



The Formation and Development of the Black Lives Matter Movement: A Political Process Perspective

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Abstract

The “Black Lives Matter” (BLM) movement is believed to be the largest social movement in American history. Making sense of such a historically significant social movement will certainly enable a fuller understanding of contemporary American politics and society. The significance of BLM also makes this movement a benchmark case that provides a testbed for social movement theories. Within the framework provided by political process theory and the process tracing method, this article seeks to explain the political and socioeconomic dynamics underlying the development of BLM. One important factor that stands out in the case of BLM is the presence of an enabling political-economic environment characterized by rising ethno-racial inequalities, police brutality, and racism under the socially polarizing effects of the 2008 economic crisis. A second set of factors to be considered is BLM’s adoption of a decentralized organizational structure, which facilitates the rallying and mobilization of large segments of society based on loose coalition strategies enacted through social media. Third, the rise and development of BLM greatly owe to the deployment of strongly motivating slogans, symbols, and modes of collective action that carry symbolic value, appeal to mass emotions, and address the political opportunities in place.

Keywords

American Politics, Black Lives Matter, Civil Rights, Political Process, Racism, Social Movements

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Introduction

“There is cause to be thankful even for rebellion. It is an impressive teacher, though a stern and terrible one,” wrote African-American social reformer, Frederick Douglass (1866). According to him, developing a firm understanding of the underlying causes of a rebellion should be made a top policy priority, because he believed, “the thing worse than rebellion is the thing that causes rebellion”. Surely, Douglass’ words still echo in our ears, having lost nothing of their relevance. Considering its national scale and global influence, the current wave of United States (US) civil rights protests that resurfaced in the year 2020 is perhaps the sharpest expression of this relevance.

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement is claimed to be “the largest movement in US history” (Buchanan, Bui & Patel, 2020). BLM emerged in 2013 as a massive social media reaction to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch coordinator, in the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African-American (Holt & Sweitzer, 2020). This movement gained significant momentum with the rise of far-right movements, racism, and race-specific police shootings in the Trump era (2017-2021). Certainly, explaining the underlying dynamics of the BLM movement is key to a fuller understanding of contemporary US politics and society. In a similar vein, one could argue that such a historic movement as BLM will serve as a benchmark case that provides a testbed for social movement theories. In other words, the study of BLM holds great potential to offer meaningful contributions to our understanding of both US political sociology and the social movement literature. With this in mind, the present article relies on political process theory and the process tracing method to explain the political and socioeconomic dynamics underlying the development of the BLM movement.

Contemporary theorizing on social movements has developed as a dialogue between two major approaches (Kousis, 2016, p.146). The first is represented by new social movement theories, which attempt to explain social mobilization by reference to the chief role of cultural factors such as gender, sexuality, age, and ethnicity (Melucci, 1996, p.103). These theories hold that major social conflicts in contemporary society are driven by struggles over lifestyles, cultural autonomy, and collective identity, which have ultimately trivialized social classes. On the part of social movement actors, cultural demands for autonomy have gained primacy thanks to the advent of globalization and new communication technologies, as well as the weakening of nation-states (Touraine, 1988, pp.33, 35, 204). Under these circumstances, new social movements lay stronger emphasis on lifestyle- and issue-based agendas, such as environmentalism, gender activism, anti-racism, and peace advocacy (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014, p.xviii). With the diffusion of new communication technologies, the state monopoly on communication has been overtaken by a decentralized “network society” organized based on collective identities (Castells, 2010, pp.1-2, 255). From this perspective, new social movement theories would explain BLM’s development mainly by reference to the strengthening of the African-American identity triggered by rising racism and enabled by social media. This is also reminiscent of critical race theory, which draws inspiration from postcolonialism and postmodernism to bring to the forefront the processes by which race is both socially and legally constructed by the dominant institution and everyday life practices. In the US case, for example, the “white privilege” is constructed and perpetuated through the deployment of words,

symbols, stereotypes, and discourses inscribed in collective identities (Cole, 2017, p.26; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p.21).

