

## *Recognition and Redemption: Visions of Safety and Justice in Black Lives Matter*<sup>1</sup>

### Reconhecimento e redenção: visões de segurança e justiça no movimento Black Lives Matter

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**ABSTRACT:** In this paper, I recover and appraise the principal ways in which movements motivated by the ideal of racial justice have sought to transform how questions of police and punishment are imagined and acted upon. The focus of the enquiry is the visions of safety and justice found in Black Lives Matter. I offer an interpretive reconstruction and appraisal of the core claims found with the Black Lives Matter movement and their ideological lineage and affinities. The paper seeks to understand those claims anthropologically, from the inside, trying to offer a best-case rendition of their contexts and appeal. It also seeks to situate these claims politically (while recognizing diversity and avoiding the imposition of some spurious unity) with a view to grasping the normative character of the alternative plausible world that Black Lives Matter projects and seeks to usher into being. My claim is that one finds in Black Lives Matter a tension between a politics of self-determination and a wider politics of transformative redemption.

**KEYWORDS:** Black Lives Matter; racial justice; recognition; police.

**RESUMO:** Neste artigo, recupero e avalio as principais formas pelas quais movimentos motivados pelo ideal de justiça racial têm buscado transformar o modo como policiamento e punição são imaginados e postos em prática. O foco da investigação são as visões de segurança e justiça encontradas no movimento Black Lives Matter. Proponho uma reconstrução interpretativa e uma avaliação das reivindicações centrais encontradas no movimento e sua linhagem ideológica e afinidades. Neste artigo procuro entender essas reivindicações antropologicamente, de dentro, tentando oferecer uma best-case rendition do contextos e dos apelos formulados. Também procuro situar politicamente essas reivindicações (ao mesmo tempo em que reconheço a diversidade e evito a imposição de alguma unidade espúria) com vistas a apreender o caráter normativo do mundo alternativo plausível

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que o Black Lives Matter projeta e busca inaugurar. Minha afirmação é que se encontra no Black Lives Matter uma tensão entre uma política de autodeterminação e uma política mais ampla de redenção transformadora.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Black Lives Matter; Justiça Racial; reconhecimento; polícia.

*The arc of the moral universe is long, and it will bend toward justice if we bend it’.*

*(Mckesson 2019: 6; emphasis in original)*

*History will not judge this movement by the list of things we oppose; it will judge us based on the vision we put forth for the new world, for the alternate future (Adams and Rameau 2016: 517)*

## INTRODUCTION

In the face of persistent police violence, the stubborn realities of mass incarceration, and enduring racial disparities in criminal justice, it is easy to overlook the ways in which social movements organized around questions of Black identity, recognition and racial justice have impacted upon the politics and practice of criminal justice over the last half-century. The neglect of these movements tends to be a feature of many of the most influential macro accounts of criminal justice politics of recent times. Such accounts tell a story of the rise and apparent hegemony of neo-liberalism, or the enduring appeal of conservatism, or the emergence of a new nativist populism, in ways that can overlook how these dominant ideologies have since the 1960s been contested by new ideas and social movements struggling for recognition for systematically excluded populations. Yet these movements – and their animating ideas – have contested and re-shaped crime and penal politics, not only in the USA and UK, but across the globe. As we shall see, they continue to do so. Movements for civil rights and racial justice have unsettled established notions of harm, protection and victimhood, creating new lines of contestation and prefiguring alternative futures of safety and justice. Any attempt to map the contested ideological space of public safety must make room for consideration of these alternative political visions.

The politics of identity and recognition (not only around race, but also around gender, sexuality, disablism, and their intersecting effects) emerged from a critique of, and attempt to move beyond, the two dominant

progressive ideological positions of the twentieth century. It emerged, first, from a critique of socialism and social democracy and its organizing focus on class politics and ideals of the common good or public interest. These ideals, the argument ran, effaced the distinct experiences of different marginalized groups – blacks, women, lesbians and gays – and silenced their voices in an act of reductive and spurious unification. The politics of identity was built, secondly, upon a critique of procedural liberalism and its focus upon creating colour – or gender – blind practices that valued and protected the common humanity and equal worth of individuals, but in ways that erased the collective identities and particular experiences of marginalized groups. Identity politics sought – conceptually and practically – to move beyond a politics of impartiality that made the setting aside of group difference the entry ticket to equal citizenship. The thread that has arguably connected the resulting political contests – especially those of feminism and anti-racism – is the ‘struggle for recognition’ (Fraser 1995; Honneth 1995).

Policing, criminal justice and punishment have been key institutional sites for pressing political demands for recognition, especially around questions of gender and race. In this paper, I recover and appraise the principal ways in which movements motivated by the ideal of racial justice have sought to transform how questions of safety and protection are imagined and acted upon. This is a large topic and it needs some boundaries. So the focus of the enquiry is the political visions found in Black Lives Matter.

## THE IDEA OF BLACK LIVES MATTER

In the anger that followed the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis on 25<sup>th</sup> May 2020, Black Lives Matter became a slogan that people across the world – black and white, young and old – deployed to register abhorrence at police brutality and signal their belief in racial justice. It appeared on posters and placards, on t-shirts and face masks, in the windows of people’s homes, in corporate and organisational branding. But Black Lives Matter is not simply a sentiment, or rallying cry. It also a social movement. It came into being in 2012, when following the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the killing of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin on 26th February 2012, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Khan-Cullors and Opal Tometi expressed their outrage at another needless and unaccountable Black death using the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter (Khan-Cullors and Bandele 2017). The fledgling movement gained impetus during the protests that followed the

police killings of Michael Brown in Ferguson and Eric Garner in New York in 2014. The movement spread across the US. The killing of George Floyd six years later further catapulted the movement to prominence. Black Lives Matter now has over 30 autonomous local chapters throughout the US, and others across the world. It has become a global movement for racial justice<sup>3</sup>.

Like many social movements it is focused on mobilizing and organizing, tactics and strategies. It places value on local autonomy, horizontal organizing and networking. It has no established hierarchy, founding texts, or identifiable spokespeople. Its orientation is to expose, publicize and critique – especially police brutality and killing. It situates police violence in a long history of racialized control and places itself in a lineage of anti-racist struggle, from anti-slavery uprisings to the civil rights and Black power movements of the 1950s and 1960s (Ransby 2018).

But, as Christopher Lebron argues in *The Making of Black Lives Matter*, it is also an idea. It is a movement that draws on ideas, that is animated by ideas, that is generative of ideas. It issues policy positions and has political goals. The hope that Black Lives Matter inspires flows from its radical imagination, the capacity to conjure a better future. This message resonates through the memoir of Black Lives Matter activist DeRay Mckesson. Mckesson's re-working of Martin Luther King's famous remark about the long arc of history bending towards justice sets aside faith and its certainties. Progress towards justice is not pre-ordained. Instead, Mckesson opts for hope and its possibilities. Hope means refusing to surrender to trauma as a condition of the world and the will to fashion something new. This requires many things. Among those things are ideas and imagination, virtues that Mckesson refuses to dismiss as 'the soft, feel good aspect of the work of justice' (2019: 113). Without imagination, Mckesson writes, 'we will never win'. He continues:

A radicalism that is at its heart about dismantling the status quo in favour of an unimagined 'better future' is not in fact radicalism, but actually a cold detachment from reality itself. To be radical implies having an idea in juxtaposition to the dominant one. (2019: 129)

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3 Khan-Cullors' reflection on this can be found at: <https://medium.com/@patrissemariacullorsbrignac/we-didn-t-start-a-movement-we-started-a-network-90f9b5717668#.lOoku76m3>. On Black Lives Matter UK see <https://blacklivesmatter.uk/>. The focus of this paper is principally on the US, not least because of the abundance of material there which enables one to 'get at' the alternative political visions that are mobilised by the movement.

