrial metropolitan areas in the North East and the West Coast. This massive migration was a response to the blooming and lucrative American defense industry. One of the busiest industrial cities was Oakland, California, which had a massive military shipping industry, making it an enticing place for Black migrants who were searching for work. It was a combination of the “romantic appeal of the West... and actual opportunity for gainful employment which led to massive migration of Black southern workers.”<sup>15</sup> Life for Black Americans on the West coast was arguably smoother than anywhere else in the U.S. Because of a relatively miniscule Black population, systems of racial segregation and repression had not yet taken root. According to Donna Murch, “Black rates of property ownership in California ranked among the highest in the nation, and in contrast to their places of origin, Black migrants suffered less physical repression, worked largely outside agriculture, and had greater access to public services.”<sup>16</sup>

However, as the Black population of the region rapidly expanded, these relatively good socioeconomic conditions would not last long. There was a serious tension between a traditional White industry and an influx of a Black labor force. The clash between industry and labor led to the development of a major Black labor movement which aimed to combat the racist sentiment that had developed. Although the shipyards in the Bay Area refused to hire Black workers at first, labor activist C.L. Dellums and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, a labor union established in 1925 by African American employees of the Pullman Company, launched a

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<sup>15</sup> Donna Murch, “The Campus and the Street: Race, Migration, and the Origins of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, CA,” *Souls* 9, no. 4 (June 2007): pp. 333-345, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999940701703794>, 334.

<sup>16</sup> Donna Murch, “The Campus and the Street: Race, Migration, and the Origins of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, CA,” 335.

coordinated campaign lobbying for the employment of Black migrant workers.<sup>17</sup> The campaign was successful in providing jobs as “over 70% of Black migrants found work in the shipyards, and Black female employment tripled” as a result of a proliferating Black labor force.<sup>18</sup> The formation and success of the campaign contributed to a growing Black labor movement in the Bay and laid a foundation for more empowering Black movements to come.

As World War II ended so too did the economic prosperity that came with it. The Black work force disappeared after the War and Black unemployment became a serious issue in Oakland and in the country more generally. Union and employer discrimination “relegated much of the growing Black population to secondary labor markets.”<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, racially charged anxieties heightened in Oakland as the Black population grew. This contributed to a post-war fixation on juvenile delinquency and the criminalization of Black youth. While widespread policing of Black migrants occurred during the war years, it escalated sharply in the period of economic peril that followed. However, the problematization of Black youth in Oakland was not reserved for the police. White residents in Oakland created initiatives that worked with local authorities and school districts to monitor Black youth. This development heightened an intense racial divide in Oakland and institutionalized prejudice at multiple levels: the local criminal justice system, residential and community organizations, and school systems. Donna Murch explains that, “the category of Black youth itself became defined as a social problem at best, and

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<sup>17</sup> Alexandra Catsoulis, “Labor’s Edge: Views from the California Labor Movement,” California Labor Federation, April 22, 2019, <https://calaborfed.org/honoring-labor-and-civil-rights-activist-c-l-dellums/>.

<sup>18</sup> Donna Murch, “The Campus and the Street: Race, Migration, and the Origins of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, CA,” 336.

<sup>19</sup> Donna Murch, “The Campus and the Street: Race, Migration, and the Origins of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, CA,” 336.

as a criminal presence at worst.”<sup>20</sup> This can be seen as a possible hindering factor in the pre-movement phase. The institutional anti-Black sentiment which leads to the incarceration of Black youth stifles potential for mobilization.

Furthermore, in 1950, the centralization of the Oakland police force led to further subjugation and neglect of Black migrants. The new police chief in Oakland shut down local precincts and centralized the Oakland Police Department while mandating that the force hire more affluent and educated candidates. These systematic changes heightened the tension between Black migrants and the White middle class. Black people, especially the youth, were problematized by a retreating and increasingly White cohort that consisted of affluent and middle class communities in conjunction with the police force.

The sudden increase of Black migrants in Oakland, the formation of a Black labor movement, and the prejudicial institutional response to this movement, set the stage for a significant Black revolutionary opportunity. It was the California education system that was a crucial factor that enabled the formation of Black revolutionary thought. While there was serious educational inequality between white affluent school districts and Black school districts, compared to the rest of the country many Black people were able to more freely enroll in school. Furthermore, Donna Murch explains that,

California's university system, with its integrated tiers of community colleges, state, and public universities, led the nation in superior levels of funding, infrastructure, and quality of instruction. In 1960, the state-wide Master Plan for Higher Education vastly increased the number and capacity of junior colleges and mandated that they admit all applicants with high school diplomas. Urban campuses greatly expanded Black working class college enrollment, and provided an institutional base for political organizing. By 1969, the San Francisco Bay Area boasted one of

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<sup>20</sup> Donna Murch, “The Campus and the Street: Race, Migration, and the Origins of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, CA,” 337.

the highest rates of minority college completion in the nation. Full access to community colleges became particularly important given racial segregation and inequalities in the city's primary and secondary schools.<sup>21</sup>

It was this access to higher education that cultivated Black revolutionary thought throughout the 50s and 60s. Higher education gave Black individuals the tools to analyse the present inequalities that plagued California and the Country. The revolutionary social, political, and economic thought culminated in a variety of Black Power organizations, most notably, the Afro-American Association (AAA), which was established in 1961 by a variety of UC Berkeley graduate students but led by Donald Warden, a second year student at UC Berkeley's Bolt School of Law. The AAA which began as a study group, was a student organization for individuals of African descent to discuss and debate popular Black intellectual topics such as the nature of racial identity, integration, and the responsibilities of the Black middle class. The debates were not designed for a White audience, they were an active discussion amongst Black individuals and an exploration of radical ideology which "anticipated cultural nationalist thought of subsequent years."<sup>22</sup>

It was within collectives like the AAA that the Black power revolutionary evolved. The AAA was strictly for Black individuals who wanted to organize and discuss the best ways to create a better political, social, and economic life. Meetings would include discussion over "books of immediate political relevance and host[ing] weekly forums throughout the Bay Area." Furthermore, some of the most essential Black revolutionary intellectuals were part of the AAA including Donald Hopkins, Ann Cooke, Henry Ramsey, Maurice Dawson and Mary Lewis. In

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<sup>21</sup> Donna Murch, "The Campus and the Street: Race, Migration, and the Origins of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, CA," 338.

<sup>22</sup> Donna Murch, "The Campus and the Street: Race, Migration, and the Origins of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, CA," 339.

1961, the association members invited Malcolm X, who at the time served as Elijah Muhammed's ambassador for the Nation of Islam (NOI) to speak at one of their forums. X's involvement proved to be extremely influential as after his talk, a group of students began to attend "Nation's mosque, Temple 26B, in West Oakland." The Association began to form an official opposition to integration which would become a consequential part of the Black revolutionary outlook of AAA. This is evident as "their public speeches, often reserved their greatest rancor not for the dominant White society, as for the compliant "Black Bourgeoisie." This rejection of what was characterized as forced assimilation was also evident in the push to adopt particular cultural practices such as the wearing of the Simba, an African style garment, and the speaking of Swahili and Arabic.<sup>23</sup>

However, the evolution of the Black revolutionary tradition can also be interpreted as a constellation of competing ideological directions that eventually coalesced into an ambition for an internationalist movement of oppressed peoples. While the Nation of Islam preached the moral framework of Islam as a way to enfranchise Black Americans, the Revolutionary Action Movement took a more secular, radical, and socialist approach. Furthermore, Malcom X's eventual split from the Nation of Islam in 1964, and his journey to the Middle East and Africa illustrates a tension within the ideological direction of the Black Power intellectuals. While he was originally devoted to an Islamic tradition that promoted Islam's moral piety as a solution for the unequal status of Black individuals, his view changed after he traveled to Africa and the Middle East and experienced a variety of different political movements. His travels exemplified an effort to better understand the experiences of oppressed people abroad in order to further

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<sup>23</sup> Donna Murch, "The Campus and the Street: Race, Migration, and the Origins of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, CA," 338-340.

develop his revolutionary thoughts in the U.S and link the experiences of victims of American imperialism. According to Alex Lubin in “Between the Secular and the Sectarian: Malcolm X's Afro-Arab Political Imaginary,”

While addressing the meeting of the OAU in Cairo, Shabazz called on African leaders to recognize that “our problems are your problems.” He attempted to convince the heads of African states that state violence and racial oppression were as powerful in America as they were in South Africa, and he called on his audience to regard Black Americans as a political entity whose freedoms should be defended in international bodies. “In the interests of world peace and security, we beseech the heads of the independent African states to recommend an immediate investigation into our problem by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. . . . May Allah’s blessing of good health and wisdom be upon you.”<sup>24</sup>

Malcolm X envisioned the Black Power Struggle as an opportunity to expand the series of revolutionary movements into an internationalist, anti-imperial movement that combined elements of various ideologies across the globe while simultaneously identifying American imperialism as a common force of oppression.