It is difficult to overlook the importance of cultural dynamics and the enabling impact of new communication technologies for explaining social mobilization in a contemporary context. However, the culturalist argument that states and economic dynamics have lost their central relevance is highly contestable (Gürcan, 2019b). Moreover, the cultural reductionism of new social movement theories cannot provide a satisfactory explanation for those who are interested in understanding the multifaceted dynamics of social mobilization. In the case of BLM, for instance, one should take into account not only racial factors but also organizational dynamics and the political-economic background of state policies in a systematic manner. It follows that the task of undertaking a systematic study of the multifaceted dynamics of BLM can be adequately addressed based on political process theory, which is the second major approach that dominates contemporary debates on social movements. Framing the BLM mobilization based on race theories would divert the focus of this study from the social-movement literature. Social movements rather than race constitute the main object of study in this research. Furthermore, social movement theories are well-equipped to explain the cultural dynamics of the BLM mobilization without systematic recourse to race theories. This being said, one cannot help but notice how the integrative perspective of the political process theory resonates with the materialist (and Marxist) interpretations of critical race theory, which draw attention to the role of material conditions of life in shaping racial relations alongside the intertwined mechanisms of racial privilege, status, and wealth in the context of elite and popular mobilization (Cole, 2017, p.26; Dua, 2014, p.27; Bakan & Dua, 2014, pp.5,9; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p.31).

Political process theory defines social movements as “organized efforts, on the part of excluded groups, to promote or resist changes in the structure of society that involve recourse to non-institutional forms of political participation” (McAdam, 1999, p.25). In political process theory, the development of social movements is explained by reference to three sets of dynamics: political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and cognitive liberation/framing (McAdam, 1999). This being said, not every political process scholar adopted Doug McAdam’s original formulation centered on a three-variable model (Gürcan, 2019a). For some reason, the literature evolved to focus more on the political opportunities variable at the expense of overlooking the leadership and cultural dynamics of social mobilization (Otero, 1999). This is the reason why political process theory is often used synonymously with “political opportunities theory/model” (Inclán, 2018). This article seeks to transcend this structuralist and crude materialist framework – i.e. a conception of society where economic and political structures unilaterally determine the actions of human beings without giving room for agency (McNabb, 2020)– by offering a more balanced approach to material and subjective factors.

Later formulations of political process theory adopted the framework of contentious politics (Gürcan, 2019a). Contentious politics is a term that defines the instances of social conflicts or political struggles where at least one of the parties involved is represented by the state and the involving parties advance certain claims against one another. The real focus of contentious politics concerns broader processes, such as wars, elections, regime change, and revolutions rather than singular social movements (Tilly & Tarrow,

2015, pp.7-8, 30-31). Therefore, contentious politics diverts the focus of political process theory from universal determinants like political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing to context-specific social mechanisms that transform state-civil society interactions (Edwards, 2014, pp.78, 106). This article, however, does not rely on contentious politics given that the research aim of explaining the origins and development of BLM as a singular movement –as adopted in this article– better conforms with the movement-focused framework of political process theory. Contentious politics would be more interested in investigating the transformation of US democracy and broader ethnic relations in the longer term rather than the formation of BLM. Furthermore, BLM is still an unfolding movement, and a fuller assessment of how contentious politics has transformed state-civil society relations as a result of the BLM mobilization is only possible after this movement has reached its completion.

In the context of political process theory, political opportunities involve large-scale sociopolitical and economic factors such as armed conflicts, economic crises, regime change, and demographic movements. These factors create a conducive or restrictive environment for social mobilization (McAdam, 1999, pp.40-43; Tarrow, 2009, pp.76-77; Jenkins, Jacobs & Agnone, 2003, p.278). Regarding BLM, one should take into account the destabilizing effects of the 2008 crisis which is designated as the gravest economic crisis of global capitalism since the Great Depression era (1929-1939) and led to the ossification of rising racial divides, racism, and police repression (Szetela, 2020; Drakulich, Wozniak, Hagan & Johnson, 2020).

When it comes to mobilizing structures, these structures concern the study of leadership mechanisms, communication networks, strategic and tactical toolboxes, and bases of support that contribute to the emergence and development of a social movement organization (McAdam, 1999, p.43-48; Tarrow, 2009, pp.123-124). What stands out in the individual case of BLM's mobilizing structures are decentralized organizational dynamics led by social media, which facilitate the nationwide mobilization of local actors. Black feminists, African-American youth movements, left-leaning Black nationalists, and radical Black militias represent perhaps the most cohesive force of BLM. Their adoption of a broad coalition-building strategy has considerably expanded BLM's popular base and allowed for the inclusion of numerous local and fragmented organizations (Szetela, 2020; Drakulich, Wozniak, Hagan & Johnson, 2020).

The framing component of political process theory addresses the cultural and discursive dynamics of social mobilization. By engaging in framing activities, social actors develop a certain level of motivation and cohesion conducive to social mobilization. These activities speak to social actors' perception and interpretation of the available political opportunities while also advancing certain claims and constructing collective identities (Tarrow, 2009, pp.109-111; Noakes & Johnston, 2005, p.1-2). Worthy of notice concerning BLM's framing efforts is how it has succeeded in sustaining a spirit of resistance and indignation by deploying highly motivating slogans and symbols that appeal to mass emotions and aspirations in conformity with the political opportunities at hand (Szetela, 2020; Drakulich, Wozniak, Hagan & Johnson, 2020).