My aim in this paper is to excavate this idea or, more precisely, the family of ideas that may be located in, and distilled from, the angry protests sparked by the police killing of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and so many others. What different futures, what alternative political visions, animate Black Lives Matter? Can one identify any distinctive political ideology or programme? How should these alternative visions be located politically? My task is to reconstruct and sympathetically interpret these political visions, and to assess the normative character of the preferred conceptions of a better politics of safety and justice one finds in Black Lives Matter.

There is no simple answer to these questions. Nor is the task of answering them a self-evidently obvious or virtuous one. The attempt at an ideas-centred understanding of Black Lives Matter stands in contrast to three other possible readings of the movement. The first views Black Lives Matter as one of a number of anti-capitalist, anti-racist social movements (the ‘Occupy’ movement is another) that prize autonomous organizing, horizontal networking, and nimble-footed flexibility. Such movements have no wish to be hidebound by rigid or doctrinaire ideologies that are laid out from above. Their actions do not flow from theoretical texts or manifestos<sup>4</sup>. They stand ‘quite explicitly opposed to the idea that what the movement needs is an alternative vision of how the world should look’ (Tormey 2004: 75). On this view, Black Lives Matter prioritizes concrete struggles and practical actions, and to do this effectively it needs to operate without and beyond the strait-jacket of ideology (see, generally on this point, Soborksi 2018: ch. 2).

A second take on Black Lives Matter doesn’t deny its ideological situatedness or influences, but holds that these influences are too diverse to be able to pin-down. On this view, the movement doesn’t possess any coherent ideology. It follows that any attempt to ‘fix’ the political identity of Black Lives Matter will be necessarily partial or reductive. Such efforts are either destined to alight arbitrarily on certain influences at the expense of others, or else are attempts to fold Black Lives Matter into some pre-existing political category. In a generally sympathetic portrait of the movement, written in the aftermath of George Floyd’s killing, Adam Shatz vividly

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4 In this respect, Lebron (2017: xiii) contrasts Black Lives Matter’s lack of ‘philosophical moorings’ with the tome *Black Power* that Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton (1967) penned to inspire the black power generation of the 1960s. Electronic copy available at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3840766> 4.

captures this problem of political fluidity: ‘The protestors offer an inchoate mix of Marxism, anti-colonialism, Black Power rhetoric, intersectional feminism, radical self-care and (this is America, after all) an appeal to Jesus and other prophets’ (Shatz 2020: 7). How an earth is one going to discern coherence in all that?

A third reading of Black Lives Matter can be found in the discourse favoured by some among its activists and supporters. The claim here – sometimes explicit, often implied – is that certain positions or preferred outcomes (such as defunding the police, or abolition, or reparations) follow logically or naturally from an acknowledgement of the history of colonial occupation and systemic racism. On this view, the task at hand is not to make a case for certain preferred futures; it is to ‘educate’ others in the facts of racial domination and expect particular courses of action to flow from social recognition of Black suffering. This position may be an understandable reaction to the asymmetries of power which Black Lives Matter seeks to overturn. But it overlooks the aforementioned political diversity that is to be found *within* Black Lives Matter. It also results in a curiously technocratic mode of radical politics, a form of left de-politicization of the issues at stake. It says: once you have ‘done the work’ of learning Black history, and acknowledging Black experience, you are bound to agree that this particular outcome follows.

The ideas-centred account of Black Lives Matter I propose pushes back against all three of these readings. It is possible to recognize the virtues of flexible organizing and pragmatic flexibility without being committed to the view that Black Lives Matter is somehow free of ideology. The latter is an implausible position. Black Lives Matter may not possess either a ‘thick’ or even a ‘thin’ ideology – to borrow the terms proposed by Freeden’s morphological analysis (see further, Loader 2021). Black Lives Matter does though propound ‘a set of ideas and beliefs with the aim of... contesting or changing the social and political arrangements and processes of a political community’ (Freeden 2013: 32). This imaginative capacity is, as Mckesson notes, integral to its appeal as a vehicle for political transformation. There may thus be value in enquiring into the content and persuasive force of these ideas and beliefs.

Protestors against police brutality do not march with a single voice. Their demands are for many things with respect to policing, and about much more than policing. We must recognize that Black Lives Matter is ‘more of

a quilt than a monolith’ and take care not to prematurely or reductively ‘fix’ its political meaning<sup>5</sup>. But none of this is to deny the possibility, or value, of seeking to discern the central claims that animate the Black Lives Matter movement, or identifying the points at which these claims borrow from, extend, or dispute the focal concerns and core concepts of ‘established traditions of political thought’ (Soborski 2018: 82). Such an exercise in ideological mapping may help us to grasp more fully the ways in which Black Lives Matter contributes to a better politics of safety and justice.

By so doing, we can also resist the vices that follow from insisting that the claims of Black Lives Matter flow unproblematically, and without argument, from the historical legacies and present realities of Black experience. We can instead treat these demands seriously by bringing them fully into the ideological fray, pinpointing the ways in which they extend or transcend the boundaries of political contests over crime and justice, and reckoning with them as one plausible, but contestable, political vision. This is part of what it means to think about Black Lives Matter politically.

What follows then is an interpretive reconstruction and appraisal of the core claims found with the Black Lives Matter movement and their ideological lineage and affinities. This means seeking to understand those claims anthropologically, from the inside, trying to offer a best-case rendition of their contexts and appeal. It means situating these claims politically, while recognizing diversity and avoiding the imposition of some spurious unity. It means trying to give shape to what often seems diverse and frayed, with a view to appraising the normative character of the alternative plausible world that Black Lives Matter projects and seeks to usher into being. This requires, in turn, a methodological approach that is consistent with Freeden’s claim that ideologies are historically situated collective products. This means attending to the US history, social structure and politics out of which Black Lives Matter comes, while being open to the ways in which its claims circulate, and have purchase, beyond the American context. It also means being sensitive to the diverse sources and locations of Black Lives Matter’s ideological production – theoretical treatises, political tracts, memoirs, policy statements, zines, campaign toolkits, social media, and so

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5 <https://spokesman-recorder.com/2020/06/26/defund-the-police-should-lead-to-community-control-of-resources/>.

forth. If we are to better understand the movement's political identity and promise, our search must proceed across all these domains.

## **REFUSING AND RADICALISING LIBERALISM: ON REDUCING POLICE HARMS**

BLM is a movement animated by police violence and which has a set of programmatic demands that starts with police. We need to begin our excavation there. The departure point of the campaign to critique and defund the police in the United States is an arresting historical and sociological claim: that American policing is not oriented to crime prevention and public safety, but to racialized control, to keeping Black people in order and in (their) place. In poor Black neighbourhoods, police are how government is experienced (Soss and Weaver 2017). Crime, in American life, has long served as a proxy for racism, a coded means of voicing supremacist sentiment. Police brutality and killing are part of the Black American experience (Muhammad 2011). So too is legal impunity, and the white denial or endorsement, that attends and facilitates these killings. It is a rare event indeed for a police officer to be prosecuted, still less convicted, for violating Black bodies. This critical starting point is well-expressed in this statement from the group Critical Resistance:

Policing is a social relationship made up of a set of practices that are empowered by the state to enforce law and social control through the use of force. Reinforcing the oppressive social and economic relationships that have been central to the US throughout its history, the roots of policing in the United States are closely linked the capture of people escaping slavery, and the enforcement of Black Codes. Similarly, police forces have been used to keep new immigrants 'in line' and to prevent the poor and working classes from making demands. As social conditions change, how policing is used to target poor people, people of color, immigrants, and others who do not conform on the street or in their homes also shifts. The choices policing requires about which people to target, what to target them for, and when to arrest and book them, play a major role in who ultimately gets imprisoned.