Encounters between Black revolutionary leaders like Malcolm X and foreign political leaders in the Middle East was one ideological influence on the BPP. Additionally, both the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) took on more domestically focused ideological doctrines and were extremely influential to the Black Panther Party. Founded in Ohio, at Central State College (now University) by a collective of undergraduate students, the Revolutionary Action Movement opened its first chapter in Philadelphia in 1962, becoming public in 1963. It organized community support for

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<sup>24</sup> Alex Lubin. "Between the Secular and the Sectarian: Malcolm X's Afro-Arab Political Imaginary." (*Journal of Africana Religions* 3, no.1. 2015): 83-95.

economic boycotts, engaged in voter registration/education drives, and held free African/African-American history classes.

Muhammad Ahmad, one of the founding members of RAM describes the radicalization of the movement that would ensue. In 1964, two events transformed the Black Power movement, and more specifically, the Revolutionary Action Movement. Malcolm X announced his independence from the Nation of Islam, and Robert F. Williams' article, "Revolution without Violence?" circulated throughout the U.S. In the article, Williams explains that Black individuals could bring the country to a standstill with urban rebellions and with the use of guerrilla warfare. His arguments went beyond the popular understanding of self defense and served as an early articulation of a call for massive rebellion. After these two events, RAM organizers began mapping a blueprint for a Black Nationalist student conference. Muhammad Ahmad, who at the time was known Max Stanford, met with Black nationalists in SNCC and reached out to James and Grace Boggs, then two leading Black liberationist theoreticians. He also wrote Malcolm X and a handful of other liberation organizations across the country. Then, on May 1st 1964, the first Afro-American Student Conference on Black Nationalism was conducted at Fisk University. This marked the first time since 1960 that activists from the north and south met to discuss Black nationalism. Many topics were discussed, including Malcolm X's effort to bring the case of Afro-Americans to the United Nations, the prospect for a Black cultural revolution, as well as Pan-Africanism. Activists were prepared to create a statewide self defense system.<sup>25</sup> All of these measures are clear indications of a plan to articulate the kind of dual power that Bayat recognizes as the hallmark of revolutionary trajectories, at least in the Middle East.

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<sup>25</sup> Muhammad Ahmad, "History of RAM," in *History of RAM* (Revolution Action Movement RAM, 1979), 18-20.

The Revolutionary Action Movement was extremely influential in its organizing strategy and its ideology. According to Ahmad, it “publicized itself as a revolutionary nationalist-internationalist organization based around the tactics of using confrontational self-defense direct action to achieve its ends.” The movement would go on to champion a twelve point program that was established at the Afro-American Student Conference on Black Nationalism:

1. A National Black Student Organization Movement.
2. Ideology (Freedom) Schools.
3. Rifle Clubs.
4. A Liberation Army.
5. Propaganda, Training Centers and a National Organization.
6. An Underground Vanguard.
7. Black Workers "Liberation Unions."
8. Block Organization (Cells).
9. A Nation within a Nation Concept, Government in Exile.
10. A War Fund (Political Economy).
11. Black Farmer Cooperatives.
12. An Army of the Black Unemployed.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, Ahmad describes Black Revolutionary Nationalism as

not only a particular way of viewing the reality and trends inherent in U.S. society from a dialectical and historical materialist point of view of a domestic colonized nation, it is also a program and practical strategy of the struggle for achieving national liberation and socialism. Revolutionary Black Nationalism is... the scientific and historical process of transforming from a domestic colonized nation serving American imperialism (as a source of cheap labor and major market for its commodities) into a National Liberation Movement consciously representing its own interest as a nation struggling for national independence and state power.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Muhammad Ahmad, “The Papers of Muhammad Ahmad ,” in *The Papers of Muhammad Ahmad* (Gale Archives , n.d.).

<sup>27</sup> Muhammad Ahmad, *The Basic Tenets of Revolutionary Black Nationalism* (Institute of Black Political Studies, 1977), 1.



Now that the ideological precursor in the pre-movement phase of the The Black Panther Party has been described, we will now examine the party itself in the main movement phase. The Party was founded on October 15th, 1966, by two young community college students named Bobby Seale and Huey Newton as an anti-imperialist and anti-colonial movement. Their goal was to be a part of a global initiative to combat American imperialism and colonialism and link “the condition of African Americans to peoples in the Third World struggling for independence.” This effort was supported by a long tradition of anticolonial theory developed and popularized in the 1950s by a variety of Black thinkers and revolutionaries. This theoretical foundation gave the founders of the Black Panther Party the tools to reframe the position of Black Americans. Rather than citizens who have been denied their rights, there was popular sentiment to define the Black experience in America as a colonized people. Sean Malloy explains that, “[w]hen Newton referred to Oakland police as an “occupying army” and Black Oaklanders as colonial subjects, he was drawing directly from this rich rhetorical and ideological legacy.” This ideology laid the foundation for the fierce anti-colonial and anti-imperial aims of the movement.<sup>28</sup>

This colonial framing of Black Americans became part of a revolutionary tradition that aligned with that of occupied peoples all over the world. The Revolutionary Action Movement is one example of many organizations that played a significant role in establishing the narrative that Black people in America were colonized people. This was a transformative ideological evolution within the revolutionary tradition as rather than fighting for political and social rights for Black Americans, the Black Panther Party, and the Black Power movement as a whole, recognized its role in a larger international political conflict between imperial-colonial America and its subjects.

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<sup>28</sup> Sean L. Malloy "Introduction: “Theory with No Practice Ain’t Shit”." In *Out of Oakland: Black Panther Party Internationalism during the Cold War*, 1-17. (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2017. Accessed May 5, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt1qv5qm8.4>.) 5.

Malloy elaborates, “Reinterpreting the tradition of Black nationalism in light of Third World anticolonialism, this revolutionary nationalism sought to link self-determination to a larger project of socialist revolution in the United States and around the world.”<sup>29</sup> The Black Panther Party had a significant domestic focus and armed Black communities in an effort to defend black lives from, as Fred Hampton would say, fascist pigs and other sources of extrajudicial violence. The aim of the Panthers was to combat a system that, in the eyes of Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, could not be reformed. The movement's ideology and political revolutionary strategy derived from the international political spirit of the Third Worldist left and linked the Black struggle with the larger Third World anti-imperial struggle. By contextualizing the problems of Black individuals “in terms of their relationship to a broad set of political and economic processes rather than simply stressing racial or cultural identity,” the Black Panthers had an opportunity to expand their organization into a broad network of oppressed peoples and challenge existing systems of power.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, the political climate of the 1960s in America was quite turbulent and one that favored dissent. In the late 1960s, over a million students identified as part of the “New Left” and favored the development of a new mass revolutionary party. In fact, “[a]mong African Americans, revolutionary sentiments contended not just for influence but for preeminence, especially among those under the age of thirty, as more than three hundred rebellions flared up among inner-city blacks from 1964-1968.” By the early 1970s, 40 percent of college students believed a revolution was necessary in America. This included the vast majority of Black