In this article, we investigate these dynamics based on secondary sources and process tracing. The method of process tracing responds to the requirements and priorities set by our

research aims, as well as these of political process theory, which conveniently conceptualizes social mobilization as a “process.” Process tracing enables a qualitative and, therefore, interpretative reading of social processes based on empirically supported logical inferences. Its focus is on social actors’ tools, motivations, priorities, perceptions, and opportunities by reference to critical junctures or historical turning points (Vennesson, 2008, pp.230-231, 234). In what follows, this work will use process tracing to address BLM’s underlying political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing efforts, respectively.

The Underlying Political Opportunities of the Black Lives Matter Movement

Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous saying that “a riot is the language of the unheard” perfectly mirrors the general situation during the BLM mobilization (King, 1968). Violent forms of popular mobilization are often rooted in the disillusionment of the masses who lost belief in the status quo’s ability to address their demands and protect their basic rights. For disillusioned masses, eventually, politics becomes a “continuation of politics by other means” (Gamson, 1990, p.139). In a similar context, the US has been center stage to problems associated with racially motivated discrimination and violence, which led to widescale popular protests by African-American communities.

From a historical point of view, one could argue that the right to stand for freedom and democracy, i.e. liberalism in the Lockean sense, is deeply ingrained in US political culture since the birth of American independence (Hartz, 1955). This being said, the behavior of past US administrations does not entirely reflect the consistent application of these political-cultural values. In numerous instances of US history, the right to stand for freedom and democracy has been predominantly envisioned as a privilege reserved to white communities at the expense of African-Americans. As such, minority groups reacting to this situation have accumulated a long history of violent confrontations with the dominant white communities in the US (Kim, 2012, p.2000). In particular, many claims advanced on the part of African-American communities in defense of their rights and freedoms have been addressed by the state outside the context of institutional democracy (Jackson, 2020). Therefore, US democracy testified to numerous African-American uprisings since the late 1700s, and, following the civil rights era (1950-1963), their demands have been either dismissed or repressed (Muhammad, 2017, p.251). Although this historical record of racial struggle contributed, to a certain extent, to the emergence of “a general and pervasive understanding that black people are far more than background characters in an ostensibly white drama” (Ogbar, 2019, p.1), from the Nixon era to the Trump administration, members of the white working classes were led to believe that the real threat to their well-being stems from racial minority groups that benefit from social policies even though they do not actively contribute to the creation of national wealth. Driven by this conviction, segments of the white working classes developed a stronger sense of belonging to a higher status of citizenship, while scapegoating racial minorities for failing to adapt to so-called white American values (Muhammad, 2017, p.251).

All of this provided an enabling environment for legal arrangements such as those allowing remissions for crimes against African-American citizens and thus encouraging racially motivated crimes, which eventually serve as a political opportunity that facilitates protests led by African-American communities (Muhammad, 2017, p.251). In BLM’s

case, these opportunities can be easily traced to recent US history from the 1990s, which testified to several instances of racially motivated mobilization deeply ingrained in African-American collective memory (Ransby, 2018, p.13). In 1992, for example, the release of four police officers accused of beating black motorist Rodney King without charges triggered massive riots in Los Angeles, which came to be labeled as one of the most devastating civil disturbances of 20th century US history (History, 2010). These riots were also connected to the killing of Latasha Harlins in 1991, a 15-year-old African-American girl, which aroused massive popular anger when the defendant received a relatively light sentence (Sastray & Bates, 2017).

21st century US politics has not been exempted from intense racial conflicts. A case in point is the fatal shooting of Timothy Thomas by a police officer from the Cincinnati Police Department in 2001, which sparked massive riots. Similar events of smaller scale took place by the year 2013 when BLM was created upon the extensive adoption of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on social media after the acquittal of George Zimmerman. In the period 2014-2015, BLM gained momentum in reaction to fatal police violence in Ferguson and Baltimore. In 2014, a police officer fatally shot Michael Brown, an 18-year-old black man, but the officer was not indicted in Brown's death, which led to nationwide violent protests met with a militarized response by police. In reaction to these events, President Obama himself acknowledged the "legacy of racial discrimination" in the US, which had resulted in "a deep distrust exists between law enforcement and communities of color" (Obama, 2014). In his report about the Ferguson investigation, Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. also pointed to the social background of these events, which serve as part of BLM's underlying political opportunity structures. According to the report, the Police Department has systematically engaged in numerous constitutional violations "including First Amendment abuses, unreasonable searches and seizures, and excessive and dangerous use of force; exacerbated by the severely disproportionate use of these tactics against African Americans" (Department of Justice, 2015). Freddie Gray's death under police custody due to excessive police violence in 2015 has generated a similar popular reaction to the Ferguson events. Despite the imposition of a city-wide state of emergency in Baltimore, popular protests were reignited and escalated into nationwide events upon the acquittal of police officers involved in Gray's death.