One striking dimension of BLM responses to police brutality is an evident impatience with the liberal reform agenda that typically presents



when a police killing makes the headlines (most don't). The reform repertoire – implicit bias training, procedural justice, body-worn cameras, more black cops, progressive police chiefs – is taken to have routinely promised and time and again failed to make policing better. In the aftermath of George Floyd's death, reform has become the enemy. 'Why on earth', asks the BLM activist Mariame Kaba in the *New York Times*, 'would we think these same reforms would work now?'<sup>6</sup> In a similar vein, Bruce Dixon warns against being sucked in by 'proceduralism'<sup>7</sup>. Proceduralist schemes fail, the argument runs, because they do not fully grasp the role the police play in shoring up the American racial order. In the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015: 78):

You may have heard the talk of diversity, sensitivity training and body cameras. These are all fine and applicable, but they understate the task and allow the citizens of this country to pretend that there is a real distance between their own attitudes and those of the ones appointed to protect them. The truth is that the police reflect America in all of its will and fear.

Black Lives Matter makes three kinds of demands in respect of police. The first springs from a certain kind of liberalism, or at least a recognizably liberal sensibility. We need to use liberalism with care here. The jumping off point for Black Lives Matter is that the liberal police reform agenda is wanting because it lacks a critical assessment of the problems the state is asking the police to solve, and naively overlooks the active role police and punishment play in 'racecraft' (Fields and Fields 2012) – defining racial boundaries and imposing racial categories and reputations (see also Bell 2017; Soss and Weaver 2017). So the liberalism of which BLM partakes is not one that sees the state as a neutral umpire. Nor does BLM share a liberal faith in the police as an impartial force subjecting everyone equally to law, and offering everyone the equal protection of law – what Alex Vitale calls 'a liberal fantasy that the police exist to protect us from bad guys' (Vitale 2017: 32). Nor does it invest hope in the due process protections of individual rights that are the hallmark of procedural liberalism. Rather, Black Lives Matter shares with liberals a fear of the state and the harm that it causes, and borrows and radicalises the idea the state power stands in need of urgent and constant watching. As Alex Vitale (2017: 25) puts it: 'countervailing

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6 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/opinion/sunday/floyd-abolish-defund-police.html>.

7 <https://truthout.org/articles/the-complexities-of-black-community-control-of-police/>.

institutional bases of power must be positioned to monitor police actively and thoroughly’.

This is very much the spirit that animates groups such as Campaign Zero which emerged during the protests against the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson in 2014. The group was set up to promote immediate measures to mitigate the detrimental impact of policing in Black neighbourhoods and reduce the harm done by police. ‘We can’, the group claims, ‘live in a world where the police don’t kill people by limiting police interventions, improving community interactions, and ensuring accountability’. In pursuit of this world, Campaign Zero proposes the following solutions: ending broken windows policing and police departments profiting financially from aggressive ticketing; policies to minimize the use of force; prohibitions on the purchase of military equipment; ensuring public access to body-worn-camera footage and establishing a right to film the police; de-escalation training; the creation of independent investigations against police abuse; stronger community oversight, and replacing police hiring with a programme to recruit community mediators. It is a capacious agenda of police reform.

In the midst of ongoing protests against police brutality Campaign Zero also developed a set of concrete steps to combat police violence called #8CantWait<sup>8</sup>. The campaign claims that ‘research shows that more restrictive use of force policies can reduce police killings and save lives’. It then sets out eight measures that can ‘bring immediate change to police departments’ – namely: a ban on chokeholds and other neck restraints; requiring officers to de-escalate, to give a verbal warning, and to exhaust all alternatives before using deadly force; a duty on officers to intervene to stop excessive force by other officers; a ban on shooting at moving vehicles; establishing a clear use of force continuum<sup>9</sup>, and a duty upon officer to report each time they use or threaten force. These measures are set out in the graphic below. Campaign Zero has more recently mobilized behind proposals – termed #NixtheSix<sup>10</sup> – to reduce the power of police unions, including ending police bill of rights laws, stopping the destruction of police misconduct records, and ensuring community representation in union negotiations. The focus here is to remove police unions as a roadblock to accountability.

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8 <https://8cantwait.org>.

9 By which is meant “a spectrum governing what kinds of weapons can be used against different types of resistance”.

10 <https://nixthe6.org>.



A number of things are striking about this strand of BLM politics. The measures listed above – and cognate demands such as a ban on no-knock entry, an end to qualified immunity, and strategic non-response (Bell 2017) – are animated by an overarching vision of equality; they are a call for the police to treat Black Americans with dignity. The focus is on steps that reduce the harm that the police do *now*; steps to limit the police power to harass, stop and frisk, maim and kill Black people with something close to impunity. These demands are also advanced in a frame that is data-driven and information-heavy. They make a claim to be grounded in research evidence; they locate examples of current good practice that can be replicated or up-scaled; they offer model examples of use-of-force policies or fair police union contracts. According to Samuel Sinyangwe, the data scientist at Campaign Zero, this focus is deliberate. The aim is to assemble ‘policies that can make a big difference and that can be implemented most quickly by cities across the country’<sup>11</sup>.

This way of advancing the political goals of Black Lives Matter is not without its critics as we shall see. These critics charge that it is too cautious and makes too many concessions to the status quo. Such proposals, critics allege, ‘remain comfortably within the technocratic, meliorist domain,

11 <https://www.vox.com/2020/6/5/21280402/8-cant-wait-explained-policing-reforms>.

rather than amounting to a radical transformation of policing'<sup>12</sup>. The focus on limiting police violence risks 'reifying the state', when, 'we need a discourse that gives our communities clear alternatives and new visions, new imaginings of public safety' (Heatherton 2016: 34; see also Murray 2020). In this spirit, the NGO Human Rights Watch urged US government officials to reject the #8Can'tWait campaign, which it dismissed as proposing 'only minor and ineffectual changes'<sup>13</sup>.

The focus on accountability, however, is not the product of deep conviction, but rather of a felt requirement to do things that will reduce harm in Black communities right now! As activist DeRay Mckesson puts it: 'we must work to change the conditions of our lived reality *today*, while maintaining the commitment to changing the core power structures that led to the conditions that caused us to fight in the first place' (Mckesson 2019: 125; emphasis in original). The same holds, arguably, for the borrowing of certain liberal dispositions and positions. That borrowing is tactical rather than principled. It is the take up of liberalism not as a set of abstract values – save perhaps for the important value of equal dignity – but as a source of vital, here-and-now protections, what one might term liberalism as a defensive crouch. This is not liberalism as an inspiring vision of the future, but as a survival strategy in the present.

## DEMOCRATIC SELF-DETERMINATION: BLACK COMMUNITY CONTROL OF POLICE

A second family of demands made by Black Lives Matter is rooted in ideas of democratic self-determination. These demands also begin with an act of refusal – the refusal to be seduced by incorporation into hollow practices of police consultation. They draw a sharp distinction between extant practices of civilian oversight and future visions of community governance. The former are limited to public input into police policy-making and ex-post review of police actions. The alternatives proposed involve developing, and experimenting with, deeper democratic forms of ex-ante neighbourhood *control* over police decisions, with the aim of tackling police violence against Black people and aligning police departments with the experiences of harm and desire for safety found in Black neighbourhoods (Simonson 2020). The aim is a power transfer from the police to the community. This is

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12 <https://www.vox.com/2020/6/5/21280402/8-cant-wait-explained-policing-reforms>.

13 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/09/us-reject-8cantwait-policing-program>.

often attended by proposals for participatory budgeting – people’s budgets – that enable citizens to decide, not simply police priorities, but on the range of investments and interventions required to resolve conflict and produce order in structurally disadvantaged Black communities. In both cases, it is a vision of democratic contestation and participatory democracy.

Proposals for empowering Black communities against the police have emerged in various forms. One of them is organized practices of ‘cop-watching’. Simonsen (2016) describes cop-watching as a form of grassroots politics that rejects ideas of deliberation and consensus in favour of a more contestatory, agonistic stance towards police power. Cop-watching typically involves ‘organized groups of local residents who patrol neighbourhoods, monitor police conduct, and create videos of what they see’ (Simonson 2016: 410). Such groups aim to deter police abuse in real time, gather data about police malpractice, and engage in ground-up debate on the meaning of constitutional norms and protections. As such organized cop-watching seems to be a variant of the kind of defensive liberalism I have just described – its purpose is to keep vigilant watch over state power. But Simonson suggests it is more than that: it is, she argues, a civic practice that combines participation and accountability, a mode of collective resistance that ‘shifts power, creates agency and sparks legal imaginations’ (Simonson 2016: 1609).