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<sup>29</sup> Sean L. Malloy "Introduction: “Theory with No Practice Ain’t Shit”." In *Out of Oakland: Black Panther Party Internationalism during the Cold War*. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Sean L. Malloy "Introduction: “Theory with No Practice Ain’t Shit”." In *Out of Oakland: Black Panther Party Internationalism during the Cold War*. 9.

individuals as well. This is an important context of the main movement of the Black Panther Party and is another condition that contributed to the successful formation, and then expansion, of the Black Panther Party and their ideology. Because “the strength of the status quo was on the wane,” any movement that began to pick up momentum was more of a threat to existing systems of oppression. The response to this threat, as we will see later, was quite crippling. Any strategy or organizational weaknesses of the movement would be heightened by the threat it posed to institutions of power. The complex and richly cultivated Black Revolutionary ideology posed the biggest threat.<sup>31</sup>

However, despite immense institutional pressure, the Black Panther Party was able to catapult to national relevance and expand into a national organization with international aspirations. Their successful growth can be attributed to two structural factors. First, their use of weapons proved to be an enticing recruitment strategy for many Black individuals. Panther Chairman Bobby Seale explained that, “[w]e knew that at first the guns would be more valuable and more meaningful to the brothers on the block, for drawing them into the organization.”<sup>32</sup> Ultimately the vision of the Panthers was to establish a revolutionary nationalist program where social services, economic wealth, and political power were deployed in the people’s interest. Their agenda demanded that the state allow Black people to control institutions within their communities. Of course these demands were not met, and subsequently, the BPP would regularly deploy groups of armed men and women to patrol and to defend people in areas subject to extrajudicial violence and hyper-policing. The second structural factor was the codification of the

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<sup>31</sup> Jama Lazerow and Yohuru R. Williams, *In Search of the Black Panther Party New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*. 61.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Jama Lazerow and Yohuru R. Williams, *In Search of the Black Panther Party New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*. 63.

agenda of the Black Panther Party into a ten-point program, much like the one established from the Afro-American Student Conference on Black Nationalism in 1964. This agenda included demands to end all wars of aggression, to establish a guaranteed universal basic income, to provide free and accessible healthcare for all, and many more. The ten-point program not only issued a set of demands and policy positions, but it established the official aims of the movement. With the BPP agenda publicized, and with the procurement and circulation of weapons to help secure these goals, the movement met the revolutionary demand of the time.

However, the use of weapons by the Black Panther Party and their strategy to defend themselves from oppressive police forces resulted in a series of violent conflicts between the police and Panther members. These conflicts resulted in the deaths of several BPP members and police officers and created a serious point of contention surrounding the BPP and its strategy. While the media framed the BPP as armed thugs, their strategy with regard to patrolling the police and their right to bear arms was legal. Furthermore, the Party made an effort to emphasize the legality of their revolutionary efforts more generally. The party “built the case for the right of revolution” on the basis of the anticolonial struggle waged against the British, as well as ... the Constitutional guarantee to the right of self-defense.”<sup>33</sup> Given the intense repression of Black people in the 60s, the Black Panther Party argued that their anti-America movement was actually very much in line with American revolutionary tradition. Just as American revolutionaries justified armed resistance to the oppression of the British, the Black Panthers justified their armed resistance on the same basis while simultaneously challenging the racist aspects of the

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<sup>33</sup> Jama Lazerow and Yohuru R. Williams, *In Search of the Black Panther Party New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*. 62.

Constitution. Just as American revolutionaries posed as an existential threat to British rule, the Black Panthers ideology posed an existential threat to imperial America.

However, here arises a contradiction. While the BPP positioned itself as a liberating force, why would it try to emphasize the legitimacy of their struggle to the prevailing system of power? Using Bayat's framework, this aspect of the movement seems to contradict the ideology that aims to uproot systems of power and create separate insurrectionary governmental institutions. Furthermore, this contradiction becomes even more stark when assessing the various domestic dealings of the BPP. Although the Party would oppose forced assimilation and recognized its role in the broader struggle against America's oppressive hegemony, many of its domestic strategies worked

“within the system” from the very beginning: lawfully carrying guns as they “patrolled the police”; lobbying for street lights at dangerous intersections; running for state and national office on the Peace and Freedom Party ticket; organizing “survival programs pending revolution; and registering Black people to vote.<sup>34</sup>

These are a few of the Party's strategies to empower Black individuals domestically, while slowly moving towards broader goals such as establishing an international coalition. In light of Bayat's framework, this would seem to contradict the founding principles of the BPP as an anti-imperial and anti-colonial movement aimed to enfranchise Black people while rebelling against institutional oppression and the U.S. more broadly. How can we reconcile the radical ideological foundation of the movement and their emphasis on the legality of their strategies? This suggests an important question: What comes of a movement that positions itself as revolutionary but must adhere to certain societal norms and laws in order to have a better chance

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<sup>34</sup> Jama Lazerow and Yohuru R. Williams, *In Search of the Black Panther Party New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*. 60.

at securing its aims? How is it possible to win momentum for radical resistance from within the status quo? Is it possible for a movement to be transformational in some ways and reformist in others?

In the end, regardless of the legality of their arms, many questioned whether the arming of the Black Panthers damaged its image. Although the Party tried to adhere to the law to establish credibility and to protect its existence, the legality of their strategies did not stop most media outlets from broadcasting exclusively negative press coverage of their actions. While they had the legal right to bear arms, the White mainstream condemned the Panthers, labeling what they would argue is their right to self defense as irrational violence.

While the revolutionary ideology of the party evolved into a transformational anti-imperial movement, their organizational structure had some notable weaknesses. The Black Panther Party had a centralized headquarters in Oakland and chapters in Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, New Haven, and many other cities around the U.S. Furthermore, the organization had a hierarchical structure with ranking leaders known as “Field Marshals” and an official platform presented as “Executive Mandates.” However, despite these organizational efforts, the expansion of the Party and the spontaneous affiliation of a variety of different chapters decentralized the party. For example,

In Kansas City,... the Panthers got their start by absorbing the Black Vigilantes, which had emerged in the aftermath of the King assassination. In New Orleans the Party operated through an affiliate, the National Committee to Combat Fascism, which was based in the city’s massive Desire housing project.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Jama Lazerow and Yohuru R. Williams, *In Search of the Black Panther Party New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*. 99.

The connection between the headquarters in Oakland and the various chapters was tenuous in many instances. The consistent distribution of the *Black Panther* newspaper helped establish a degree of coherence within the party. Although it communicated official information concerning the party, it was impossible for the various branches of the movement to follow the policy shifts that appeared in the weekly issues of the paper perfectly.

The factionalism of the Black Panther Party turned out to be a weakness that would be exploited by the state. While the expansion of the movement fractured the party's organizational structure, it also began to pose a threat to the American establishment. In response, there was a full-on institutional assault on the Black Panthers orchestrated by local authorities and the FBI. The latter established a program called COINTELPRO, a program designed to undermine and infiltrate dissidents and popular movements that aimed to uproot or even challenge social and political systems. In the case of the Black Panther Party, the FBI carried out coordinated operations on prominent members of the BPP and are confirmed to have played a role in a number of lethal tragic incidents that occurred in and around the BPP. According to records from the COINTEL FBI program, "more than two hundred such operations, including the use of agents provocateur, planting false news releases, and "bad jacketing" Party members... (circulating information to give the impression that an individual was an informer)" were a few methods used against the BPP. These efforts were all part of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover's campaign to "further plant the seeds of suspicion" within the party.<sup>36</sup>

These measures created and exploited serious weaknesses in the Party's organizational strategy. The revolutionary spirit of the 1960s threatened "the corrosive and socially degrading

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Jama Lazerow and Yohuru R. Williams, *In Search of the Black Panther Party New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*. 100.

power of corporate capitalism and boldly challenged the presumptions of white supremacy.” And subsequently, the Black Panther Party and the other Black revolutionary movements “brought down on their collective necks the full power of the iron fist of American imperialism.” The counterinsurgency efforts led to the eventual demise of the Black Panther Party as COINTELPRO carried out over 200 hundred operations which aimed to destroy it.<sup>37</sup>

Using Asef Bayat’s criteria for assessing movements and revolutions, we can surmise that the Black Panther Party had both transformational and reformist aims and strategies. The Black Panther Party had a clear intellectual anchor rooted in Black Nationalism coupled with anti-colonial and anti-imperial ambitions which had a direct influence on their radical strategies.

