

# The Next Civil Rights Movement?

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DISSENT · SUMMER 2015

Kareem Jackson, a St. Louis hip-hop artist who goes by the name Tef Poe, was interviewed this February by a BBC talk show host about why the Black Lives Matter movement was necessary. A leader in the organization Hands Up United, which was founded in the wake of Michael Brown's murder, Poe explained: "One of the negligent areas of the civil rights movement is that we did not move the moral compass of racism to the right direction."

Though the 1960s movement addressed the civil and political rights that were denied to black people—access and use of public accommodations, the right to vote, and ensuring fair employment and housing opportunities—it did not directly confront the racialized degradation black people endured, and many continue to endure, at the hands of the police. What the Black Lives Matter protests have done, however, is not only put police reform on the policy agenda but demanded that American society reconsider how it values black lives.

Tef Poe had not been directly involved in politics until Brown's death. He was a struggling hip-hop artist who occasionally wrote a column for the *Riverfront Times*, an independent newspaper in St. Louis. One day, while checking his Instagram account, Poe noticed a post that shook him. It was a photograph of Brown's stepfather holding up a hand-written sign that read simply, "My unarmed child has been murdered by the Ferguson police." As he watched the wave of anger, disgust, and disbelief mount on his social media feed within hours of the shooting, Tef Poe knew he had to go to Ferguson. This is how he—along with legions of people across the country—was transformed into an activist, not just concerned with civil and political rights but with black humanity.

The protests that have erupted since the deaths of Brown and other casualties of police brutality have been extraordinary. Seemingly out of nowhere, a multiracial, multigenerational movement asserting black humanity in response to racist police killings and vigilante violence has ripped across

the country. The police brutality and killings are not, to be sure, new; the emerging movement against them, however, is. The upsurge in anti-racist organizing is a break from what we normally consider black activism in the United States. Each periodic wave of activism for the last half century—whether centered on electoral politics or protests—has traced its lineage to the “golden age” of the 1960s. But while there is a great deal of nostalgia in these comparisons, core activists of the Black Lives Matter movement have been quick to remind us that this current wave of protest “is not your grand-mamma’s civil rights movement.”

In a purely tactical sense, that assessment is correct. The movement’s use of technology to mobilize hundreds of thousands of people through social media is light years away from the labor that was once required to mobilize black people and their allies during the 1960s or even a few years ago. Jo Ann Robinson of the all-black Women’s Political Council in Montgomery, for instance, spent hours using a hand-driven mimeograph machine to crank out over 52,000 leaflets that announced a mass protest after Rosa Parks’s arrest in 1955.

Today, social media—particularly Twitter—can reach individuals throughout the nation and across the world in milliseconds, drastically slashing the time it takes to organize protests. As a recent *New York Times Magazine* spread noted, through Twitter, core Black Lives Matter activists like Johnetta Elzie and DeRay Mckesson, who are based in St. Louis, now have the ability to frame events and direct the actions of hundreds of thousands of people across the nation at their fingertips. Not only is social media a tool for mobilization, but the intense reporting on police brutality via social media also influences print and television coverage, which means that attention to such incidents has multiplied. Twitter and Facebook have, in this way, become documentary tools for Black Lives Matter activists, a way for them to become citizen journalists capturing the protests and police responses in almost real time. Indeed, for this reason, the spontaneity and the intensity of Black Lives Matter is more akin to other recent movements—Occupy Wall Street and the explosive protests in Egypt and Brazil—than 1960s activism.

Similarly, images of police violence are helping put pressure on municipal police departments to address these issues. Unlike the images of brutality that sparked outrage in the past—photographs of lynch victims hanging from trees during the age of Jim Crow or newspaper images of brutalized black bodies lying in a coroner’s office—we are now able to witness and document police violence as it happens. Videos from handheld phones and surveillance cameras have shown Marlene Pinnock being beaten by a California highway patrol officer, the ambush police shooting of John Crawford at a Walmart in Ohio, the chokehold death of Eric Garner in Staten Island, the drive-by police shooting of twelve-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland, and the crippling condition of Freddie Gray as he was arrested in Baltimore, before he eventually died.