A second more institutionalised mode of power shifting is to be found in proposals for Black community control of police. This is an idea with established roots in Black liberation struggles. It was a key demand of the Black Panther Party which in the 1970s launched (unsuccessful) ballot initiatives for community control in Berkeley, Oakland, Richmond and San Francisco (Altshuler 1970). It has re-surfaced again in the last decade with varying degrees of institutional specificity and organizational momentum. To its proponents, ‘Community Control of Police must be the central demand of this moment’<sup>14</sup>. It is a demand claimed to have more transformative potential than more renowned – and debated – calls to defund the police. It is no less than ‘the democratic right of the African community to hire, fire, train, discipline and control anyone who operates as a security force within our communities’<sup>15</sup>.

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14 <https://www.blackagendaareport.com/community-control-vs-defunding-police-critical-analysis>.

15 <https://www.theburningspear.com/2020/07/Black-Community-Control-of-the-Police-is-what-we-need>.

In 2016, the Movement for Black Lives issued a policy programme that demanded, in this spirit, ‘direct community control of local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies, ensuring that communities most harmed by destructive policing have power to hire and fire officers, determine disciplinary action, control budgets and policies, and subpoena relevant information’<sup>16</sup>. This was accompanied by a call for participatory budgeting – in police and across public policy – that extends ‘successful participatory budgeting experiences around the globe and in the United States, in particular in Brazil’. Since 2012, an organized campaign has been afoot – led by groups such as Black Lives Matter Chicago and the Black Youth Project 100 – to create an elected Civilian Police Accountability Council in Chicago (Rahman and Simonson (2020:704-70)<sup>17</sup>. Such a Council would, *inter alia*, appoint the police superintendent, set a budget, create regulations for the governance of the police department, negotiate and approve union contracts, hear disciplinary actions, and review and sign off all new police policies.

The most detailed proposal for community control of police has been put forward by Adams and Rameau (2016), with support from Pan-African Community Action and the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression<sup>18</sup>. The proposal is to divide cities, towns and counties into police districts, residents of which are then balloted on whether to retain their police department, or disband it and establish a new one. In districts that vote for the latter, Civilian Police Control Boards would be created (see graphic below). These Boards would not be a review or oversight body. Rather, they entail a shift in power from the police to the community which means that ‘people will have a direct say in who has the right to carry guns, detain, arrest, and use force in their community in the name of the state’<sup>19</sup>. On this proposal, the rotating membership of the Boards would be determined not by election (which can be subverted by money and dominated by special interests). It would be done by random selection, giving residents in turn the chance to exercise power and agency. The Board would be a bi-cameral authority, one half given over to deciding priorities and policies, the other with the enforcement of those policies, including the power to discipline

16 <https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/community-control/>.

17 <https://www.blackagendareport.com/whole-damn-system-guilty-hell-taking-control-police>.

18 <https://thenextsystem.org/learn/stories/community-control-over-police-proposition>; and <https://naarpr.org/up-dates/campaign-for-community-control-of-police/>.

19 <https://thenextsystem.org/learn/stories/community-control-over-police-proposition>.

and fire police officers. By creating an institutional vehicle through which ‘entire communities are empowered to exercise control’, Adams and Rameau argue, ‘we will be free to re-imagine and re-envision the very nature of policing itself’. They continue:

By unleashing our power and creative energy, we can build a new vision of what police can do to truly serve and protect our communities. We suspect that this vision, and its implementation, might be so radically different and unrecognizable from what we today call ‘policing,’ that we just might be forced to rename the institution.<sup>20</sup>



This vision of Black community control of the police can be situated politically in several different ways. We might note first that, in the course of lively debate within Black Lives Matter<sup>21</sup>, it is presented by its advocates at the most transformative demand of the movement; more so than calls to defund the police. As Black Agenda Report editor Glen Ford argues: ‘Absent community control, defunding of police will only result in a shrinkage of the domestic army of occupation, not a change in the lethally oppressive relationship’<sup>22</sup>. By contrast, community control ‘directly confronts the

20 <https://thenextsystem.org/learn/stories/community-control-over-police-proposition>.

21 See, for example, <https://theanalysis.news/interviews/community-control-vs-defunding-the-police/>.

22 <https://mronline.org/2020/06/19/community-control-of-the-police-and-a-whole-lot-more/>.

issue of power in the here and now'<sup>23</sup> and 'transforms the power dynamic between police and citizens'<sup>24</sup>. Community control is about breaking the link between police and white domination and re-locating authority over the police in Black communities. The focus is less on 'policy answers and more on the institutional configurations that can alter the balance of who governs' (Rahman and Simonson 2020: 693). It offers Black people the capacity to transform the means and the meaning of public safety. In this regard, community control is couched either as a liberatory demand in its own right, or as a step on the path towards more radical transformations in public safety for Black communities. Glen Ford again:

Although there is no intrinsic contradiction between the three most-voiced demands of the current movement – community control of police, defunding the police, and abolition of policing as we know it – only proposals for community control of the police directly confront the issue of power in the here and now, and also address demands for direct democracy and Black self-determination.<sup>25</sup>

Community control is advanced, secondly, as a claim to de-colonize and democratize the police. In respect of the former, it serves as an act of severance and separation – uncoupling the police from the US state and racialized control, and freeing Black neighbourhoods from their status as 'domestic colonies' ruled from the metropole. As Adams and Rameau (2016: 538) put it: 'deconstructing the historical relation between the police and the Black community'. In terms of the latter, community control is an act of re-location, re-making the police as servants of Black neighbourhoods and speaking to 'demands for direct democracy and Black self-determination'<sup>26</sup>. It builds both political agency and countervailing power within Black communities (Rahman and Simonson 2020: 690). In both cases, this demand of Black Lives Matter borrows the legitimating ideals of American democracy. It is a demand to locate police authority 'in the will of the people'; or as Adams and Ramaeu put it, to ensure that 'democratic institutions are grounded in the consent of the governed'<sup>27</sup>. But it is also a demand to radicalise and

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23 <https://www.blackagenda-report.com/community-control-police-and-whole-lot-more>.

24 <https://popularresistance.org/community-control-of-police/>.

25 <https://www.blackagenda-report.com/community-control-police-and-whole-lot-more>.

26 <https://www.blackagenda-report.com/community-control-police-and-whole-lot-more>.

27 <https://thenextsystem.org/learn/stories/community-control-over-police-proposition>.



extend those ideals so that they work for poor Black neighbourhoods. As Glen Ford puts it:

Nothing could be more democratic than the notion that the people most affected by the criminal justice system should have the decisive voice in how the system operates. But, such notions clash with the principles of bourgeois electoral democracy, in which majorities rule, and with the cold reality of elections under capitalism, in which money has the decisive voice.<sup>28</sup>

Community control is, in sum, grounded in a radical experimentalist vision of local governance and self-determination. It anticipates a world of engaged democracy and democratised policing. As such, it remains free of the doubts about its emancipatory potential expressed by, for example, Bernard Harcourt: 'It is hard to know how a community of people will manage the police function, Unless we work on transforming the way in which people in general respond to crime statistics and blotters, unless we neutralize the force of Black criminality in this country, it is unlikely the just shifting control over the institution of policing is going to solve our problems'<sup>29</sup>. Proponents of community control are also notably free of the concerns that have attended the promotion of democratized policing elsewhere on the ideological spectrum, as well as the fears that trouble its liberal detractors. What is strikingly absent from this vision of self-governance is any worries about majoritarian tyranny emanating from within Black neighbourhoods, or concerns about what might happens to Black or Hispanic minorities in communities where local white majorities acquire (or retain) control of the police, or fears of a descent into populism<sup>30</sup>. It is a future vision of democratic self-determination for a Black community imagined as a unified, virtuous whole and not therefore in need of individual protections from the group. It is democracy without – or beyond – liberalism.