Furthermore, when examining the ideological formation of the revolutionary movements in Iran and Yemen in the 1970s, it is remarkable to see the similarities between the radical wing of the civil rights movement and those movements in the Middle East. Asef Bayat characterizes the latter as anti-imperial, Marxist-Leninist, and radical Islamic. All of these same elements are present in the Black Panther Party. Malcolm X toured the Middle East and spoke with Nasserist leaders in Egypt and PLO leaders in Lebanon and Palestine. The Revolutionary Action Movement recognized socialist policy as paramount to the Revolutionary Black Nationalist Ideology. All of this to illustrate the ideological linkage between revolutionary thought in the Middle East and Black Power in the U.S.

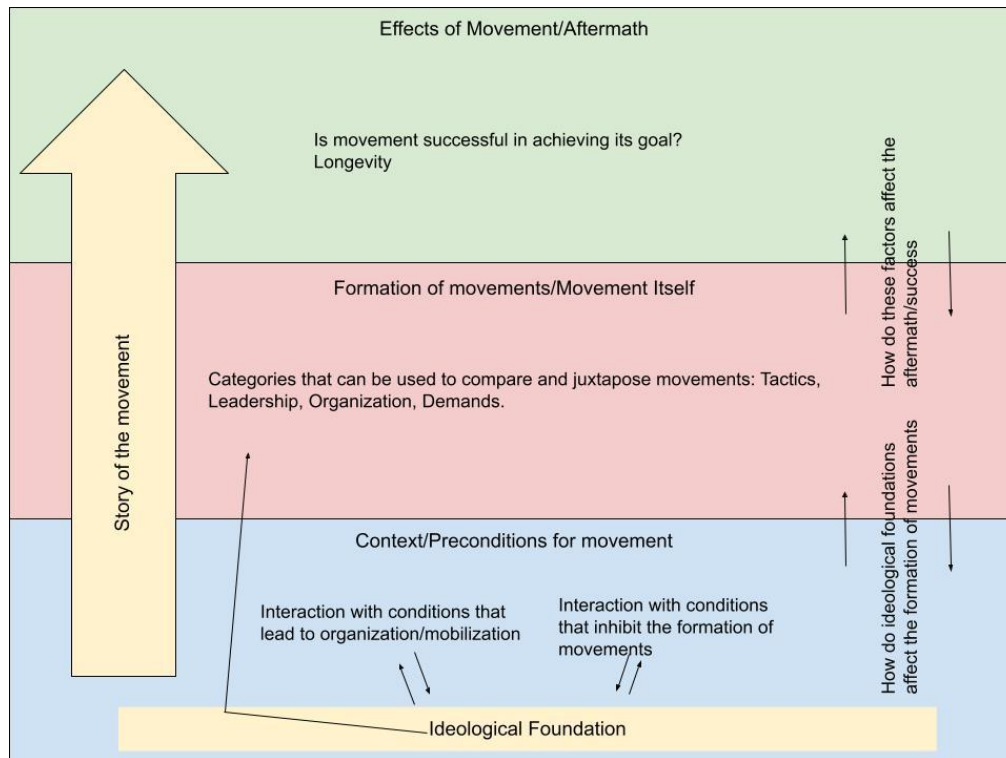
The figure below is an adaptation of my original framework to fit my findings after my analysis of the BPP. It is the same model, except it depicts the formation of an ideological

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<sup>37</sup> Jama Lazerow and Yohuru R. Williams, *In Search of the Black Panther Party New Perspectives on a Revolutionary Movement*. 59-60.



foundation in the pre-movement phase. It also shows that the ideological foundation interacts with various societal forces and influences the strategies, methods, and tactics of movements.



After tracking the ideological story of the Black Panther Party, it is clear to me that the movement was born out of a pre-existing ideological discourse. Do all transformational movements in the ideological era take on this trajectory? As we will see in the post-ideological era, the Black Lives Matter Movement takes on a very different life.

However, while this ideology was the official anchor of the BPP, there were competing perspectives within the Panthers. How can the Party be truly transformational when it engaged in several efforts to work within the American system by encouraging Black individuals to vote and run for office? While these methods were reformist by Bayat's standards, they alone are not the reason for the demise of the Party or the lack of structural change that was enacted because of its efforts and actions. In fact there is no evidence that the Black Panther Party's reformist strategies

inhibited the movement's imagination or trajectory whatsoever. It was a series of explicit counterinsurgency operations and neoliberal policy implementations which fatally injured the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s and the BPP more specifically.

## Chapter 2: The Black Lives Matter Movement

Now that we have analysed the formation of the Black Panther Party and the various competing ideological influences that made up its revolutionary spirit, we will pivot to a descriptive analysis of the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM). We are still in the main phase of the Black Lives Matter Movement, which means that if I am to make conclusions regarding the future of the movement, they will be speculative. Telling the story of the Black Lives Matter Movement is more challenging than telling the story of the Black Panther Party. I cannot mirror the structure of the previous chapter because BLM formed in such a different way. The BPP formed as the slow development and evolution of Black political thought over several years. BLM is a very different movement that formed in a very different way. The formation of BLM is much more spontaneous, and because of this I must take an approach that honors this important formational difference. That being said, the problem that BLM formed to address did not arise spontaneously at all. Police violence against Black individuals and racial injustice in the American criminal and penitentiary systems have been major issues in American domestic politics, and these conditions enter significantly into the broader context of the BLM movement.

In spite of the fact that BLM was largely a response to long standing conditions, Bayat would argue that due to the widespread plague of neoliberalism and the absence of significant ideological diversity, BLM, which might have facilitated revolutionary mobilization similar to what occurred in the Arab Spring, does not have a transformational trajectory. While I am importing Bayat's diagnosis of the Arab Spring into an analysis of the Black Lives Matter movement, of course there have been some incisive diagnoses of BLM produced by American scholars and activists. Adolph Reed and Cedric Johnson, as we will see in the analysis of BLM

later, further substantiate Bayat's claim with regards to BLM. They also comment on the broader conditions for change in the dominant mechanisms of American political power and ideology, and like Bayat they recognize the absence of transformational political thought. Russel Rickford is another voice actively assessing the nature and the trajectory of BLM. While he too recognizes the lack of ideological foundation in BLM, he maintains the possibility that the movement might in time take on a more radical and ambitious ideology. While Rickford's prognosis might seem like a simple expression of optimism, it suggests some profound questions that I will address more thoroughly in the conclusion: Can a movement that has formed from a widespread reaction produce a transformative agenda for change over time? Or, is it impossible for a movement to develop a transformative agenda without a preexisting ideological anchor?