Contrary to general expectations, racial conflicts gained momentum during the second term of President Obama as the first African-American president. Marked by an unanticipated increase in racial polarization and tensions within the American society, the Obama period witnessed the worsening of social relations in terms of racial struggle, which culminated in the Ferguson events. According to a Pew Research Center Poll conducted in June 2016, months before President Obama left the White House, slightly more than six-in-ten Americans (61%) believed that the country needs to do much to achieve racial equality. The same poll also revealed the conviction of a striking majority of Americans (66%) that the Obama administration could not improve race relations in the US, whereas, for a quarter of Americans, he made them even worse. (Parker, Horowitz & Mahl, 2016, pp. 6, 44). Indeed, these conflicts escalated even further in the Trump era, which was strongly marked by the expansion of right-wing populism and racism into the mainstream of US politics (Weissinger, Mack & Watson, 2017, p.12; Muhammad,

2017, pp.240, 244). Pointing out to a worse legacy compared to that of his predecessor regarding racial conflict, under President Trump, the number of Americans who consider race relations in the country “generally bad” rose to 58% in 2019, from 48% in 2016. Moreover, 56% of Americans stated that the Trump administration made race relations even worse (Horowitz, Brown & Cox, 2019; Horowitz & Mahl, 2016). Certainly, police violence served as a key trigger of BLM-related events as part of the political opportunity structures in place. For example, in Minneapolis, where George Floyd was murdered, only 20% of the population is represented by African-American communities. However, African-Americans constitute 64% of those who were exposed to knee-to-neck restraint by the police in the period 2019-2020. 60% of fatal shootings by the Minneapolis police between 2009 and May 2019 were directed at African-Americans (Kendi, 2020).

One could argue that police discrimination in Minneapolis is no exception to the US. National estimates suggest that the rate of African-Americans subjected to fatal police violence is three-times higher than that of white US citizens (Mapping Police Violence, 2020). In the period 2013-2019, almost 42 per one million African-American have fallen victim to fatal police violence, which constitutes the highest rate among racial groups in the US (Radhakrishnan, Sen & Singaravelu, 2020). Similarly, the likelihood of a fatal shooting of a young African-American by the police is estimated to be 21 times higher than that of their white peer (Gabrielson, Sagara, Jones, 2014). Figures about US inmates are also indicative of racial disparities in the country. The rate of incarceration for African-American males is 5.8 times higher than for white males. The same rate is 1.8 for females. Moreover, 2018 data indicate that 33% of the total incarcerated population in the US is represented by African-Americans (Carson, 2020, pp.1, 6). Whilst African-American women represent 13% of the total US population, their rate of incarceration is almost 29% among female inmates (Kajstura, 2019).

The expansion of BLM’s popular base is also attributable to the political environment represented by the Donald Trump administration. Contrasting with President Obama’s pluralistic attitude, Trump’s conservative presidency symbolizes the integration of white supremacist aspirations into the mainstream of politics, which evolved from paleoconservative roots (Donduran, 2020, p.175). These ideological developments were facilitated by a securitized political environment of fear under the US wars of intervention in countries, such as Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as by the amplification of economic grievances in the Great Recession era (Greeberg, 2016). As embodied in the Trump administration, the rise of right-wing populism brought to the fore xenophobic policies targeting migrants and racism against minorities, including African-Americans, which eventually resulted in the widespread disillusionment of these targeted populations as part of the political opportunities structures underlying the BLM movement itself.

From this angle, it is hardly surprising to see that the Trump administration witnessed the two largest waves of social mobilization the US has ever experienced since the 1960s, namely the Women’s March and BLM. The Women’s March mobilized millions of protesters who reacted to Trump’s inauguration against misogyny (The Economist, 2020). Driven by the cumulative effect of racism and discrimination against African-Americans, which reached its peak in the Trump era, BLM even surpassed the Women’s March – which mobilized around 3 to 5 million people– by the number of participants (Buchanan, Bui &

Patel, 2020). Trump's antagonizing attitude reflected in debates such as personal armament, climate change, and migration has been highly instrumental in triggering the most massive protests of US history since the Cold War (Buchanan, Bui & Patel, 2020).