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28 <https://truthout.org/articles/the-complexities-of-black-community-control-of-police/>.

29 <http://blogs.law.columbia.edu/abolition1313/bernard-e-harcourt-introduction-to-3-13-on-police-abolition/>.

30 Though some within Black Lives Matter worry about precisely this prospect. As Amuchie puts it 'We still have too many hierarchies and contradictions within the Black community to ensure a subset of people with police power would not replicate the same violent institutional power. The problem with policing is not who controls it or who can enforce its protocols. The problem with policing is that policing is inherently violent and always patriarchal'. <http://hoodcommunist.org/2020/09/10/community-control-of-police-v-defunding-police-addressing-the-patriarchal-roots-of-policing/>. See also <https://inthesetimes.com/article/carl-christian-williams-police-control-abolition>.

## THE RADICAL SOCIALIZATION OF PUBLIC SAFETY: ON DEFUNDING THE POLICE

When I see police, I see 100 other jobs smashed into one thing with a gun<sup>31</sup>.

If you grew up in a well-off, predominantly white suburb, how often did you interact with a cop? Communities with lots of good jobs, strong schools, economies, and social safety nets are already, in some ways, living in a world without police<sup>32</sup>.

The third family of ideas advanced by Black Lives Matter – demands that have intensified and circulated globally in the period since George Floyd's killing in May 2020 – can be found in calls to 'defund the police'. This is an umbrella term that carries several meanings, expressed in different vernaculars. Defunding is, at minimum, a call to stem the upward flow of spending on American police departments and to control police violence by reducing the scale of the police and its extensive reach across American life. But defunding the police is not simply an exercise in budget-cutting: it also means investing those funds elsewhere. It is to think and act on questions of safety, poverty, education, addiction, homelessness and mental health in ways that prevent them from defaulting to the police to handle – with all that has entailed for Black Americans. Defunding is finally, and most radically, an invitation to imagine and work towards a world without – or beyond – police. This is not a call to abolish the police tomorrow. Rather, abolition works as a 'utopian horizon' that reimagines urban life and governance, and harm prevention and public safety, without resort to police (Akbar 2020). The idea – and attendant task – is to loosen the imaginative grip of police fetishism, to break the seemingly 'natural' association between order and police. In these respects, abolition is simply the most thorough-going version of the idea that unifies calls to defund the police: the radical socialization of public safety.

In Black Lives Matter literature, this overarching idea is commonly captured in the mobilizing slogan 'disempower, divest, disband'<sup>33</sup>. But its transformative – and well as critical – ambitions are rather better expressed by BLM activist Mariame Kaba who describes defunding the police as a

31 [https://southsideweekly.com/who-are-theorganizers/?fbclid=IwAR1HpXdJBdIPNEM7g\\_fZF3jko1vplpRKW-CRF3eeodEOWdNd19aABzQVimaM](https://southsideweekly.com/who-are-theorganizers/?fbclid=IwAR1HpXdJBdIPNEM7g_fZF3jko1vplpRKW-CRF3eeodEOWdNd19aABzQVimaM).

32 <https://www.mpd150.com/what-are-we-talking-about-when-we-talk-about-a-police-free-future/>.

33 See, for example, [https://issuu.com/ftpzines/docs/gbnf\\_zine\\_all](https://issuu.com/ftpzines/docs/gbnf_zine_all) and <http://aworldwithoutpolice.org>.

politics of ‘divesting, investing, and experimenting’<sup>34</sup>. This captures well both the ‘deconstructive’ and ‘imaginative’ moments (Akbar 2018) of the defunding the police movement. So let us use Kaba’s triptych to organize our reconstruction.

We need first to recall that the three panels of this triptych have a common starting point – a refusal of reform, a radical break from the liberal idea that through recruitment, training and technology the police can be made better, friendlier, more responsive to Black communities, adherent to legal standards. BLM’s historical claim is that American policing has – since its roots in slave patrols – been bound up with the subjugation of Black people and the protection of white supremacy: ‘From their inception, police institutions have actually served to defend the property of the wealthy and powerful, while maintaining working class people and people of color in poverty and desperation. Doing this job requires beating, caging and killing’<sup>35</sup>. The attendant sociological claim is that violence and brutality ‘is an inherent part of police and policing’, not an aberration that can be mended<sup>36</sup>. Kaba is particularly critical of the idea that Black communities are ‘over-policed’ and ‘under-protected’. The former claim ignores the fact that ‘the police monopoly on the use of force is not tangential or incidental; it is constitutive. That means we won’t be able to excise just the “violence” part of police violence while preserving the rest. Violence is central to police work’. As for the ‘under-protection’ argument: ‘It assumes police failing to protect marginalized people is a bug rather than a central feature of policing’<sup>37</sup>. These linked claims amount to a denial of the distinction between good and bad policing. There is just policing. Police violence against Black people not simply a matter of ‘bad apples or bad attitudes’. It is officers doing their job, the system ‘working as it is supposed to’ (Akbar 2018: 28). Police violence is the result of ‘what police *must be and do* in America. The only way to stop the violence is to abolish the police’<sup>38</sup>. From this vantage point, it is

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34 <https://gen.medium.com/to-stop-police-violence-we-need-better-questions-and-bigger-demands-23132-fc38e8a>.

35 <http://aworldwithoutpolice.org>. See further on this history Muhammad (2011) and Hinton and Cook (2020).

36 <https://gen.medium.com/to-stop-police-violence-we-need-better-questions-and-bigger-demands-23132-fc38e8a>. Theoretical elaborations of the police-violence linkage can be found in Neocleous (2008); McLeod - (2013) and Ristoph (2014).

37 <https://gen.medium.com/to-stop-police-violence-we-need-better-questions-and-bigger-demands-23132-fc38e8a>.

38 <http://aworldwithoutpolice.org>.

melioristic, liberal reform – not abolition – that looks like naïve, utopian fantasy.

The first aspect of the defunding movement is the most literal: divest. It involves a series of measures designed to shrink the budgets, size and scale of the police. These, for example, and the *immediate* demands of the group #8toAbolition (see graphic below). Such demands are presented as a critique of, and obvious counterpoint to, the aforementioned claims for urgent action proposed by #8Can'tWait, which are dismissed as 'dangerous and irresponsible, offering a slate of reforms that have already been tried and failed'<sup>39</sup>. Reforms, such as these, which fail to reduce the power of the police, 'simply create new opportunities to surveil, police, and incarcerate Black, brown, indigenous, poor, disabled, trans, gender oppressed, queer, migrant people'. Instead, #8toAbolition propose what they term 'non-reformist reforms' (Gilmore 2007: 242), 'measures that reduce the scale, scope, power, authority and legitimacy of criminalizing institutions'<sup>40</sup>. These include reducing police budgets, cutting officer salaries, ending hiring, and reducing the power of unions, as well as a range of measures to disarm and 'de-militarise' the police. A similar set of proposals emanate from the Interrupting Criminalization Project at the Barnard Centre for Research on Women, which frames its key demands as follows: (i) shrink police department budgets; (ii) shrink police department size; (iii) shrink police department scope; (iv) shrink police department equipment; and (v) shrink police department power. Mariame Kaba encapsulates the spirit of these demands well: 'If you care about the violence of policing, then you should want as little policing as possible in any form. You wouldn't want to keep legitimizing policing as a response to various societal problems'<sup>41</sup>.

These proposals are not, however, limited to reducing police budgets. The related ambition is to reduce the large police footprint on American life and disrupt what is viewed as the colonization of social institutions by police officers, technologies and logics. So police should be removed from hospitals; universities should discontinue their partnerships with police departments, and police should disengage from schools – the site of intense

39 <https://www.8toabolition.com>.

40 In this respect, campaigns for police abolition draws on a much longer history of prison abolitionism, both in the US (Davis 2003) and Europe. It is striking, however, how little Black US abolitionism appears to draw from European abolitionist perspectives dating back to the 1970s (Mathieson 1974).