The formation of BLM follows a very different trajectory than that of the BPP. While the BPP was part of a larger culmination of Black Power movements and ideologies, BLM formed from a spontaneous hashtag and evolved into a social movement over time. Christopher J. Lebron observes that the ideological influence of BLM does not derive from a particular source. He states, "The Black Power generation had in the sharp and brave tome penned by Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power*, a published manifesto and theoretical edifice. In contrast, no such text exists to provide the philosophical moorings of #BlackLivesMatter."<sup>38</sup> Where is the manifesto from which Black Lives Matter came? There is none. This is regarded by some as a source of strength or rather breadth in the movement. It is regarded by others as a profound weakness. This may be one of the more readily identifiable conditions of the post-ideological world: that neoliberalism does not allow for popular realization of alternative ideology. This is

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<sup>38</sup> Christopher J. Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), xiii.

because baked into neoliberal sensibilities is the common sense notion that, as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan were fond of saying, capitalism combined with liberal democracy yields the only reasonable social order, or “the most deeply honorable form of government ever devised by man.”<sup>39</sup>

The Black Lives Matter movement started as a hashtag, formulated by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi Garza, Cullors, and Tometi, had been active in immigration, incarceration, and domestic labor campaigns.<sup>40</sup> The hashtag first appeared July 13th, 2013, following the acquittal of George Zimmerman, who killed the unarmed seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin 17 months earlier. This and other reactions to episodes of violence against Black and Brown Americans would evolve into a widespread horizontal movement that aims to elevate Black lives and draw attention to lethal discriminatory policies and actions.

Zimmerman had been charged with 2nd degree murder after patrolling his neighborhood in a vehicle armed with a handgun on February 26th, 2012, in Sanford, Florida. Zimmerman saw Trayvon Martin walking through his neighborhood in a gray hoodie and decided he had reason to believe that the kid walking down the sidewalk was a burglar. He called the police, declaring his suspicions and explaining that there had been a slew of robberies in the neighborhood. In Zimmerman’s 911 call he states,

Zimmerman: He's got his hand in his waistband. And he's a black male.

Dispatcher: How old would you say he looks?

Zimmerman: He's got a button on his shirt, late teens.

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<sup>39</sup> Ronald Reagan, Remarks at a Ceremony Commemorating the 40th Anniversary of the Normandy Invasion, D-day, (June 6, 1984).

<sup>40</sup> Russell Rickford, “Black Lives Matter,” *New Labor Forum* 25, no. 1 (August 2015): pp. 34-42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1095796015620171>, 1.

Dispatcher: Late teens, ok.

Zimmerman: Something's wrong with him. Yup, he's coming to check me out, he's got something in his hands, I don't know what his deal is... These assholes they always get away... Shit, he's running.

Dispatcher: Which entrance is it that that he's heading towards?

Zimmerman: The back entrance... Fucking punks. These assholes, they always get away...

Dispatcher: Are you following him?

Zimmerman: Yeah.

Dispatcher: Okay, we don't need you to do that.

Zimmerman: Okay<sup>41</sup>

Armed, Zimmerman followed Trayvon Martin on foot despite the dispatcher's advice. This would eventually lead to a physical altercation that left Zimmerman injured and Martin dead. Zimmerman was charged with 2nd degree murder but was eventually acquitted on the grounds that he had acted in self defense and because the prosecution was unable to prove to the jury, beyond a reasonable doubt, that Zimmerman had intended to kill Martin before the altercation.

The verdict would spark national outrage, a movement to address issues of racial profiling and the criminalization of Black individuals in general. Zimmerman, 28 at the time, followed an unarmed teenage boy and shot him through the heart. The event sparked a national outcry that Black lives matter. On the same day that Zimmerman was acquitted, Garza describes her “deep sense of grief” in a Facebook post while using the phrase “Black lives matter.”<sup>42</sup> Later

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<sup>41</sup> George Zimmerman. Phone conversation with Sean Noffke. (Sanford PD Dispatcher). February 26, 2012.

<sup>42</sup> “The Hashtag #BlackLivesMatter First Appears, Sparking a Movement,” History.com (A&E Television Networks, July 10, 2020), <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/blacklivesmatter-hashtag-first-appears-facebook-sparking-a-movement>.

that day, Patrice Cullors, a friend of Garza and a Los Angeles community organizer, replied to her post and included the first instance of #BlackLivesMatter.

The hashtag became part of a larger outcry to address the many issues of American racial injustice, which seemed to be worsening. However, according to Monica Anderson at the Pew Research Center, #BlackLivesMatter only appeared on twitter 5,106 times between July, 2013, and August, 2014.<sup>43</sup> It wasn't until a police officer shot and killed Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year old Black teenager, that the Black Lives Matter movement began to establish a more socio-political trajectory and became a de facto organization. Before I describe the developments of BLM, it is important to describe the killing of Michael Brown, because this event, along with the protests and uprisings it provoked, turned a social media phenomenon into a bona fide movement.

The events that led to the killing of Michael Brown had to be reconstructed from eyewitness testimony. Brown, an unarmed 18 year old Black teenager, was walking in the street with his friend Dorian Johnson in Ferguson, Missouri. The two had just come from a convenience store where, according to Johnson, Brown had stolen several packs of cigarillos. As they walked down the street, Darren Wilson, a police officer, confronted the two teens from his vehicle, ordering them to move out of the street and onto the sidewalk. This is where the accounts of Wilson and Johnson diverge quite drastically. Wilson describes Brown as a raging combative individual who slammed Wilson's door shut when the police officer tried to leave the patrol car. According to Wilson, Brown then physically assaulted him from outside the window of the car. Johnson, on the other hand, explains that Wilson grabbed Michael Brown's shirt collar

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<sup>43</sup> Monica Anderson, "History of the Hashtag #BlackLivesMatter: Social Activism on Twitter," Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech (Pew Research Center, December 31, 2019), <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2016/08/15/the-hashtag-blacklivesmatter-emerges-social-activism-on-twitter/>.

and pulled him toward the vehicle. This struggle ended when Wilson fired his gun twice from within the vehicle. According to Johnson, one of these shots hit Brown in the chest. However this account is inconsistent with the forensic evidence. After Wilson's gun went off in the vehicle, Michael Brown tried to run away. After gaining some distance, Brown turned around and put his hands up. It was at this moment that Wilson shot at Michael Brown 12 times, striking him 6 times. Wilson testified that Michael Brown,

...looks like a demon, that's how angry he looked. He comes back towards me again with his hands up....He turns, and when he looked at me, he made like a grunting, like aggravated sound and he starts, he turns and he's coming back towards me...At this point it looked like he was almost bulking up to run through the shots, like it was making him mad that I'm shooting at him....And when he gets about that 8 to 10 feet away, I look down, I remember looking at my sites and firing, all I see is his head and that's what I shot.<sup>44</sup>

This account does not match that of Johnson, who claimed that,

[t]he second statement [Brown] was starting to say I, you know, he couldn't get the full sentence out before the rest of the shots hit his body. And I stood and watched face-to-face as every shot was fired and as his body went down and his body never — his body kind of just went down and fell, you know, like a step, you know what I'm saying? Like a step, his body just kind of collapsed down and he just fell.<sup>45</sup>

This killing of Michael Brown led to massive protests and riots in Ferguson and across the U.S. Furthermore, the use of #BlackLivesMatter exploded after Brown's death and became more than just a hashtag. The political and social climate surrounding police brutality was ripe for a cohesive movement as massive protests erupted all over the country. It was at this point that #BLM blossomed into an actual political organization. According to Russel Rickford, “[t]he most recognizable expression of widespread black outrage against police aggression and racist violence, the phrase has engendered a spirited, if decentralized, movement.” Although BLM emerged from Ferguson as a de facto organization, it did so largely as a “horizontal” movement

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<sup>44</sup> Damien Cave, “Officer Darren Wilson’s Grand Jury Testimony in Ferguson, Mo., Shooting,” *The New York Times*, November 25, 2014.

