Ariane Chebel d'Appollonia, PhD
Professor,
School of Public Affairs and Administration (SPAA),
Rutgers University–Newark

To Whom Black Lives Actually Matter? Reflections on the Efficacy and Sustainability of Ethno-Racial Coalitions

"It is true that all lives matter, but it is equally true that not all lives are understood to matter which is precisely why it is important to name the lives that have not mattered."
– Judith Butler[1]

Introduction

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement first emerged in reaction to George Zimmerman's 2013 acquittal for the death of Trayvon Martin. It was created by three women – Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi – who, in opposition to the male-dominated hierarchical style of leadership, intended to give special attention to the needs of Black women, Black queers, and Black transgendered.[2]

According to Garza, "Black Lives Matter is a unique contribution that goes beyond extrajudicial killings of Black people by police and vigilantes. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements."[3] Since its creation, the BLM campaign has sought to address a broad range of issues, such as a lack of economic justice and community control, and an inadequate protection of civil rights and liberties, as well as demanding a more effective fight against persistent racial prejudice and racial practices. The movement gained momentum during the riots that took place in Ferguson in 2014 after the killing of Michael Brown, and morphed into a large protest movement after the killing of Eric Garner, Michael Brown and numerous others. BLM protests peaked on June 6, 2020 when half-a-million people demonstrated over the death of George Floyd in nearly 550 places across the country. A total of 15-to-26 million participated in demonstrations during the summer of 2020.

Who actually supports the BLM movement? What are the main motives of the various ethno-racial groups that coalesce around its agenda? And what has been its impact to date? I address these questions by focusing on the evolution of race relations and multiracial coalitions in America today.

RUTGERS

UNIVERSITY | NEWARK

School of Public Affairs and Administration

From a Facebook Post to a Rallying Cry Across America

What began as a post on FB and then a hashtag on other social media a few years ago has now become the largest social movement in U.S. history. It now encompasses over 30 chapters in the U.S. and abroad, including a dozen Black-led organizations, as well as affiliated non-Black groups (such as Mijente and Asians for Black Lives). Support for BLM increased by nearly as much as it had over the previous two years in the weeks after the death of Floyd, with over half of American voters (52 percent) supporting the movement in early June compared to only 28 percent opposing it.[4]

This growing support for BLM demonstrations has been sustained by a significant shift among Americans, who have become increasingly aware of the scope of racial inequality. According to a poll conducted in June, for example, 69 percent of Americans believed the death of Floyd reflects a "broader problem in the way Black people are treated by police" (up from 43 percent in 2014).[5] Another poll found that 76 percent of Americans consider racism and discrimination a "big problem" (up from 51 percent in 2015).[6] Indeed, measured in terms of levels of support and number of protesters, BLM has already achieved more than all the civil rights marches in the 1960s.

Who specifically supports the BLM agenda? There are certainly significant variations in the perceptions of BLM, symptomatic of the intense political and racial polarization that developed during the Obama administration and culminated after Trump's election in 2016. Not surprisingly, 88 percent of Democrats supported BLM in August 2020, compared to 46 percent of Independents and only six percent of Republicans. The effects of this political polarization are twofold. First, as racially conservative whites rejected Obama's Democratic Party, the remaining Democrats have become more racially liberal. As a result, those white liberals who have remained in the party are, in fact, more enthusiastic about diversity than other groups. In 2018, 87 percent of white liberals surveyed reported believing that ethno-racial diversity makes the U.S. a better place to live – compared to only 54 percent of Black respondents, 46 percent of Hispanics, and 42 percent of non-liberal whites.[7] In dozens of towns that held protests during the summer of 2020, the population was exclusively white; nearly 95 percent of counties that had a protest were majority white; and in nearly three-quarters of the counties the protestors were more than 75 percent white. Second, and conversely, white conservative opponents to BLM have radicalized their counter-protests. Their patterns of mobilization range from relatively peaceful, if often hostile, Trump supporter rallies to the use of extreme violence by white supremacists.