In BLM's conjuncture, Trump's antagonizing discourse on social media platforms and official statements have served nothing but to incite the BLM protests even further. A strong case in point is Trump's statement, "When the looting starts, the shooting starts!" in connection to street mobilizations to protest George Floyd's tragic death. This statement was originally made by Walter E. Headley, the police chief of Miami in reaction to the 1967 riots spurred by a Republican Party convention and driven by African-Americans' deep resentment of widespread urban discrimination (McArdle, 2018). The persistence of this historical legacy itself demonstrates how collective memory serves as a political opportunity mechanism to facilitate social mobilization. In the case of BLM, Trump's self-identification as a "connoisseur of chaos" and labeling of protesters as "thugs", "domestic terrorists", and "ugly anarchists" contributed to the further escalation of protests. This added to Trump's threat to use the Insurrection Act against protesters while staging a photo opportunity by holding a Bible (Liptak, Westwood, 2020).

Trump's excessive reactions also helped protests to spread to non-African-American communities. It is estimated that in Summer 2020, over 40% of counties in the US experienced BLM protests and almost 95% of these counties are predominantly white (Buchanan, Bui & Patel, 2020). According to a Pew Research Center polling that surveyed 9,654 adults on June 4-10 2020, 60% of adult Americans support BLM, whilst BLM also enjoyed the support of 67% of white Americans (Parker, Horowitz & Anderson, 2020). The same research reveals the provoking effects of Trump's antagonizing attitude on the BLM protests. Almost half of Americans (48%) believe that racial tensions in the US have been exacerbated under the Trump administration, even though this rate dropped from 56% in 2019, mainly thanks to the consolidation of Trump's popular base (Parker, Horowitz & Anderson, 2020; Horowitz, Brown & Cox, 2019).

In the final analysis, we argue that the BLM movement owes its development to the availability of an enabling socioeconomic environment facilitated by rising racial inequalities under the economic crisis and consolidated by Trump's discriminatory discourse and policies. Combined with the historical legacy of African-Americans' collective memory, these conditions have created ample potential for BLM to enlarge its organizational networks and appeal to the masses. Indeed, the successful activation of such potential is strictly contingent on the availability of mobilizing structures that can coherently address the political opportunities at hand. This will be thoroughly addressed in the next section.

The Mobilizing Structures Underlying the Black Lives Matter Movement

Political opportunities do not automatically translate into social mobilization by themselves. Social mobilization requires the mediation of several additional factors to realize the accumulated potential over socioeconomic and political grievances. One of these intermediary factors concerns mobilizing structures, i.e. the leadership mechanisms that can exploit socioeconomic and political grievances inscribed in the political opportunities at hand (Tarrow, 2009, p.123). In BLM's case, these mechanisms appear in

various forms: the strong historical legacy of organizing inherited from past struggles, the availability of a strong personal leadership base, the existence of communication networks facilitated by social media, reliance on an organization model characterized by broad and decentralized coalition strategies which enhance diversity and inclusivity, and the deployment of disruptive and confrontational forms of collective action which increase the movement's grassroots dynamism and social visibility. This section is devoted to the study of these factors.

In the Americas, racist mass movements have a long history, dating back to the 1660s. Over time, notably since the 18th century, these movements were met with counter-reactions on the part of African-American communities who stood for their rights and freedoms (Blackpast, 2016). One could argue that BLM represents the most recent phase of a centuries-old process by which African-Americans achieved substantial gains, including the abolition of slavery. The BLM movement itself is built on the historical legacy of African-American struggles as part of its mobilizing structures. The most salient examples of this organizational legacy are embodied in the emblematic figure of Dr. Martin Luther King, the leading organizations of the Black Power, such as the Nation of Islam movement of Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party, the Freedom Rides of 1961, and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), all of which are essential to understand and explain the development of a new African-American identity and the long history of the racial struggle of the black community in a predominantly white country (Ogbar, 2019, pp.191-197). In particular, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, initiated by Rosa Parks to protest the pro-white discriminatory public transport policy, and the series of protests that occurred under the leadership of King inspired the BLM to adopt civil disobedience and confrontational forms of collective action that allow for greater social visibility through the disruption of everyday life. The Freedom Rides, enabling white and black students to travel together to the Southern regions where racist public transport rules prevailed, has had a similar impact on the development of BLM. Malcolm X and the radicalism of the Black Panther Party, with its emphasis on direct action, enhanced the symbolic leadership potential of BLM. Likewise, the SNCC's tradition to organize within campuses reflects continuity in the youth's support for BLM. Moreover, like the Freedom Rides and the Montgomery incident, the BLM protests opted for stopping traffic, disrupting politicians' speeches, occupying streets, and halting sports competitions to draw attention to issues of relevance, such as police violence, black health problems, persecution in prisons, anti-immigrant regulations, inequality in education, and the discrimination of black people in housing. In times when the number of black murders and protests against police violence skyrocketed, BLM's repertoire of collective action was extended to occupying government buildings and setting fire to police stations (Dennis & Dennis, 2020, pp.13-14, 17-18; Weissinger, Mack & Watson, 2017, p.12).