41 <https://gen.medium.com/to-stop-police-violence-we-need-better-questions-and-bigger-demands-23132-fc38e8a>.

police intervention over recent decades and a proximate cause of the school-to-prison pipeline. As Alex Vitale (2017: 55) puts it: ‘we need a complete break with idea of using police in schools. They have no positive role in schools that couldn’t be better handled by non-police personnel.’ In part, this is resistance to the material expansion of *police* officers and technologies ‘into many institutions, including social services, health care provisions, and educational settings, and professions, including social workers, medical providers and teachers’<sup>42</sup>. But it is also to challenge the spread of *policing* ideologies and methods across these institutions. Mariame Kaba again: ‘we cannot call for social workers to replace police if they’re imbued with the same mandates of surveillance and coercion’<sup>43</sup>.

Black political leaders have since the 1970s made demands for public investment to tackle the criminal violence and multiple disadvantage that blights Black neighbourhoods; but what they routinely get is more law enforcement (Forman 2017). Against this backdrop, Black Lives Matter’s aim is not simply to cut the budget of ‘one over-funded segment of the state’ (Camp and Heatherton 2016: 4). The second panel of the BLM triptych is replete with proposals to invest those resources elsewhere. As the Movement for Black Lives puts it: ‘When we talk about defunding the police, we’re talking about making a major pivot in national priorities. We need to see a shift from massive spending on police that don’t keep us safe to a massive investment in a shared vision of community safety that actually works... We must divest from excessive, brutal, discriminatory policing and invest in a vision of community safety that works for everyone, not just an elite few’<sup>44</sup>. As this intimates, this is not a call for a world that is entirely unknown, but for access to the gamut of social goods that is already enjoyed by privileged white Americans: ‘we know the safest communities in America are places that don’t center the police. What we’re looking for already exists, and we already know it works. We need look no further than neighborhoods where the wealthy, well-connected, and well-off live, or anywhere there is easy access to living wages, health care, quality public education, and freedom from police terror’<sup>45</sup>.

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42 [https://issuu.com/interruptingcriminalization/docs/defund\\_toolkit](https://issuu.com/interruptingcriminalization/docs/defund_toolkit).

43 <https://gen.medium.com/to-stop-police-violence-we-need-better-questions-and-bigger-demands-23132-fc38e8a>.

44 <https://m4bl.org/defund-the-police/>.

45 <https://m4bl.org/defund-the-police/>.

What this requires, according to one Defund toolkit, is a ‘commitment to imagining, identifying, building and resourcing the skills, relationships, institutions, and practices necessary to meet community needs, ensure accountability, repair, and transformations of conditions that contribute to harm, and create conditions that enable everyone to thrive’<sup>46</sup>.

The kinds of public investments needed to realise this vision include quality, affordable housing; a living wage; universal basic income; programmes to strengthen Black families and homes; ‘programs that will create sustainable jobs for Black youth’, and investing in economic and employment opportunities for Black communities<sup>47</sup>. 46 The Movement for Black Lives calls for a reallocation of funds to ‘long-term safety strategies’ such as education, local restorative justice, and employment programs. It proposes a decriminalization program, focusing on the expungement of drug related offenses and prostitution, and ‘the reinvestment of savings into restorative services, mental health services, job programs and other programs supporting those impacted by the sex and drug trade’. It also demands: ‘Real, meaningful, and equitable universal health care that guarantees: proximity to nearby comprehensive health centers, culturally competent services for all people, specific services for queer, gender nonconforming, and trans people, full bodily autonomy, full reproductive services, mental health services, paid parental leave, and comprehensive quality child and elder care’<sup>48</sup>.

Programmes of this kind arise not only from a critique of policing and claim that police resources should be re-routed elsewhere. They also flow from an historical analysis of Black exploitation and are integral to a wider demand from BLM for economic justice and reparations. The above proposals are, in other words, about wider recognition of the harms inflicted by racial capitalism on Black communities and lives (Robinson 1983). They demand some degree of economic redistribution to materially improve the conditions of Black people<sup>49</sup> as well as reparations for the historic and

46 [https://issuu.com/interruptingcriminalization/docs/defund\\_toolkit](https://issuu.com/interruptingcriminalization/docs/defund_toolkit).

47 See, for example, <https://sccinsight.com/2020/11/04/black-brilliance-research-project-delivers-preliminary-budget-recommendations-to-city-council/>. A similar set of remedies for addressing violence in black communities can be found in Currie (2020: ch. 5).

48 <https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/invest-divest/>. #8toAbolition relatedly demands “city funding towards healthcare infrastructure (including non-coercive mental healthcare), wellness resources, neighborhood based trauma centers, non-coercive drug and alcohol treatment programming, peer support networks, and training for healthcare professionals”.

49 <https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/economic-justice/>.

ongoing oppression of Black people, from the transatlantic slave trade and chattel slavery to the impact of racialized economic disparities caused in the present by neoliberal restructuring and the war on drugs (Coates 2014)<sup>50</sup>. Myerson and Smith (2015), in this spirit, articulate a positive vision of social transformation. They call for economic justice for Black people, arguing that such justice is what it takes for Black lives to fully ‘matter’. In so doing, they draw an intellectual lineage from the Civil Rights Movement, citing Martin Luther King’s demand for full employment, universal healthcare and accessible housing. They argue that ‘eliminating racism requires an economic program’, as racial inequality has been historically predicated on the economic exploitation of Black people, which has continued after Emancipation to this day. They contend that ‘drug abuse, violence and educational failure don’t breed poverty; poverty breeds *them*’. On this view, the moral failings frequently attributed to Black communities by American society are in fact about the inequality of access to material resources. Tackling racism means reapportioning these resources more equitably<sup>51</sup>.

The third panel in the BLM triptych is both the most radical and the hardest to situate politically. It is a call to abolish police and experiment with new, alternative practices of public safety. We should take care to specify what is being claimed here. It is not a demand to disband the police overnight. ‘Abolition is a process, not a Thanos snap where all cops just instantly disappear’, according to a zine produced by Minneapolis community group MPD150. ‘Rather, we’re talking about a gradual process of strategically reallocating resources, funding, and responsibility away from police and toward community-based models of safety, support, and prevention’<sup>52</sup>. Nor is abolition an aspiration that neglects the social realities of harm, or casually invites chaos. These are the fears of those who, as Kaba puts it, ‘envision a society as violent as the current one, merely without law enforcement’<sup>53</sup>. What is offered, however, is an invitation to think about public safety without or beyond the police and punishment, and to break what has come to be seen as the ‘natural’ association between criminal violence and police. As Kaba points out, there is nothing natural at all about

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50 See <https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/reparations/> and <https://m4bl.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Reparations-Now-Toolkit-FINAL.pdf>.

51 <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/economic-program-blacklivesmatter/> and <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/abolish-police-instead-lets-have-full-social-economic-and-political-equality/>.

52 <https://www.mpd150.com/what-are-we-talking-about-when-we-talk-about-a-police-free-future/>.

53 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/opinion/sunday/floyd-abolish-defund-police.html>.

that linkage. The police's symbolic power (Loader 1997) requires, and is the product of, daily practices of political socialization:

It's not simply that we can't imagine a world without police, but that we are disciplined into not having that imagination. Cop shows and other pro-law enforcement propaganda are an important way of naturalizing policing. Children's books, cartoons, comic books, Lego toys, Officer Friendly programs in schools, and other popular culture artifacts past and present – all condition us into being unable to imagine a world without police. Cops are lionized in monuments, memorials, and highway signs. Cops are usually portrayed as heroic. We're told that they are the bulwark between order and complete chaos. It's hard to think of any other occupation that approaches this type of public relations effort. Why does law enforcement need so much advertising? There are no television shows uplifting the contributions of child care workers, but they are essential to ensuring the functioning of modern society.<sup>54</sup>

Nor is abolition simply an oppositional claim, a call for coercive institutions to be dismantled. It is not a politics of absence, but a project of reclamation and renewal (Davis 2005; Kaba 2021). It makes a positive demand focused on safety and security in Black communities – 'but not at the hands of the police' (Vitale 2017: 228). As Campaign Zero organizer DeRay Mckesson (2019: 44, 47) puts it: 'Chief in our desire for a well-functioning community is, among other things, the desire that order is preserved, that conflicts be managed in ways that both make us safe and make us *feel* safe. Police positioned themselves to be the first defence. But they do nothing to equip people to make better choices, to manage conflict without intervention.... Will we always need a response to conflict? Yes. Do we need the police as they currently exist? No' (emphasis in original).