How have minorities responded to BLM's greater prominence? Black, Hispanics and Asian communities share a sense of frustration and anger. Black Americans overwhelmingly feel that they are more likely than whites to experience excessive police force (87 percent, up from 77 percent in 2016), a belief shared by 63 percent of Hispanics, Asians and other minorities combined (up from 27 percent in 2016). When it comes to the protests themselves, support has reached unprecedented levels: 88 percent among Blacks, 64 percent among Hispanics, and 63 percent among Asians.[8]

Tensions nonetheless persist between Black and non-Black minorities, fueled by anti-Black feelings among Hispanics and Asians as well as a resentment that police killings of non-Blacks spark less outrage than police brutality against African Americans. Comparable friction persists between African Americans and white liberals, the former expressing the view that "sympathetic white people" are no help because "good deeds will not dismantle systemic oppression."[9] Some Black activists actually criticize BLM for being disorganized and too aggressive – as illustrated by a series of violent incidents involving some of its members or/and taking place during BLM's protests. For Barbara Reynolds, former civil rights activist, "activists in the 1960s confronted white mobs and police with dignity and decorum… But at protests today, it is difficult to distinguish legitimate activists from the mob actors who burn and loot."[10]

From Protests to Ethno-Racial Coalitions

Turning to the question of its impact, BLM protests have helped frame American politics. Issues of racial violence, discrimination, and violation of basic rights frame the current presidential debate, as well as the effect of the COVID crisis on the most vulnerable populations. There has been an unprecedented mobilization among liberals and minorities favoring political and socio-economic reforms. In a notable change of attitude, Americans are now more likely to say that the protests will help (53 percent) than hurt (34 percent) bring about racial justice and equality.[11] City councils in many cities have pledged to dismantle or reform their police department. New laws ban chokeholds. Yet a nagging question remains whether this means that these protests are setting into motion a sustained and widespread social, political change?

A Biden electoral victory will surely enhance the prospects for reform. But historical lessons are also instructive, notably the ethno-racial Black and white coalitions of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement who formed political alliances in the pursuit of social justice, civil rights, and economic equality. Other examples included those interracial minority coalitions formed locally, as illustrated by collaboration between African American and Mexican American activists during anti-poverty campaigns in California in the 1980s and 90s. These coalitions were actually more likely to happen when groups resisted a narrow race-based politics; were able to share a common perception of inter-minority relations; and could set aside short-term, group-specific considerations to jointly address fundamental social and political issues. Other contributory elements to their collective success were their ability to share common interests, and, over time, to develop trust and inherent respect for all coalition members. Collective mobilization benefited all groups when these conditions were fulfilled, leading, for example, to the election of many Black mayors in large cities who increased minority hiring and funding for minority business, even when the Black electorate was small. As Jason Rivera et al. note, these coalitions succeeded when they attempted "to decrease competition between ethnic groups within the coalition so that more benefits for the total racial-political coalition can be gained." [12]

In contrast, coalitions seeking narrowly defined goals, who espoused individualistic ideologies did not last long, often being used by group members to acquire individual benefits. Furthermore, as David Roediger succinctly suggested: "Common misery did not produce interracial unity in a simple way." [13] Being targeted by discriminatory discourse and policies created a sense of commonality but impaired collaboration for two reasons. First, the perception of a "linked fate" varied from one group to another, undermining a strong linkage between African Americans and Hispanics. For African Americans, "linked fate" related to the legacy of slavery and the resilience of racism in American society. For Hispanics, it referred to their "immigration experience" rather than their "discrimination experience" – especially among first generation members. The *Solidaridad* marches of 2016, when five million people across the country demonstrated against the anti-immigrant legislation H.R. 4437, were weakly supported by non-Hispanic minorities. Second, the perception of "linked fate" was weakened by class-based cleavages, religious diversity, country of origin, and other identificational factors. Identity politics based on intersectionality therefore provided strong incentives for mobilization beyond the ethno-racial divide; yet, it also led to what Nancy Ehrenreich described as the "infinite regress problem: the tendency of all identity groups to split into ever smaller subgroups, until there seems to be no hope of any coherent category other than the individual."[14] Both the Million Women March (1997) and the Women's March (2016) suffered from internal fragmentation which, in turn was detrimental to establishing a sense of solidarity between women sub-groups.

What's Next?

History teaches us that an inclusive agenda can also be exclusive, depending on the nature of in-group and out-group relations. Conversely, progress towards social justice can only be achieved when various groups agree on a basic definition of the public common good. Against this background, what are the future options for the BLM movement? The main challenge is to avoid two pitfalls. The first one is it turning into a brand supported by large corporations (from Coca Cola to the fashion industry) that may betrayed the original philosophy of the movement. An infatuation with "wokeness" may indeed be used by many who only intend to pay lip service in the fight against racial discrimination and injustice. The second challenge is the possible narrowing of the BLM agenda, risking alienating potential allies and thus leading to a fragmentation of the coalition engaged seriously with the substantive arguments made by the BLM movement.

