Why “Black Lives Matter” Matters

Peter Skerry

For some months now, my wife and I have been taking long, pandemic-induced walks around the a uent suburb where we live just outside of Boston. Before the winter snows arrived, we were struck by the number of Black Lives Matter (BLM) signs we encountered—in something like an inverse ratio to the number of black Americans who actually live here, or could a ord to live here, or would even want to live here.

Such displays have much to do with the ease of, and increased demand for, virtue signaling in the age of social media. Yet the signs also reflect genuine outrage at repeated deadly encounters between black Americans and law enforcement. Whatever their considerable political ·B:î—Zò¨÷{~HŒAl¸xFWK§¿MmÛ 5æhåer/the 1964 Civil Rights Act, a third of a century a adopted, Nathan Glazer argued that “this country has a special obligation to blacks that has not been fully discharged.” Twelve years later, in

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> Through the second half of the 1990s and into the early years of the twenty-first century, public attention to the plight of poor black Americans seemed to wane. There was scant media attention to the problem of concentrated urban poverty (neighborhoods in which a high percentage of the residents fall beneath the federally designated poverty line), little or no discussion of inner-city challenges by mainstream political leaders, and even an apparent quiescence on the part of ghetto residents themselves.

This is precisely the void that BLM would soon fill. Today, Americans are talking about black Americans a lot.

Yet millions of other Americans have had enough of such talk. Many believe that the nation's obligations to African Americans were never their responsibility in the first place. Others feel that, a er decades of controversial or downright objectionable policies ranging from compensatory programs to a rmative-action quotas, whatever debts were owed have long since been retired.

Such sentiments have waxed and waned among substantial segments of American society since the 1960s. And in recent decades they have been exacerbated by the economic, social, and cultural strains resulting from post-Cold War globalization. Foremost among these have been the consequences of free trade and historically high levels of immigration, policies endorsed by elites across the political spectrum. To be sure, these have benefitted many Americans, especially the well-o . But they have also negatively a ected our less a uent citizens, white as well as black. To square this circle, elites have embraced, or at least gone along with, the notion that the interests and moral claims of "racial minorities"—or alternatively, "people of color"—are all equivalent, if not indistinguishable. Somehow this conceit is supposed to not only justify prevailing levels of immigration but also suggest specifically that the interests of Hispanic and Asian immigrants are not at odds with those of African Americans. Many of these same elites eventually embraced what has come to be taken as inevitable—America's emergence as "a majority-minority society." Lost in such rhetoric have been the continuing, even exacerbated challenges facing not only black Americans but also many white Americans.

Little understood and rarely acknowledged, these are the conditions that spawned Black Lives Matter and account for its having thrust itself,

or been thrust, into the role of the vanguard of the multicultural le . A few rabid souls have ferreted out what they regard as the Marxist foundations of BLM. But this gives its prime movers too much credit. BLM has been shaped more by post-modern cultural theory than by Marxism. By their own account, the three young women who ignited this proudly "leaderless" movement have been shaped primarily by feminism and queer theory. Hence their vitriolic critique of the male-dominated black church, not to mention the traditional family. And hence the largely unasked question: How do these hugely successful entrepreneurs plan to address the continuing plight of genuinely disadvantaged black Americans?

a majority-minority nation?

Prudence might have counseled discretion about the claim that white Americans are becoming a numerical minority. And curiosity might have led some analysts touting such claims to at least note that the Hispanics whose growing numbers have been driving this change do not typically regard themselves as a racial minority the way black Americans do. In fact, as o en as not they identify themselves on census forms as racially white. Yet the political logic embedded in multiculturalism has overwhelmed common sense and plain honesty, leading intellectual and then political elites across the ideological spectrum to adopt the view that in America the moral claims of all "people of color" are virtually the same.

Making matters worse has been the seeming obliviousness of these same elites to the declining earning capacity and living standards of millions of non-college-educated white Americans. It was just as claims of a majority-minority society became prominent that this demographic began succumbing to drug overdoses, alcohol-induced liver disease, and suicide — what economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton call "deaths of despair" — reflecting "a long-term and slowly unfolding loss of a way of life for the white, less educated, working class." Just before the millennium, the age-adjusted mortality rate for non-Hispanic whites age 45 through 54 began to increase, thereby reversing a decades-long decline for that cohort. This trend is unique among comparably wealthy nations, and its negative impact on life expectancy at birth for the U.S. population as a whole has taken us into what Case and Deaton tactfully describe as "unfamiliar territory."

This is not to deny the overall disadvantage of blacks in America, who die younger and are less likely to take and college and secure employ--2( )]d v(T)v23(d)54(-4(l)vs6243-v.2g v 62(i)5.2( )]n v3

broader movement, and that other minorities—along with whites sympathetic to the cause—must agree to participate not as equal partners, but as "allies." Indeed, despite the fact that Hispanics have come to be regarded as another racial minority whose grievances and claims are for all intents and purposes identical to those of blacks and whose numbers now dwarf theirs, BLM activists have fi

reveling in its Cold War victory over the Soviet Union, including many black Americans who were beginning to register real economic gains. One problem, which many refused to acknowledge, was the swelling number of undocumented migrants streaming across the U.S.-Mexican border, even as those migrants competed with poorly educated, economically marginalized blacks already living in the United States.