But how, in the transformed world that BLM envisions, is public safety to be conceived and sustained? What 'clear alternatives and new visions' can be discerned (Heatherton 2016: 35)? Part of the answer to that question we have considered already. A large part of the case for directing resources away from the police, and building public infrastructure, is that doing so will reduce criminal violence and prevent harm in Black neighbourhoods. As BLM co-founder Patrice Cullors puts it: 'Our movement' must 'reclaim the idea of public safety as access to jobs, healthy food, and shelter' (Heatherton

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54 <https://gen.medium.com/to-stop-police-violence-we-need-better-questions-and-bigger-demands-23132-fc38e8a>.



2016: 36). This is a vision of safety expanded and re-cast as a project of meeting basic human needs (see, further on this, Friedman 2021). It rests upon, and mobilizes, an explanation of criminal violence that locates its causes in what Elliot Currie (2020: 8) calls ‘continuing marginality, neglect and structural disadvantage’ in Black neighbourhoods, and proffers solutions rooted in economic equality and racial justice. It is a demand for structural prevention, not surface coercion: ‘Abolitionists want everyone to be safe. We’re just acknowledging that there are other ways to think about “safety” than armed paramilitary forces with a proven track record of racism, brutality, and a focus on responding to harm after it’s happened rather than de-escalating or preventing it in the first place’. In these respects abolition is not an anarchistic project of dismantling government. Instead, it involves building and resourcing (and learning to trust) a transformed social state whose task is not coercive brutality, but to fund, allocate and deliver basic common goods: ‘How does [abolition] translate into actionable demands? A certain social democratic “common sense” fits in this framing: a universal right to cradle-to-grave care (healthcare, education, child and elder care) and a basic right to life (housing, a job or income, etc.). To make these common goods and not forms of social policy that police, they need to be universal and de-commodified’<sup>55</sup>. In sum:

Abolition means, fundamentally, the returning of resources, not their revoking. Taking away police and prisons is meaningless if they are not replaced with the resources that prevent violence – housing, health care, mental health services, public education, nutritious food, transportation etc. When we say ‘abolition’ we are talking about taking back the resources that have been extracted from our communities and funnelled towards their militarization. We are talking about reclaiming them, and channelling them into the options and opportunities that make our communities healthier, happier, and stronger. This is the safety we seek.<sup>56</sup>

To sceptics, this take on public safety might look evasive. It appears either to hope or imagine that violence and conflict will – to borrow an old Marxian term – wither away in a transformed world of Black liberation. Or it seems to neglect the question of how to manage or resolve conflict in that transformed world, or on the long path towards it. This in fact is not the

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55 [https://issuu.com/projectnria/docs/policeabolition101\\_zine\\_digital\\_singlepages](https://issuu.com/projectnria/docs/policeabolition101_zine_digital_singlepages).

56 [https://issuu.com/ftpzines/docs/gbnf\\_zine\\_all](https://issuu.com/ftpzines/docs/gbnf_zine_all).

case, at least not entirely. What is apparent, however, in the ways in which responses to harm are envisaged in the world projected by BLM is a marked aversion to any form of *state coercion*, and some equivocation concerning the presence and legitimacy of coercion in social life *per se*. Let us explore further.

It is clear in this respect that BLM do not envision a world in which the coercive functions of the police have been re-directed to other – apparently softer – agencies of the state. As one police abolition primer puts it: ‘We can’t allow the argument for defunding the police to mean that the armed, uniformed police are bad, but the soft social police are good. The paternalistic power embedded in the “helping professions” must be dismantled, and the work that people in this sector do must instead support autonomous and community-embedded services that provide for individual needs.’<sup>57</sup> So state social workers are folded under the banner of unjustified, racialized coercion; social work located in Black communities forms part of what a transformed world might look like<sup>58</sup>. BLM imagines and works towards a world of police abolition in which the residual need for what DeRay Mckesson terms ‘intense intervention’ in social life is met by a range of organizations embedded in Black communities<sup>59</sup>. ‘A world without police will still have 911’, a Q&A released by MPD150 points out. ‘It will still have firefighters and EMTs. And across the US, there are hundreds of programmes and initiatives that “help” people without the police being the first point of contact.’<sup>60</sup> BLM literature is replete with grounded programmes and experiments of this kind – schemes whose ambitions and practice prefigure a world of abolition democracy<sup>61</sup>. The wider political aspiration involves materially and symbolically expanding the scope of community-based bodies that are able to sensitively manage social problems and de-escalate conflicts in Black communities: ‘Police abolition [means] we actively shift responsibility for community safety to the people who are best equipped to deal with those crises. Mental health service providers, social workers, violence interventionists, victim/survivor advocates, religious leaders,

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57 [https://issuu.com/projectnia/docs/policeabolition101\\_zine\\_digital\\_singlepages](https://issuu.com/projectnia/docs/policeabolition101_zine_digital_singlepages).

58 See, for example, <https://imprintnews.org/child-welfare-2/abolishing-policing-also-means-abolishing-family-regulation/44480>.

59 <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/tv/2020/06/01/amanpour-martin-luther-king-iii-deray-mckesson-george-floyd.cnn>.

60 <https://www.mpd150.com/what-are-we-talking-about-when-we-talk-about-a-police-free-future/>.

61 See, for example, <https://transformharm.org> and the examples described in McLeod (2021: 1628-1633).

neighbors, family members and friends – all of the people who really make up the fabric of a community – are better equipped to respond to crises than armed strangers who are statistically unlikely to live in the neighborhoods they patrol<sup>62</sup>. But abolition also means investing in community solutions to acts of criminal and especially gender violence – notwithstanding that ‘prevention efforts *will* reduce the number of violent crimes’ (emphasis in original)<sup>63</sup>. This means investing in violence interrupters tasked with de-escalating and defusing violence in communities<sup>64</sup>. It entails experimenting with, and ‘building [upon] restorative justice and transformative justice models’ that are already facilitating non-punitive responses to violence in Black neighbourhoods that emphasise healing for survivors and community accountability for perpetrators. They include:

Informal conflict de-escalation by neighbors, mediation responses that interrupt cycles of retaliation, and responses that leverage the moral authority of respected people in the community to intervene in patterns of violence before they escalate and to hold those who have done harm accountable. These solutions can be credited with substantial contributions to safety now.

The overarching vision here – the utopian horizon towards which these proposals are oriented – is of a world that has defeated and transcended racialized state coercion. It is a vision that thinks about and sustains public safety in Black communities without reference to police and punishment. The state remains a large and active institution in this world, but as the source of a range of basic social goods whose provision signals recognition of Black people as full and equal members of a democratic polity. This is an agenda for radical violence prevention. But the daily work of social regulation, of managing conflicts and responding to harms, is, on this view, no business of the state. That work is to be done within Black neighbourhoods, by and for the people who make their lives there. ‘An abolitionist society’, Patrice Cullors argues, ‘is rooted in the needs of the community first. It’s rooted in providing for and supporting the self-determination of communities’ (Heatherton 2016: 40). That self-determination means communities of active, self-governing citizens: ‘It’s going to involve a lot of community

62 <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ee39ec764dbd7179cf1243c/t/5f85c390635cac03f35913d5/1602601934251/What%27s+Next+Report+.pdf>.

63 [https://issuu.com/projectnria/docs/policeabolition101\\_zine\\_digital\\_singlepages](https://issuu.com/projectnria/docs/policeabolition101_zine_digital_singlepages).