The crucial strategic question therefore is: How to consolidate a large but effective coalition? Addressing this question is not an easy task, as disagreements have already emerged about the BLM's main objectives. Beyond the overwhelming condemnation of police brutality, various ethno-racial groups disagree – for example – about police reform and reparations, while elements express resistance to efforts to integrate public schools and neighborhoods. Balancing the uniqueness of the Black experience with more universal claims may require, first, an acceptance that all lives cannot matter until Black lives matter and, second, an acknowledgement that the quest for individual dignity is intrinsic to every ethno-group's struggle. Interestingly, BLM has inspired unprecedented coalitions around the world, grouping together white people and many outcast groups – from Dalits in India, Aboriginal tribes in Australia to segregated minorities in Europe. These coalitions should in turn inspired BLM when trying to be the spearhead of the fight against injustice in the name of human dignity.

This brief is based on the book manuscript entitled "Ethno-Racial Violence and Identity Politics: Lessons from Multiracial America" by Professor Ariane Chebel d'Appollonia.

[1] Butler (Judith). 2015. "What's Wrong With 'All Lives Matter'?" The New York Times, January 12. Available at https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/12/whats-wrong-with-all-lives-matter/.

[2] Black Lives Matter (BLM) is how the movement is commonly referenced. Actually, it is part of the Black Lives Matter Global Network (BLMGN) which is part of a larger constellation of groups included into the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL). See https://m4bl.org/black-power-rising/.

[3] Garza (Alicia). 2014. "A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement," *The Feminist Wire,* October 7.

[4] CIVIQS. 2020. Opinion Poll on "Black Lives Matter." Available at https://civiqs.com/results/black_lives_matter?uncertainty=true&annotations=true&zoomIn=true.

[5] Washington Post-Schar Poll. 2020. "Big Majorities Support Protests Over Floyd Killings," June 9. Available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/context/june-2-7-2020-washington-post-schar-poll/6b811cdf-8f99-4e28-b8f1-c76df335c16a/?itid=lk_inline_manual_2. Access August 27, 2020.

[6] Monmouth University Polling Institute. 2020. "Protestors' Anger Justified Even If Actions May Not Be," June 2. Available at https://www.monmouth.edu/polling-institute/reports/monmouthpoll_us_060220/.

[7] ANES 2018 Pilot Survey.

[8] Monmouth University Polling Institute. 2020. Op.cit.

[9] Smoot (Kelsey). 2020. « White people Say They Want To Be An Ally To Black People. But Are They Ready For Sacrifice?" *The Guardian*, June 29. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/29/white-people-ally-black-people-sacrifice. See also Blake (John). 2020. "How 'Good White People' Derail Racial Progress," *CNN*, August 2. Available at https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/01/us/white-liberals-hypocrisy-race-blake/index.html.

[10] Quoted by Wortham, op.cit.

[11] Gallup Poll, July 28, 2020. Available at https://news.gallup.com/poll/316106/two-three-americans-support-racial-justice-protests.aspx.

[12] Rivera (Jason), Miller (DeMond), and Wright (Deborah). 2008. "The Future Effectiveness of Racial-Political Coalitions in American Politics," *Journal of Public Management & Social Policy*, Spring Issue: 9.

[13] Roediger (David). 1991. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (NY: Verso Books): 204.

[14] Ehrenreich (Nancy). 2002. "Subordination and Symbiosis: Mechanisms of Mutual Support between Subordinating Systems," *71 UMKC L. REV 251.*

About Rutgers SPAA

The School of Public Affairs and Administration (SPAA) at Rutgers University–Newark, highly ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* and nationally and internationally accredited, motivates students to choose careers in public service and administration through its innovative degree and certificate programs. Rutgers SPAA generates knowledge and best practices in public affairs and administration while promoting accountability, transparency, and performance in the public and nonprofit sectors.

RUTGERS
UNIVERSITY | NEWARK
School of Public Affairs
and Administration

111 Washington Street
Newark, NJ 07102
973-353-5093

spaa.newark.rutgers.edu