<sup>45</sup>Ezra Klein, “Michael Brown Spent His Last Day with His Friend Dorian Johnson. Here's What Johnson Saw.,” Vox (Vox, November 25, 2014), <https://www.vox.com/2014/11/25/7287443/dorian-johnson-story>.



that has departed from more hierarchically organized opposition movements led by figures such as Al Sharpton or Jesse Jackson. Its scattered and loose structure enables mass mobilization and protest around the country and provides people an easy opportunity to express dissent.<sup>46</sup>

Black Lives Matter activists have utilized a variety of disruptive tactics when protesting, including occupation of highways, sporting events, intersections, retail stores, police stations, campaign events, and municipal buildings. These tactics are amplified by the mass horizontal nature of the movement. Furthermore, BLM has largely abandoned appealing to politicians or utilizing other channels of expressing dissent. Most of BLM's activism takes the form of street protest or demonstration as well as raising money for victims of police violence. While public pressure from BLM seems to have influenced public perceptions and even outcomes following various incidents of police brutality against the Black community, the real victory of the movement has been popularizing radical discourse and disruptive opportunities of democratic participation. According to the BLM website,

When we say Black Lives Matter, we are broadening the conversation around state violence to include all of the ways in which Black people are intentionally left powerless at the hands of the state. We are talking about the ways in which Black lives are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity . . . How Black women bearing the burden of a relentless assault on our children and our families is state violence. How Black queer and trans folks bear a unique burden from a heteropatriarchal society that disposes of us like garbage and simultaneously fetishizes us and profits off of us, and that is state violence.<sup>47</sup>

This shows the expansion of BLM's aims after Ferguson. The movement does not just aim to address police violence against Black individuals, it has broadened its goals to include state violence against minorities in general. Furthermore, Rickford explains, the movement is committed to elevating the voices of marginalized individuals such "as women, queer people, and various non-elites—through the production of blogs, reports, missives, and by simply

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<sup>46</sup> Russell Rickford, "Black Lives Matter," 35.

<sup>47</sup> "About," Black Lives Matter, October 16, 2020, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>.

invoking the names of unsung victims of police violence (“Say Her Name,” as a related campaign is dubbed), signal an ethos of inclusiveness and a desire for a fundamental rearrangement of power relations.”<sup>48</sup>

Rickford goes on to say that fighting for Black self-determination in the face of violent White supremacy has always been a radical battle. He implies that BLM is a modern manifestation of this fight and likens participants in BLM protests to the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) of the 1960s. Furthermore, he draws a variety of historical analogies and comparisons, concluding that “[w]hat animated these struggles—and those of countless leftist and labor causes—was their insurgent nature and the uncompromising character of their rank and file participants, traits that Black Lives Matter exemplifies.”<sup>49</sup>

This purported radical dissent of BLM protestors is a necessary response to the current state of the American police and criminal justice systems, which aim to control and regulate Black bodies in an effort to manage violent inequality. Rickford contextualizes the Black Lives Matter movement by addressing the deeply oppressive presence of state sanctioned violence, the perilous nature of identity politics, and the visibility of Black elites:

Structural racism in the post-segregation era generally has lacked unambiguous symbols of apartheid around which a popular movement could cohere. Yet mass incarceration and the techniques of racialized policing on which it depends—“broken windows,” stop-and-frisk, “predictive policing,” and other extreme forms of surveillance—have exposed the refurbished, but no less ruthless, framework of white supremacy.<sup>50</sup>

This is Rickford’s analysis of the societal conditions that BLM identifies and challenges.

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<sup>48</sup> Russell Rickford, “Black Lives Matter,” 36-37.

<sup>49</sup> Russell Rickford, “Black Lives Matter,” 37.

<sup>50</sup> Russell Rickford, “Black Lives Matter,” 38.

However, within the struggle against systemic racism in the BLM movement are flickers of a broader working class movement. Racially diverse labor groups including activists from the Fight for \$15 minimum wage campaign have joined the ranks of Black Lives Matter. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) has expressed its support for the movement as well as numerous members of unions who have urged the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, the largest federation of unions in the U.S., to withhold its support for police unions. Although these are relevant examples that evoke an alliance between the BLM movement and labor movements, Black Lives Matter activists have “largely neglected to engage progressive trade unionism or to identify labor as a major ally.” That being said, recently, this last point made by Rickford, who is writing about BLM in 2016, needs to be amended as the BLM movement has subsequently expanded its support for labor, which includes recent public support for the unionization of Amazon workers in Alabama.

While BLM has provided millions of people with an opportunity to express their dissent and outrage and has successfully sparked a massive anti-racist movement, Rickford identifies its lack of focus as a serious shortcoming. Although the Movement has identified its general goals in combating White supremacy and has broadened the discussion to include all forms of state sanctioned violence against minorities, there are still relevant internal tensions within the BLM movement that can be traced to a lack of ideological anchoring. Rickford observes divergent trajectories within BLM since some activists and organizers in the movement “wish to transcend reformism altogether and pursue a revolutionary path.”<sup>51</sup> Leftist activists within and outside the movement have pushed for BLM to reconcile its ideological contradictions, including an

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<sup>51</sup> Russell Rickford, “Black Lives Matter,” 38-40

ambiguous stance on class struggle and electoral politics. Critics within the movement, Rickford observes, disavow collaboration with elites and identify capitalism, as well as White supremacy, as the problem. While the movement has highlighted the magnitude of state violence in general, and one could argue that this encompasses violence in the less obvious injuries from class inequality and struggle, according to Rickford, “the movement has yet to articulate a clear analysis of the economic underpinnings of white supremacy.” “Until it does so,” he claims, “it is unlikely to develop a specific agenda of social redistribution with which to bolster its promising rhetoric of systemic change.”<sup>52</sup> He concludes that the future of BLM depends on its capacity to strengthen its links with other grass roots movements and explicitly address class violence and violence against trans people of color, a group that has been critical of BLM in the past. Furthermore, Rickford explains that the movement needs to establish a solid ideological foundation rather than exist as a reactionary platform with inklings of more pointed analysis of state violence and power relations in the U.S.

Rickford wrote this in 2016, which gives me an opportunity to assess his claims in light of more recent BLM developments. It is clear that Black Lives Matter’s strategies have grown since its founding. What was at first an exclusively horizontal movement that lacked specific policy proposals, and failed to explicitly align with organized labor movements and other grassroots socio-political groups, has attained a clearer agenda based on a more radical analysis of social injustice. As mentioned earlier, for example, BLM enthusiastically supported the unionization of Amazon workers in Bessemer, Alabama. On March 19, the official Black Lives Matter website posted an article stating,

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<sup>52</sup> Russell Rickford, “Black Lives Matter,” 39

Amazon slapped a Black Lives Matter banner on their website last summer post-George Floyd. But if Amazon truly believes that Black Lives Matter, Amazon would have no problems with unionization, livable wages, fair working conditions, and the utmost respect for its majority Black workers — especially those in Bessemer, Alabama.<sup>53</sup>

This is a clear alignment with a significant labor movement, and it shows that BLM has taken a more direct stance on class issues such as unionization efforts. In that same article, BLM voices its support for organized labor all over the country and explains that “[u]nionizing is one of the best ways workers can address racial inequities in the workplace and collectively fight for other benefits like higher wages and better health care.” Additionally, BLM organizers raised over \$50,000 to combat anti-union propaganda and held a demonstration in Bessemer. The material contributions, organizing of demonstrations, and direct statements show a clear alliance between BLM and organized labor.<sup>54</sup>

Furthermore, while BLM fought to preserve its autonomy by repudiating official political endorsements and affiliations, the movement has completely abandoned this self-imposed neutrality as time has gone on. The website is littered with endorsements of specific policies and candidates. For example, BLM has a circulated a petition for Medicare For All; it mounted a campaign to end the Law Enforcement Support Office or the 1033 Program, which allocates “surplus” military equipment to local police forces; it issued an official endorsement of congresswoman Cori Bush as well as a call to impeach President Donald Trump; it issued requests for people to lobby California governor Gavin Newsom; it offered a formal congratulations to Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, and more. It is clear that the BLM movement,

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<sup>53</sup> “The Latest on Our Efforts in Bessemer,” Black Lives Matter, March 19, 2021, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/the-latest-on-our-efforts-in-bessemer/>.