Peaceful protests continue in Baltimore after a day of riots, April 28, 2015. Photo by Arash Azizzada via Flickr.

But it is not only technological and tactical differences that separate Black Lives Matter activists from their civil rights predecessors. When activists remind us that the Black Lives Matter movement is different from the civil rights movement, they are making a conscious decision to avoid mistakes from the past. They are rejecting the charismatic leadership model that has dominated black politics for the past half century, and for good reason.

This older model is associated with Martin Luther King and the clergy-based, male-centered hierarchal structure of the organization he led, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In the ensuing years, this charismatic model has been replicated, most notably through organizations like Jesse Jackson's Rainbow PUSH Coalition and Al Sharpton's National Action Network, but also by hundreds of other locally based activist organizations across the country. But Black Lives Matter activists today recognize that granting decision-making power to an individual or a handful of individuals poses a risk to the durability of a movement. Charismatic leaders can be co-opted by powerful interests, place their own self-interest above that of the collective, be targeted by government repression, or even be assassinated, as were Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. The dependence of movements on charismatic leaders can therefore weaken them, even lead to their collapse.

Instead, core activists of the Black Lives Matter movement have insisted on a group-centered model of leadership, rooted in ideas of participatory democracy. The movement has modeled itself after the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the 1960s organization that helped black Americans gain legal access to public spaces and the right to vote. Black Lives Matter organizers also operate on the principle that no one person or group of individuals should speak for or make decisions on behalf of the movement. They believe, as the legendary civil rights activist Ella Baker believed, that “strong people don’t need strong leaders.”

In some ways, the new tools of technology—particularly social media and especially Twitter—have facilitated the emergence of just such a bottom-up insurgency led by ordinary people, and have displaced the top-down approach of old guard civil rights organizations. But this model has also been adopted by design. For many young black Americans, leaders like Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, as well as heads of civil rights organizations such as the NAACP and the National Urban League, are no longer seen as the gatekeepers of the movement’s ideals or the leaders who must broker the interests of black communities with the state or society. Additionally, with the exception of Al Sharpton’s National Action Network, which has represented families of victims but has been less effective accomplishing police and prison reform, policing and mass incarceration have not been aggressively pursued by these more traditional organizations. And none, certainly, have adopted the disruptive protest tactics—the street marches, die-ins, bridge and tunnel blockades, and the intense publicity campaigns—that have helped Black Lives Matter force these issues onto the national political agenda.

Unlike the civil rights movement, the focus of Black Lives Matter—on policing in black and brown communities, on dismantling mass incarceration—is also being articulated less as a demand for specific civil or political rights, and more as a broader claim for “black humanity.” This insistence on black humanity has repeatedly been used by Black Lives Matter activists as a catalyst for political action. “If you can see a dead black boy lie in the street for four and a half hours and that doesn’t make you angry, then you lack humanity,” said Ashley Yates, a Ferguson activist and co-founder of Millennial Activists United, at a rally last October. Evoking humanity is used to express communal anger against police brutality, but also to mobilize those who aren’t acting. Yates explained further:

And at the very core of this is humanity—Black Lives Matter. We matter. We matter. Black lives matter because they are lives. Because we are human. Because we eat. Because we breathe. Because he [Michael Brown] had a dream, because he made rap songs, they

may have had cuss words in them. Yeah. He was human. And when we neglect to see that we end up where we are today.

Activists like Yates have also used the claim of humanity to challenge the politics of respectability, a black middle-class ideology that has its origins in the turn-of-the-twentieth century response to black people's loss of civil and political rights following Reconstruction's collapse. The politics of respectability is invested in changing the personal behavior and culture of poor and working-class black people, rather than squarely addressing the structural barriers that keep them locked into a perpetual state of marginality.