Then came the attacks of September 11, 2001. Immigration and border control took on new significance as critical to counterterrorism e orts and national security. The Immigration and Naturalization Service, a beleaguered and o en neglected agency of the Department of Justice, was absorbed into the new, high-profile Department of Homeland Security. Law-enforcement agencies redirected their energies away from drug markets and toward terrorism. And Americans became aware of a new minority that had long been present but was easy to overlook: American Muslims, many of whose co-religionists were our adversaries abroad.

Even starker disparities emerge in a 2016 report by Chicago's Police Accountability Task Force. Of the 404 lethal and non-lethal shootings by police from 2008 to 2015, 74% were of blacks, 14% of Hispanics, and 8% of whites—this in a city whose overall population is 33% black, 29% Hispanic, and 32% white. The report further notes that of the 1,886 Taser discharges between 2012 and 2015, 76% were against blacks, 13% against

isolated until late in the 20th century. Unrelieved stoop labor was the order of the day for much of that era, sustained by steady streams of workers moving back and forth across the relatively open border. Hardly thriving metropolises, the region's cities o ered only marginally greater opportunities. Fearsome law-enforcement outfits like the Texas Rangers helped police a system that verged on peonage. And mass-deportation programs during the Great Depression and the early 1950s (the latter

capitalists' desire . . . for cheap Mexican labor . . . enabled by Mexico's proximity and its large labor supply, can largely account for the persis-

sector, in academia, or especially in the barrio; and partly in the hope of heading o , or at least blunting, potential conflict with growing numbers of Hispanic immigrants. Black leaders at the local level — not to mention the typical taxi driver in, say, Washington, D.C. — dissented, sometimes loudly. But such views were not taken seriously, or were simply silenced.

One of the few black intellectuals to dissent was sociologist Orlando Patterson, who in 2001 wrote an op-ed for the *New York Times* fault-

Yet as Taylor points out, three of the six officers involved with Gray's death were black; the trials of all six ended in acquittals, mistrials, and dropped charges, with one black officer tried before a black judge by a black prosector. She also notes that at the time, Baltimore's mayor, police commissioner, public-school superintendent, city-council president, and half of the city-council members were black. "If the murder of Mike Brown

engage in it. According to Taylor, BLM adherents are attuned to "the futility of organization," especially "the top-down control of the civil rights establishment," and are therefore much more enthusiastic about "mass mobilizations, street demonstrations, and other direct actions."

At the heart of this critique of the civil-rights establishment is BLM's condemnation of the male-dominated black church. As Ransby a

a service provider's preoccupation with targeting resources to the needs of specific clienteles. What's missing is the *political* calculus necessary to bring groups with diverse needs and interests together into a coalition capable of delivering resources to all its various members. The former are processes of subtraction; the latter of addition.

Feminist theorists have sought to address this problem by developing the notion of "strategic intersectionality," which would presumably translate into what one BLM ally has called for: sanctuaries serving "not only undocumented people, but also non-immigrant Muslims, LGBTQIA people, Black and Indigenous folks and political dissidents." To be sure, any successful political actor must somehow juggle the contradictory forces of subtraction and addition. Yet declarations like this suggest that things may not add up politically for BLM.

Of greater concern is BLM's revival of the polemic against Daniel Patrick Moynihan for having called attention to the challenges confronting fatherless, female-headed black families. In this new iteration of the old critique, the o ender is Barack Obama, whom Taylor criticizes for having urged his fellow black Americans during his 2008 election campaign to take

> full responsibility for our own lives—by demanding more from our fathers, and spending more time with our children, and reading to them, and teaching them that while they may face challenges and discrimination in their own lives, they must never succumb to despair or cynicism; they must always believe that they can write their own destiny.

By contrast, BLM places the responsibility for achieving racial justice and a better life for black people squarely and exclusively on white America. Yet who exactly is "white" is unclear. Asian Americans apparently are, since they are not people of color—at least according to Nikole Hannah-Jones of the 1619 Project. As suggested above, over time Latinos are increasingly likely to regard themselves, and be regarded by others, as white as well. Perhaps at such a juncture, BLM's self-understanding as the vanguard of "a Black-led class struggle" will come to the fore, reinforced

argues in her recent book, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*, mass demonstrations organized via social media are prone to "tactical freeze"—an incapacity "to adjust tactics, negotiate demands, and push for tangible policy changes"—and consequently fail to deliver results. Movements like the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street were relatively easily built through social-media networks, resulting in massive protests attracting the attention of crucial elites. But as Tufekci shows, the fact that participants did not have to engage in the time-consuming, o en tedious work of building relationships and organizational ties deprived them of what was needed to maintain discipline, articulate agendas, and achieve real, lasting change.

Strikingly, Tufekci's model of a successful mass demonstration is the August 1963 March on Washington, which would not have occurred without the tireless work and organizational genius of the legendary Bayard

By attacking and denouncing the black church, BLM cuts itself o from the wellsprings of moral energy that ended legal segregation in America. Seeking to delegitimize the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, the 1619 Project similarly devalues the very political capital against which Reverend King presented a long-overdue promissory note on behalf of America's black citizens. Taken together, these developments threaten to deprive BLM and other such endeavors of any comparable source of ethical teaching or political legitimacy. BLM's many amorphous, networked, and transgressive manifestations may have struck a chord among Americans of diverse backgrounds and orientations. But that is only because the unique and compelling claims of black Americans remain to reckoned with.