<sup>54</sup> “The Latest on Our Efforts in Bessemer,” Black Lives Matter, March 19, 2021, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/the-latest-on-our-efforts-in-bessemer/>.

which is arguably the largest socio-political movement in America right now, has become very involved in electoral and local politics as well as supporting specific bills and policies.<sup>55</sup>

What was once a hashtag that fostered scattered reactionary movements across the U.S. has evolved into a large political organization which is still largely horizontal, but has identified a clearer political direction. This array of policy proposals and political endorsements suggest that over time, BLM has begun to develop a more focused agenda informed by a clearer picture of what social and racial justice might look like in societies that actually make these things political priorities rather than pious slogans. This path of development, from a broad but mainly reactive mobilization to a consolidated political agenda, is almost the opposite of the path exemplified by the Revolutionary Action Movement and the Black Panther Party. The BPP, which on Bayat's premises formed in the ideological era, was the product of a long tradition of Black political thought that included political Islam, separatism and African repatriation, and anti-imperialism. The Black power movement of the 1970s was the product of a long history of thought fostered by educational opportunities for Black citizens in urban America as well as Black labor movements that formed after World War II. The many strands of this ideological development served as a foundation for the Black Panther Party, which attempted to project power and expand mobilization from this ideological standpoint. The formation of BLM may be described as the inverse of this. It seems as though the Black Lives Matter movement formed spontaneously, without any established ideological standpoint, and it has subsequently cultivated a more specific agenda to challenge deeper structures of unjust power. A hashtag became mass mobilization, which in turn became a self-conscious political movement, which in turn seeks to

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<sup>55</sup> "Home," Black Lives Matter, April 28, 2021, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/>.

find or formulate a diagnosis of the social forces that project White supremacy and state violence against Black people and communities of color. Nowhere at the start of this development was there a clear vision for the future of society informed by an ideological anchor.

However, the movement, as it takes a stronger stance on specific issues such as universal healthcare and endorses progressive political candidates like Cori Bush, may be inching closer to forming an ideology. In other words, if social and political movements in the ideological era formed as a product of an ideological foundation, Black Lives Matter seems to be trying to develop its ideological foundation *after* its formation as a mass mobilization. One outstanding question that arises from these considerations, especially in light of Asef Bayat's analysis, is how well adjusted this ideology will be to the prevailing super-ideology of neoliberalism. Is there any evidence that the gradual ideological formation of BLM will depart from the neoliberal paradigm? I don't think that it does.

While Black Lives Matter has formed a more comprehensive agenda, it does not challenge American capitalist democracy in an explicit way. BLM has identified state violence, in a variety of forms, as its enemy, but this diagnosis does not include a critical analysis of American democratic capitalism. In fact, Adolph Reed, Jr. and Cedric Johnson argue that the grievances and demands voiced by BLM activists fall squarely within the political boundaries of neoliberalism. According to Reed,

This line of argument and complaint, as well as the demand for ritual declarations that "black lives matter," rest on insistence that "racism"—structural, systemic, institutional, post-racial or however modified—must be understood as the cause and name of the injustice manifest in that disparity, which is thus by implication the singular or paramount injustice of the pattern of police killings.

Reed stresses that the anti-racist sentiment that makes up BLM's agenda directs attention away from economic disparities that are the root causes of systemic oppression. While Black people are killed by the police disproportionately when compared to other demographics, "according to the *Washington Post* data, the states with the highest rates of police homicide per million of population are among the Whitest in the country." While these places are White, they are also relatively poor. 95% of police killings occur in neighborhoods where the median family income is less than \$100,000. This is not to say that racism and White supremacy do not exist. They do exist, and of course Reed knows full well that they do. Rather, these concepts are mischaracterized as the chief producers of racial injustice in the country. Reed argues that diagnosing White supremacy as the main factor responsible for perpetuating racial inequality neglects economic inequality entirely. It is this neglect which qualifies antiracism, which is embodied by Black Lives Matter, as "the left wing of neoliberalism."<sup>56</sup> One of Reed's favored illustrations is derived from the fact that the racial wealth gap in the United States is so overwhelmingly the result of disparities in the upper economic classes that if the Black-White racial wealth gap were completely eradicated, the large majority of Black Americans would be no better off. Reed further elaborates on his point by quoting Walter Benn Michaels: "the burden of that ideal of social justice is that the society would be fair if 1% of the population controlled 90% of the resources so long as the dominant 1% were 13% black, 17% Latino, 50% female, 4% or whatever LGBTQ, etc"<sup>57</sup>.

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<sup>56</sup> Adolph Reed, "How Racial Disparity Does Not Help Make Sense of Patterns of Police Violence," Nonsite.org, October 4, 2020, <https://nonsite.org/how-racial-disparity-does-not-help-make-sense-of-patterns-of-police-violence-2/>.

<sup>57</sup> Adolph Reed, "How Racial Disparity Does Not Help Make Sense of Patterns of Police Violence," Nonsite.org, October 4, 2020,



Cedric Johnson further illustrates the point that BLM and popular antiracist movements are neoliberal in their nature by highlighting the popular support of chief proponents of neoliberalism. He criticizes the performance of Democratic Party leadership as they wore Ghanaian kente cloth, a fabric popularized in the late eighties by Afrocentric nationalists, in solidarity with the protests for George Floyd. Johnson explains that,

Nearly all of the Democrat leadership who “took a knee” against racist policing, have openly opposed Medicare for All, free higher education, and the expansion of other public goods, but their technical reforms to reduce excessive force incidents and prosecute police for misconduct are the perfect way of displaying commitment to racial justice, while perpetuating the very pro-market logics and class relations that stress policing and mass incarceration were invented to protect.<sup>58</sup>

This show of support from politicians who pledge themselves to the American neoliberal ideal signifies that BLM, a manifestation of the modern anti-racist movement, “*is a class politics itself: the politics of a strain of the professional-managerial class whose worldview and material interests are rooted within a political economy of race and ascriptive identity-group relations.*”<sup>59</sup>

While there are some within the BLM movement who are calling for decarceration and defunding the police, “Black Lives Matter is a cry for full recognition within the established terms of liberal democratic capitalism. And the ruling class agrees.”<sup>60</sup>

This agreement takes the form of performative actions from massive corporations such as Walmart and Amazon who showed their support for the Blackout-Tuesday event, a day where everyone on social media would post information related to racial inequality. Jeff Bezos made a statement expressing his support of BLM, explaining that “‘Black lives matter’ doesn’t mean

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<sup>58</sup> Cedric Johnson, “The Triumph of Black Lives Matter and Neoliberal Redemption,” Nonsite.org, October 4, 2020, <https://nonsite.org/the-triumph-of-black-lives-matter-and-neoliberal-redemption/>.

<sup>59</sup> Adolph Reed, “How Racial Disparity Does Not Help Make Sense of Patterns of Police Violence.”

<sup>60</sup> Cedric Johnson. “The Triumph of Black Lives Matter and Neoliberal Redemption,” Nonsite.org, October 4, 2020, <https://nonsite.org/the-triumph-of-black-lives-matter-and-neoliberal-redemption/>.

other lives don't matter,... I have a 20-year-old son, and I simply don't worry that he might be choked to death while being detained one day. It's not something I worry about. Black parents can't say the same." Bezos also pledged \$10 million dollars to various social justice organizations while Walmart, Sony Music, and Warner all donated impressive sums of money to similar organizations. All of this provides an egress and convenient cover for massive corporations that are responsible for the exploitation of working people, responsible in fact for a long history of class warfare that breeds racial inequality and many other forms of social injury. This pleasant congeniality and sympathy between the pillars of neoliberal capitalism and the Black Lives Matter movement signifies, for Reed and others, that BLM does not pose a threat to the political-economic system that is chiefly responsible for racial disparities in policing and many other social injustices.

However, are these claims made by Cedric Johnson and Adolph Reed fair? Is it true that BLM has remained silent on issues of class and economic inequality? Rickford clearly thinks otherwise and has identified a more radical wing of the Black Lives Matter movement. But do these revolutionary activists make up enough political and social capital of BLM to produce a credibly transformative agenda?

