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Final Exam

While the Black Lives Matter movement is often regarded as a reflection of prior Black power and freedom movements, it also stands as a challenge and a product of the type of conscience building that the Civil Rights movement fostered in the 1960s. The Civil Rights movement, due to the political opportunities and climate in which their organizing occurred, relied largely on organized, centralized leadership to advocate for reform within existing legal channels. The Black Lives Matter movement, with the advent of social media, utilized “leaderless” structures to instead campaign for the dismantling and abolition of the very institutions the “old guard” sought to transform. The movements converge in their desire to protect Black life, address the nuanced manifestations of oppression in America, and ultimately better the socioeconomic statuses of Black individuals and communities. While each movement sought different means to confront the ongoing project of white supremacy, they were both grounded in trying to expose how institutionalized forms of racism continue to evolve despite “progress.”

The Civil Rights movement sought to expose the failed promise of the 13th and 14th amendment by forging an America that represented the abstract language in its constitution. Their efforts to dismantle Jim Crow centered around inequity in transportation, education, voting rights, and the system of segregation at large. They

pursued nondiscriminatory distribution of resources for Black communities, looking at public schools, community development, and the use of separate facilities based on race. They aimed to secure legal protection and tangible legislation that would provide Black Americans the mechanisms to advocate for their specific needs in the same ways afforded to white Americans. They fought firstly for acknowledgement of racial injustice by white political leaders and institutions, accountability through tangible action, and then seats at the table to prevent future wrong-doing.

Activists from the Civil Rights movement pursued social change both through institutional channels and, as largely disenfranchised communities, through extra-institutional methods. The movement was characterized by coordinated messaging, Black institution building (i.e Freedom Schools and SNCC), carefully constructed protest infrastructure, and charismatic leaders who functioned as spokesman and liaisons for elite allies. By relying on Black church networks, they created a “large, tightly organized constituency; a communications network; an independent financial base; relatively safe meeting places in which to plan tactics and generate commitment; and most critically, the “common church culture” that could be directly applied to political goals” (Burns 9). The use of boycotts, sit-ins, protests, and freedom-riding aided in broadcasting their message by capturing the media, disrupting the comfort and security of white communities, and invoking hatred from white segregationists which only further legitimized their claims.

The Black Lives Matter movement built on the failed gains of Civil Rights legislation, working to undermine the myth of a post-racial era. While their goals were varied due to the decentralized nature of their organizing, they were galvanized by the

issues of police brutality, disproportionate imprisonment of Black populations, educational justice, and the economics of oppression. Their emphasis in every cause was to affirm that Black life is valuable and that it has not been treated as such by American institutions, which have instead profited off of Black death and imprisonment. Their focus on state violence “strategically pivots away from a conventional analysis that would reduce racism to the intentions and actions of the individuals involved,” thus allowing them to call for state action (Taylor 167). The intersectionality of their causes, with an explicit emphasis on Black women and LGBTQ folx, demands a “multidimensional” assault on racism that must be “fought on different fronts” (Taylor 167). For policing, activists’ aspirations ranged from demilitarization of the police to complete abolition, with most reformers focused on anti-racial profiling legislation, suspension of law enforcement who have used excessive force, and collection of data to document police abuse (Taylor 181). In their educational justice efforts, the movement calls for the dissolution of zero-tolerance policies, examination of the school-to-prison pipeline, and greater funding for public schools disadvantaged by red lining. Lastly, in an effort to address poverty within Black communities, the movement fought for unionizing of Black workers, an end to youth unemployment, and raising of the minimum wage.

The Black Lives Matter movement has favored online organizing to increase the accessibility of their movement and also foster a sense of pride by cultivating group identity. As one activist articulates, “I think what we are doing is building a radical new community in struggle that did not exist before... Yes, we need to address policy, yes, we need to address elections; we need to do all those things but on the heels of building

a strong community” (Taylor 175). In order to pursue the goal of centering Black queer folx and women, they have opted for a democratic structuring to their organizing which allows broader, more radical, visions to be incorporated. Their use of hashtags, protests, and marches encapsulates their anti-institution approach, as activists do not feel accepted by conventional political or legal institutions, which they argue offer only empty, white-centric forms of change.

In each era, the Black Lives Matter movement and the Civil Rights movement had to contend with the comfortability of the white public. More specifically the “success” of their organizing hinged on the degree to which they could provoke awareness and care from the white masses, with much of their demonstrating and messaging relying on pushing Black suffering into the light. The use of nonviolent direct action by the Civil Rights movement, sought “to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue,” dramatizing the problem so that it “can no longer be ignored” (Burns 20). [For both movements this has meant that their aims to secure Black life and prosperity have often been catalyzed by publicized Black death whether that be Emmett Till, James Chaney, Michael Brown, or George Floyd. Especially with the Black Lives Matter movement, the brutality of white supremacy had to be made tangibly apparent for the white public to recognize that discrimination and blatant racism still thrive. While the concept of civil rights was digestible for the white public, Black Lives Matter in their alignment with Black liberation, has in some ways abandoned fervent commitment to respectability politics.

Social movement politics in each era thus utilized the tactic of extending individual experiences with racism to “understand what is happening more broadly so as to start arguing what has to change” (Lecture). Within both movements, a reliance on personal narrative and the politicization of everyday life proved crucial for garnering media attention and placing their cause on the radar of elites, whether celebrity or political official. Activists from both eras arose from their own personal experience with injustice, and it is within the articulation of these narratives by either charismatic leaders from the Civil Rights movement or sharing via online platforms, that each movement gained popularity, sympathetic supporters outside of their direct communities, and the momentum to mobilize large numbers for protests/marches.

The most significant difference between the two movements is that, while both are notable for their imprint on the American psyche, the Civil Rights movement’s centralization allowed for more concrete demands and subsequent actions. While Black Lives Matter was able to gather mass amounts of funding and notoriety due to its accessibility, it significantly lacked a viable direction for its followers to build upon. As Taylor articulates, the challenge for the movement is “transforming the goal of ‘freedom’ into digestible demands that train and organize its forces so that they have the ability to fight for more, the movement must also have a real plan for building and developing solidarity among the oppressed” (186). Social media was able to easily and quickly produce for BLM what the Civil Rights movement had to painstakingly cultivate – which is organizing demonstrations. However, without the immense care and control exercised by leaders, social organizing such as this becomes more of a protest than a movement (Taylor).

The Civil Rights movement secured basic rights, promoting a certain political and social climate that made it possible for the Black Lives Matter movement to advocate for narrower rights. Their specific manifestations and tactics are symptoms of the political, cultural, and legal environments in which they were born. While the tools and leaders have vastly changed and therefore are in some sense incomparable, it is important to recognize that the society we inhabit is still producing the same conditions that cause activists to organize, and thus begs for radical change.