It is not an overstatement to argue that personal leadership and social media have encouraged the emergence and formation of BLM, which was founded by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. The slogan "Black Lives Matter" itself was created by a Facebook message posted by Garza, following the release of Trayvon Martin's murderer: "Black People, I love you, I love you. I love you. Our lives matter (Dennis & Dennis, 2020, pp.15-16)." Garza's friend, Patrisse Cullors, responded to this message with the

#blacklivesmatter hashtag, and then the hashtag became a nationwide phenomenon that served to motivate mass action (Mundt, Ross & Burnett, 2018, p.4; Ince, Rojas & Davis, 2017, p.1818). Therefore, BLM developed as a movement that is deeply intertwined with social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook. Social media played a strategic role as part of mobilizing structures, especially in enhancing BLM's potential to gain sympathizers and participants, spreading a shared conception of protest and resistance among black people, broadening the national coalition among grassroots movements, promoting communication and coordination between movements and leaders, and disseminating news about the disproportionate use of force by the police (Mundt, Ross & Burnett, 2018; Carney, 2016; Ince, Rojas ve Davis, 2017; Cox, 2017; Ransby, 2018).

Alicia Garza, born in 1981, who embraced the Queer identity, is a seasoned labor rights activist. Her activist past covers a wide range of fields such as feminism and gender, health, and anti-police violence. Born in 1983, Patrisse Cullors followed a similar path, stepping into activism as a trade unionist and is now known as an LGBT-supporter and Queer activist, well-known for her advocacy of the dissolution of prisons. Opal Tometi, another founding leader of BLM, born in 1984, is known for her migrant rights activism. Both Cullors and Tometi hold a Master's degree. They have played a significant role in the development of BLM thanks to their intellectual skills and activism experience (Dennis & Dennis, 2020). Moreover, Garza, Cullors, and Tometi placed the gender issue at the center of the movement from the very beginning of the BLM mobilization. Worthy of note here is that black activism has historically been led by male figures, and the conservative leanings in the US black community with regards to the gender issue are no secret. Thus, the founders of the BLM have considerably contributed to shattering the gender conservatism of the US civil rights movement, as well as to the broadening and rejuvenation of its base (Cohan, 2017, p.49; Dennis & Dennis, 2020, p.16; Ransby, 2018, pp.14, 27-30).

To encourage local participation and sustain its mass initiative, the BLM movement embraced a decentralized organization model based on loose coalitions as part of its underlying mobilizing structures (Dennis & Dennis, 2020, p.18). The Black Lives Matter Global Network (BLMGN) that constituted the core of the BLM movement was founded by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi and had independent local representatives across North America. The BLMGN is also one of the integral parts of the coalition called Movement for Black Lives (M4BL). Among other prominent organizations that constitute the M4B, the Black Youth Project (BYP100), Million Hoodies, and Dream Defenders are found. This coalition constitutes a flexible platform established by independent social movement organizations that identify themselves with the broad BLM movement. The local constituents of the coalition are placed across a broad spectrum, ranging from Malcolm X supporters to black feminists and churches (Ransby, 2018, pp.16, 161-166; Dennis & Dennis, 2020, p.16; Drakulich, Wozniak, Hagan & Johnson, 2020, p.373).

To finish this section, it is plausible to argue that BLM's underlying mobilizing structures derive their power from a long-standing tradition of organizing. Undoubtedly, individual leaders, as movement entrepreneurs, have embraced a key role in translating this tradition into action. Moreover, with the widespread use of social media, BLM has

rapidly become a mass movement. Along with the facilitating impact of social media in mass communication, the strategies of BLM, based on broad coalitions and decentralized organizational forms, have made protests more inclusive and appealing to large masses. Likewise, the use of disruptive and confrontational forms of action in the protests has reinforced the grassroots dynamism and social visibility of BLM. At this point, it bears underscoring that the sustainability of these organizational dynamics would also depend on the ability of movement constituents to perceive and develop a firm and coherent grasp of political opportunities. This raises the issue of framing, which will be addressed in the next section.