BLM recently championed legislation that is at the very least transformative with regards to the criminal justice system. On June 7th, 2020, several activists held an online conference to unveil the BREATHE Act. In summary, this legislation, championed by BLM, is a comprehensive reimagining of the criminal justice system. It proposes the complete divestment and gradual closure of carceral facilities such as public prisons and immigrant detention centers.

Furthermore, the bill lays out a plan to eliminate all police departments and to divert all of their funding into alternative institutions such as,

Neighborhood mediation programs, supportive housing, community-based organizations that provide voluntary, non-coercive health services and healing supports for communities, and employment opportunities that benefit formerly incarcerated individuals.

Additionally, the act includes provisions for expanding Medicaid, providing access to clean water, air, and food, providing job programs for economically disadvantaged people, pilot programs for universal basic income, funds for worker-owned cooperatives for the formerly incarcerated, give incarcerated individuals the right to vote, and a variety of other policies that would be funded by the complete divestment of the carceral state. It is important to recognize that this piece of legislation is a blow to the carceral and authoritarian wing of neoliberalism.<sup>61</sup>

While the legislation includes transformative elements that upend prevailing systems of power in the criminal justice system, it does not include a reimagining of the economic system. While offering competitive grants and encouraging investment in community programs are undoubtedly beneficial measures for low income communities, they are not a direct challenge to the neoliberal paradigm and its dominating economic structures, which organize every aspect of society as a business enterprise and leave massive corporations to act with impunity. Ultimately, the BREATHE Act evokes Adolph Reed, Jr's warnings of race reductionism. That modern anti-racist sentiment attributes racial disparities primarily to racism when in reality,

[The police are] basically protecting a property and the suppression of the unruly classes. What we know, the unruly classes basically come down to the strata of the population who make people with property feel uncomfortable.... Not everybody who is hurting under neoliberalism is Black, and not all Black people are hurting under neoliberalism. Some of them are doing pretty well, actually, as the wealth gap shows.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> "The Breathe Act," The Breathe Act, February 1, 2021, <https://breatheact.org/>.

<sup>62</sup> Hope Reese, "Adolph Reed Jr.: The Perils of Race Reductionism," Jstor Daily (Jstor.org, April 28, 2021).

This kind of analysis, one that inherently challenges neoliberalism, is mostly missing from the Black Lives Matter movement and the BREATHE Act.

Despite the absence of an alternative ideological anchor within BLM, Patrisse Cullors refers to herself and the other founders as “trained Marxists... super-versed on, sort of, ideological theories.” In an interview with Democracy Now!, Cullors explains that she was trained as an organizer with the Labor/Community Strategy Center, an organization which openly supported Black Communists as well as “the Black Panther Party, the American Indian Movement, Young Lords, Brown Berets, and the great revolutionary rainbow experiments of the 1970s.” Given the founder’s history as a trained Marxist and the movement’s strategic evolutions, is it possible that the movement might develop a more radical ideology over time?<sup>63</sup>

While I have illustrated how BLM falls within the neoliberal paradigm, the BREATHE Act, massive protests, and its enormous grassroots apparatus could still be part of a larger trend. The question is, can an ideology that challenges neoliberalism emerge from a social and political movement? Is BLM moving closer to a broader structural analysis that identifies economic inequality as the engine of racial disparity in American society, or is it headed farther down the path of race reductionism? In an article posted on the BLM website on September 11, 2020, Patrisse Cullors, now executive director of BLM, reflected on the accomplishments of the movement. One short statement from the piece caught my attention: “*We are winning.*”<sup>64</sup> While the BLM movement has certainly come a long way, it seems it might be heading the wrong way,

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<sup>63</sup> Yaron Steinbuch, “Black Lives Matter Co-Founder Describes Herself as ‘Trained Marxist,’” *The New York Post*, January 25, 2020.

<sup>64</sup> Patrisse Cullors, “Seven Years of Growth: BLM’s Co-Founder and Incoming Executive Director Reflects on the Movement,” Black Lives Matter (BlackLivesMatter.com, September 11, 2020).

at least with regards to Bayat's framework. Earning broad acceptance and enthusiastic support, including from Google, Walmart, and Nike may be part of winning, but one does not have to be a committed critic of the BLM movement to consider that this kind of winning might also count as a kind of losing as well.

## Conclusion

This entire exploration has been an attempt to address a distressing impression of American popular political apathy: that there was revolutionary mobilization in the country with a lack of clear direction and a lack of popular support. Admittedly, this impression was quite general but it prompted a more specific question: can there be a transformational social or political movement in America? Of course there are a few points in this question that needed to be qualified. What do we mean by political movement? And what do we mean by transformational? It was at this point that I found a similar set of questions in a study by Asef Bayat. However, while his work dealt with the same issue of transformation of social and political movements, he examined the Arab Spring and why it did not lead to more structural political change in the Middle East. He explains that while the Arab Spring had revolutionary mobilization, it was on a reformist trajectory due to a lack of revolutionary ideology and due to the monopoly influence of neoliberal ideals within the movement. This proved to be a solid launching point for my quest. My feelings about American politics derived from the massive widespread activism from the Black Lives Matter movement, similar to that of the Arab Spring. My pessimistic views on the outcome of said mobilization evokes the same conclusions that Bayat makes about the Arab revolutions: that Black Lives Matter lacks an ideological anchor and is constrained by the same neoliberal sensibilities that deflated the Arab Spring.

This critical role of revolutionary ideology in political mobilization becomes more apparent with some examination of the Black Power movements of the 1960s and the more recent mobilizations of BLM. In chapter one, I analysed the evolution of the Black Panther Party and the story of its ideology. There were clear links between its radical ideology and the

transformational aims and strategies of the movement. The Black Power movement was a culmination of various distinct currents of thought such as separatism, internationalism, Islamism, and socialism all wrapped up in Black Nationalism. These aspects of the Black Power movement made up the backbone of the BPP and influenced its radical trajectory. The Panthers armed its members, formed a ten point plan, communicated specific demands, and formed an internationalist aim. Using Bayat's framework, I concluded that several elements of the Black Panther Party were quite transformational and were anchored by a constellation of ideologies. In fact, their challenge to the legitimacy of American Empire was so pertinent, it led to a full scale counterinsurgency from the FBI.

If we accept the premise that ideology is necessary for political change, can we say for certain that the current mass mobilization in the U.S., similar to the Arab Spring, will settle into an exclusively reformist trajectory? In chapter 2, I described the Black Lives Matter movement and its evolution since it emerged as a hashtag in 2013, then to emerge as a largely horizontal organization. This horizontalism led to mass mobilization, fuelled by real political discontents, but according to Bayat's criteria, it did not produce the kind of mobilization capable of diagnosing and challenging the structural relations of power and authority that underlie the violence captured on a phone camera in Minneapolis and elsewhere. Rather, it is a mobilization that responds to the injustice of George Floyd's death as a result of excessive police power, but remains too distant from the injustices George Floyd suffered throughout his life as a result of routine functions of neoliberal political and economic forces. I believe that this movement evokes the same reformist shortcomings that are clearly identified and predicted in Bayat's framework. Similar to the Arab Spring, BLM is a product of a "post-ideological" era of

movements. However, the gradual development of BLM into an organization shows that large scale social movements in the post-ideological era form differently from their ideological counterparts. I concluded that although BLM ultimately does fall in line with the neoliberal paradigm, in that it fails to directly challenge the economic structure responsible for racial injustice, its evolution signifies that there is a potential for more comprehensive analysis of state violence and class structure. Black Lives Matter may be a movement in search of an ideology.

My project was predicated on the acceptance of Bayat's claim that we are living in a post-ideological time. In future research, it would be valuable to interrogate this claim directly. Possibly by charting the transition between the ideological era and the post-ideological era. This would provide a better understanding of the way that neoliberalism took root as the dominating ideology.



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