64 <http://blogs.law.columbia.edu/abolition1313/bernard-e-harcourt-epilogue-on-abolition-3-13/>.

meetings, budget hearings, and neighbours talking to neighbours. It's going to be hard. It's going to take constant community buy-in and pressure on elected leaders'<sup>65</sup>. This is a vision of order – a rather Jane Jacobsesque vision (Jacobs 1961)<sup>66</sup> – as the product of embedded local institutions and a broadly shared set of norms. It involves people seeking to resolve conflict in ways that are participatory, non-punitive and without resort to coercion – though it is on this last point that one sometimes encounters silence or equivocation. The fantasy here is of a social world free of coercion. It is a fantasy that either posits Black communities as at least potentially coercion-free, or assumes that Black liberation will give rise to universal compliance with norms. It skates over the question of what happens if, for example, community violence interrupters are unable to defuse conflict. The more plausible utopia is one where coercion is parsimonious and non-dominating – part of what is sometimes required to regulate social life among equals, but no longer serving the project of white supremacy and racialized control.

## BLACK LIVES MATTER AND THE PLAUSIBLE WORLDS OF JUSTICE

Our goal is not to become white, thereby extending the reach of domination. We must end of the idea of domination as the organizing principle of society (Mckesson 2019: 92-93)

Black Lives Matter is a social movement provoked, at the surface, by police violence against Black people. But it is not in the end about policing. It organizes to end police brutality. But it has a vision beyond brutality. Black Lives Matter situates current brutalities within a long historical trajectory of entrenched racial domination – a trajectory it seeks to disrupt in order to chart a different course. Its vision of a plausible alternative world connects the ending of violence against Black people to more far-reaching questions to do with capacities and failings of the American state. Can that state, BLM asks, be reimagined and remade so that it becomes a source of provision and protection for Black people? Can state resources be re-oriented, and state programmes be created, in order to systematically reduce and prevent the violence and harm that afflicts the Black experience?<sup>67</sup> That vision also

65 [https://issuu.com/projectnia/docs/policeabolition101\\_zine\\_digital\\_singlepages](https://issuu.com/projectnia/docs/policeabolition101_zine_digital_singlepages).

66 I am grateful to Jonny Steinberg for drawing this comparison to my attention..

67 Though there is, it should be noted, an anarchistic strand of thinking within the BLM movement that calls for resistance to the state (in all its forms) in the name of a still to be created world of solidaristic, cooperative, communal governance (see, for example, Harney and Moton 2013).

poses deep, critical questions about the meanings, practices and sites of democracy, and anticipates a world of self-determination and engaged participatory democracy – one in which Blacks come to see themselves as co-authors of governing institutions, not simply their disposable objects. It is a world of non-punitive, communal responses to harm animated by values of reciprocity, accountability and repair, a world that is prefigured in current community organizing around public safety. It is a vision of what first W.E.B. DuBois (1935), and then Angela Davis (2005), termed ‘abolition democracy’.

But on what kind of critique of the American republic does this vision of abolition democracy rest? And what, in outline terms, does a politics of abolition democracy entail? The movement for Black lives seems poised here between two related tensions; a tension between de-fetishizing and immanent critique, and between what one might term a politics of Black self-determination and a wider politics of transformative redemption. Let me conclude with a few words on each.

The first mode of critique – what Harcourt (2020: 51-52) has recently termed “de-fetishizing” – seeks to unmask the founding principles of the American polity, and liberal ideals more generally, and expose them as little other than legitimating fallacies. The task is to pinpoint the ways in which the values of freedom, equality and democracy have since their inception been compromised by the material realities of the ‘racial polity’ (Mills 2015: ch. 6) and have no meaning, or liberatory promise, outside of systems of white supremacy and racial domination. On this take, Black Lives Matter offers a politics that strips away the illusions that shore up the carceral state, and ‘exposes the foundational lie of the United States as a free and democratic society’. ‘The political activism and rebellion of Black people bring that lie to the surface for all to see, throwing into question the actual nature of US society’ (Taylor 2016: 85). On this view, such activism does not aim to lay foundations for known concrete alternatives, but to clear the ground for as yet unknown possibilities. As Halberstam (2013: 6) puts it: ‘We cannot say what new structures will replace the ones we live with yet, because once we have torn shit down, we will inevitably see more and see differently and feel a new sense of wanting and being and becoming.’

Though elements of such anti-foundational critique and politics can clearly be discerned within Black Lives Matter, my reading in this paper has shown that BLM tends predominantly towards a second critical orientation.

This orientation seeks not to trash America's founding egalitarian ideals but to take their unredeemed transformative potential very seriously<sup>68</sup>.

It 'strives to reveal the ways in which our normative commitments are entangled with relations of power and domination' (Allen 2016: 205). But, in so doing, it seeks to expose the contradiction that has long existed between the emancipatory promise of equal respect and inclusive democratic governance and their partial, selective embodiment within a system of racial capitalism. Here Black Lives Matter engages in the practice of immanent critique (Jaeggi 2018: ch. 6). It takes the motivating political values, the very ideals that Americans – indeed, democrats everywhere – claim to hold central and dear, and turns these ideals against the rulers and systems of rule that make a parody of them for millions of poor Black Americans. In so doing, it deploys as its critical resources 'the very principles that [are] already in play in our polity' (Lebron 2017: 13). Its central contention is this:

American democracy cannot claim for itself the title of a liberal, well-ordered democracy so long as blacks are so often killed with impunity by private citizens or state agents, or as long as they earn lower incomes simply because of their skin colour, or as long as their children receive substandard education because of their ancestors. Indeed, the ideal of democracy, even if imperfectly practiced, requires that one's life chances not hinge on entirely arbitrary and irrational features like race. (Lebron 2017: 143-144)

A further, interconnecting, tension within Black Lives Matter concerns the extent to which it seeks to build a plausible world of self-determination and self-governance for those living in Black communities, or whether it practices a wider politics of social transformation which seeks to give institutional effect to egalitarian ideals – one which liberates Black communities, while at the same time extending an invitation to 'people who have been brought up hopelessly, tragically, deceitfully, to believe that they are white' (Coates 2015: 7) to forsake the privileges of whiteness, in exchange for being free (see also Taylor 2016).

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68 With the important caveat that many BLM activists have critiqued America's hegemonic role in foreign affairs in extremely sharp terms – for example, Angela Davis (2005) has written on the US military-industrial complex and its relationship to the occupation of Palestine, drawing a link between police brutality in the US and police brutality in the occupied territories. Several radical BLM writers would take issue with the project of only redeeming American democracy, without accounting for its impact on other nations and role in global capital movement.

As we have seen, both of these political forms can be discerned in the proclamations of the movement for Black lives. In so far as BLM is focused on either Black community control of the police, or replacing state coercion with community responses to harm animated by non-violence, accountability and repair, it would seem to be a politics of self-determination – carving out a protective space for Black people to govern themselves, free of the colonial domination of police and the incursions of the carceral state. A host of questions to do with the relation of liberated Black communities to the world beyond are left hanging here. Who, if anyone, can intervene to ensure that communal justice does not give rise to new forms of rights-abuse and suffering? What, if anything, is to stop white neighbourhoods from controlling ‘their’ police, or turning to private security to defend themselves?

But we have also found a complementary and wider political vision at play within Black Lives Matter. To the extent that abolition democracy – and the attendant recognition and emancipation of Black people – requires ‘some form of democratic-socialist governance with rights to employment, housing, healthcare and education’ (McLeod 2019: 1619; Davis 2005), that democracy requires a politics of redemption. Building a transformed social state not only depends upon alliances and coalitions that transcend racial, class and gendered subject positions. The maintenance and upkeep of such a state also depends, crucially, upon a cultural substrate of cross-class and cross-race solidarities. It requires citizens not only to see the benefits of a generous social infrastructure for them and their families, but a willingness to devote public resources (and their taxes) to the care of strangers. In so far as Black Lives Matter evinces a commitment to this vision, it partakes not of the particularistic politics of separation but of a politics of participative, egalitarian political community – a politics in which ‘arbitrary and irrational features like race’ have ceased to be an axis of structural discrimination, or a determinant of access to safety and justice.

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