Framing the BLM Movement

Another intermediary factor that leads to the successful mobilization of social movements is framing, which is supposed to provide a comprehensive, holistic and coherent framework of socioeconomic and political grievances extracted from the political opportunities in place (Benford & Snow, 2000; Noakes & Johnston, 2005). As such, this framework generates a shared awareness that inspires and motivates mass action, as expressed in the underlying symbols, slogans, demands, and other discursive elements of social actors (Drakulich, Wozniak, Hagan & Johnson, 2020, p.373). From this perspective, BLM developed as a popular attempt at cognitive liberation from the white supremacist frameworks that have become unbearable for large segments of American society. This is confirmed by the rapid growth of the BLM movement under the presidency of Donald Trump who has not concealed his belief in the superiority of white Americans (Laderman ve Simms, 2017).

Relatedly, another substantial factor that has contributed to the rapid growth of BLM is the pervasive perception that black lives have incrementally been devalued. The formation and deepening of this perception stem from controversial judicial decisions, legal regulations, and other discriminatory sociopolitical practices. Indeed, the fact that the most popular slogan of the demonstrators –which also gives its name to the movement– is “Black Lives Matter” illustrates the nature of what framing scholars call “diagnostic framing” which has to do with how social actors diagnose their problems and define their grievances. Diagnostic frames help social actors to define their contention as the main objects of their struggle (Noakes & Johnston, 2005, p.6). Worthy of emphasis in BLM’s case is that the movement does not make any demand for the transfer of racial privileges from the white to the black community. Likewise, BLM’s emphasis on the importance of the lives of black individuals does not imply any intention for devaluing the lives of others. On the contrary, the BLM movement does not negate that all lives are equally valuable while explicitly stressing that the systematic devaluation of black lives is blatantly unjust (Ransby, 2018). Indeed, one could argue that the BLM movement proceeds from a deep-rooted understanding that racism in the US, especially against the black community, has penetrated every sphere of social life and eventually reached an intolerable and unignorable degree. Conceived as such, the “black lives matter” argument is leveled against “all lives matter” and “blue lives matter”, which rather prioritize the lives of policemen who represent the authority of the privileged (Cohan, 2017, p.39; Dennis & Dennis, 2020, p.15; Drakulich, Wozniak, Hagan & Johnson, 2020, p.371).

BLM protesters' targeting of the police and public buildings –as well as their objection to excessive police violence and law enforcement budgets– mirrors the severity of the crisis of US politics (Cohan, 2017). At the level of framing, this crisis is addressed by BLM through slogans such as “I can't breathe”, which conveys the protesters' reaction to the knee-on-neck restraint technique abused by the police, which led to the death of George Floyd (Camp & Heatherton, 2016, p.17). Similarly, another slogan that stands out is “hands up don't shoot”. This can be seen as an element of diagnostic framing, which refers to the shooting and killing of unarmed black individuals, underscoring the systemic character of racism and reflecting the shared diagnostic framework of the BLM activists (Ransby, 2018, p.114).

Doubtlessly, the devaluation of black lives does not solely consist of legal and political aspects. Its repercussions in the economic sphere are also captured by BLM's diagnostic framing efforts. African-Americans can be seen as one of the most vulnerable segments of society that have disproportionately suffered the negative impact of neoliberal policies. The income of an average black family, despite a relative increase since the 1970s, amounts to around 65% of that of an average white family (Kochhar, Cilluffo, 2018). The disadvantaged status of African-American communities can also be assessed by reference to COVID-19 conditions. A closer examination of the number of COVID-19 cases and COVID-related deaths demonstrates that the rate of black individuals in all cases and deaths is strikingly higher than their rate in the demographic weight. For instance, in Minnesota, which came under the spotlight after the killing of George Floyd, African Americans make up only 6% of the population. However, they account for 10% of COVID-related deaths and 24% of total COVID-19 cases (The COVID Tracking Project, 2020). These data not only provide another confirmation of the pre-existing political opportunities that set the stage for the BLM protests but also evince the accuracy of the movement's diagnostic framing activities.

What framing scholarship calls prognostic frames refers to alternative solutions that social movements propose in response to their diagnosed grievances (Noakes & Johnston, 2005, p.6). The main demands of the BLM movement are but an expression of their prognostic framing efforts. There is a minimum of six demands made by BLM: (1) termination of the war against the black communities, (2) economic justice, (3) encouraging investments in basic services and infrastructure to increase black communities' well-being while defunding programs and institutions that marginalize and criminalize these communities, (4) including the black communities in decision-making about the crucial issues that affect them the most, e.g. decisions about local spending and policy regulations in education and law enforcement, (5) empowering all marginalized groups, including the black communities, and granting them the right to self-determination in every sphere of social life, and (6) compensation for the pecuniary and non-pecuniary damages suffered by the members of black communities in the past. Overall, these demands match with BLM's diagnostic framework, particularly the movement's intention to address systemic racism and police violence (Yates, 2016; Drakulich, Wozniak, Hagan & Johnson, 2020).