This appeal to humanity too has deep—though hidden—roots in the history of the black freedom struggle. The eighteenth-century anti-slavery campaign roused the consciousness of nations by pleading to those who kept them and profited from their bondage, “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?” The agitation of the anti-lynching campaigns of the first half of the twentieth century highlighted the inhumanness of mob violence against black people. Striking garbage workers fighting for a living wage in Memphis in 1968 carried with them placards proclaiming, “I am a Man.” But with the successful passage of major civil rights legislation—specifically the 1964 Civil Rights Act, 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the 1968 Fair Housing Act—and the expansion of these laws in subsequent decades, the language of civil rights came to dominate both the ideas and the strategies of leaders and organizations concerned with racial inequality.

With Black Lives Matter, we now have a revival of these historical roots. Its recognition that all black lives deserve humanity, regardless of their gender, class, or sexual orientation, has breathed new life into the legacy of the black freedom struggle. Today's new—and much larger—movement is also articulating the national struggle for racial justice as a broader one for human rights.

In 1951, the “We Charge Genocide” campaign—which included William Patterson, Paul Robeson, W.E.B. Du Bois, Claudia Jones, and family members of victims of racial violence such as Josephine Grayson and Rosalie McGee—petitioned the United Nations to examine human rights abuses against black Americans. The petitioners sought to frame their claims—that African Americans were being persecuted, denied the right to vote, and “pauperized” because of their race—as a question of both black humanity and as a human rights issue: “[A]bove all we protest this genocide as human beings whose very humanity is denied and mocked.”

The horrific evidence compiled for the petition, culled from stories in black newspapers and accounts collected by civil rights and labor organizations from 1945 to 1951, is eerily similar to the accounts we hear today. We

may be more familiar with the evidence that petitioners document in the Jim Crow South, but the incidents recorded outside it are especially revealing. In many pockets of the urban North, the policing of black migrants was merely a parallel to the Jim Crow violence that terrorized them in the South.

For instance, in February 1946 in Freeport, Long Island, a policeman shot and killed two unarmed black men, wounded a third, and arrested a fourth for “disorderly conduct.” The men had objected to being denied service in a café. The Freeport police, in a move that resembles the police’s response to protesters in Ferguson, “threw a cordon around the bus terminal and stationed men with tommy guns and tear gas there, saying that they wanted to ‘prevent a possible uprising of local Negroes.’”

Three months later in Baltimore, police shot and killed Wilbur Bundley. “Nine witnesses stated that he was shot in the back while running,” the petition reports. In July, Lucy Gordy James, a member of a prominent family of “Negro business people in Detroit,” was “beaten severely” by three police officers. “She sued the officers for \$10,000 damages, charging illegal arrest, assault, and maltreatment.” And in 1951 in Philadelphia, “forty police officers killed an unarmed 21-year-old Negro youth, Joseph Austin Conway, allegedly being sought for questioning in a robbery. He died in a hail of bullets while seeking to draw fire away from his family and neighbors.” This catalogue of disaster—to quote James Baldwin—is documented in over 200 pages.

In the 1950s, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King also used the language of human rights to internationalize the issue of racial inequality in the United States. During his travels abroad, Malcolm X enlisted the assistance of heads of states in Africa and the Middle East to condemn the United States for their treatment of black Americans. He discovered that by framing the mistreatment of black Americans as an international human rights issue instead of a national civil rights one, “those grievances can then be brought into the United Nations and be discussed by people all over the world.” For him, as long as the discussion was centered on civil rights, “your only allies can be the people in the next community, many of whom are responsible for your grievance.” Malcolm X wanted “to come up with a program that would make our grievances international and make the world see that our problem was no longer a Negro problem or an American problem but a human problem.”

In framing racial discrimination in human rights terms, the Black Lives Matter movement is today picking up the baton of civil rights activists before them. The parents of Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis have raised the issue of discriminatory policing with members of the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in Geneva. The parents of Mike Brown along with representatives of organizations in Ferguson and Chicago traveled to Geneva to share information about their cases with the UN Committee Against Torture in November 2014. Brown’s parents

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