Another popular slogan of BLM, “black power,” conforms with what framing scholarship calls “motivational frames” understood as action-centered frames that serve to legitimize and stimulate social mobilization. In this sense, emotional, moral,

symbolic, artistic, and other cultural elements can be considered as part of these framing efforts (Noakes & Johnston, 2005, p.6). In the case of BLM, symbols and symbolic acts encountered during the protests convey profoundly motivating meanings. Among such symbols is the well-known “raised fist”, which evokes the protest of African American athletes, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, at the Olympic games held in Mexico City in 1968. This “raised fist,” as a transgenerational anti-discrimination act of protest, had, in the 1960s, come to be identified with the Black Power movement and the Black Panther Party and turned into one of the main symbols of black liberation (The Economist, 2020). With regards to the BLM protests, the act of “kneeling” has become another iconic symbol. Protesters kneeling with a raised fist, a familiar image since the Civil Rights era, have again taken to the streets, and this time, the image has become even more meaningful as George Floyd was killed by a policeman performing the knee-on-neck restraint technique. The photograph of a female protester standing on a single knee in front of the police has already become one of the most iconic images of the BLM protests. Similarly, the two-flag symbol of Antifa, an anti-fascist organization dating back to the 1930s, is also one of the symbols frequently encountered in recent American protests, including BLM. Finally, other motivating framing elements that have marked the protests include the demolition and destruction of statues of historical figures identified with racist practices and policies, seen as symbols of racism and colonialism, and the burning of US flags on the streets. This is, in fact, a clear reflection of the fierce reaction toward the systematic racism that has been going on for centuries in the US.

Review and Discussion

The emergence and development of the BLM movement owe to several political and socio-economic factors. One important factor that stands out in the case of BLM is the presence of an enabling political-economic environment characterized by rising ethno-racial inequalities, police brutality, and racism under the socially polarizing effects of the 2008 economic crisis. The cumulative effect of a centuries-long historical record of racial discrimination in the country and the popular reaction to this collective memory is part of BLM’s political opportunity structures. This adds to the political environment in today’s America, shaped by the Trump administration’s discriminatory discourse and white supremacist practices, which end up activating black communities’ accumulated anger. A second set of factors to be considered is BLM’s adoption of a decentralized organizational structure, which facilitates the rallying and mobilization of large segments of society based on loose coalition strategies enacted through social media. In other words, BLM as a mass movement results directly from the success of effective leadership mechanisms, taking advantage of recent advancements in information and communication technologies alongside broad coalition strategies. Third, and finally, the rise and development of BLM greatly owe to the deployment of strongly motivating slogans, symbols, and modes of collective action that carry symbolic value, appeal to mass emotions, and address the political opportunities in place.

Theoretically, these findings contribute to a defining debate in social movement studies, that of culturalism versus structuralism. At first glance, racial tensions and mobilization in US society can be attributed to the salience of cultural identities, ethnic affiliations,

and the lifestyle choices of clashing communities. Yet, a closer examination reveals that the actual problem is a bit more complex than it seems. Even though cultural dynamics cannot be entirely overlooked, a fuller understanding of the processes by which social movements are formed and developed requires due attention to the interplay between political, economic, and cultural factors. With this in mind, new social movement theories would fall short of providing a comprehensive account of the BLM mobilization due to their cultural reductionist approach. BLM's case reveals the utility of the potentially holistic and materialist approach of political process theory, which also takes into account, not only social classes and state actors, but also organizational dynamics such as personal leadership, tactics and strategies, popular bases, and communication networks. This article proposes a more balanced approach to the multiplicity of factors underlying social mobilization by transcending the top-down and structuralist bias that overemphasizes the role of political opportunities in the political process literature.

To conclude this article, the BLM protests have revealed that the polarization of American society is not solely limited to the political sphere. Today, in the United States, the main axis of social divisions revolves around the economic and cultural cleavages between rapidly radicalizing conservative segments that envision America as a community of primarily white Christians, concentrated in rural areas, i.e. Jacksonians, and those who generally reside in big cities, driven by a relatively cosmopolitan worldview. The two-party structure of the US political regime – with both parties adhering to capitalist ideology – does nothing but further deepen social polarization between these two segments. Once such profound divisions take root in social life, one cannot expect them to disappear spontaneously. American politics, regardless of its inherent partisan divides, therefore, has to be transformed in a more socially inclusive direction by eliminating socioeconomic inequalities. Neglecting this task would be, for the US, no different from sitting on a time bomb and would inevitably result in ever more profound and staggering sociopolitical ramifications in the future.

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