

What Would the Black Panthers Think of Black Lives Matter?

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Featured image: Black Panther Party founders Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton standing in the street, armed with a Colt .45 and a shotgun. (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

The black revolution is much more than a struggle for the rights of Negroes. It is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws—racism, poverty, militarism, and materialism. It is exposing evils that are rooted deeply in the whole structure of our society. It reveals systemic rather than superficial flaws and suggests that radical reconstruction of society itself is the real issue to be faced.—Martin Luther King Jr., 1968

You don't have to be one of those conspiratorial curmudgeons who reduces every sign of popular protest to "George Soros money" to acknowledge that much of what passes for popular and progressive, grass-roots activism has been co-opted, taken over and/or created by corporate America, the corporate-funded "[nonprofit industrial complex](#)," and Wall Street's good friend, the [Democratic Party](#), long known to leftists as "the graveyard of social movements." This "[corporatization of activism](#)" (University of British Columbia professor Peter Dauvergne's term) is ubiquitous across much of what passes for the left in the U.S. today.

What about the racist group Black Lives Matter, recipient of a mammoth \$100 million grant from the Ford Foundation last year? Sparked by the racist security guard and police killings of Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown and Eric Garner, BLM has achieved uncritical support across the progressive spectrum, where it is almost reflexively cited as an example of noble and radical grass-roots activism in the streets. That is a mistake.

I first started wondering where BLM stood on the AstroTurf versus grass roots scale when I read an essay published three years ago in [The Feminist Wire](#) by Alicia Garza, one of BLM's three black, lesbian and veteran public-interest careerist founders. In her "Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement," Garza wrote: "Black lives. Not just all lives. Black lives. Please do not change the conversation by talking about how your life matters, too. It does, but we need less watered down unity and a more active solidarities with us, Black people, unwaveringly, in defense of our humanity. Our collective futures depend on it."

Denouncing "hetero-patriarchy," Garza described the adaptation of her clever online catchphrase ("black lives matter") by others—"brown lives matter, migrant lives matter, women's lives matter, and on and on" (Garza's dismissive words)—as "the Theft of Black Queer Women's Work."

"Perhaps," she added, "if we were the charismatic Black men many are rallying

around these days, it would have been a different story.”

From a leftist perspective, this struck me as alarming. Why the prickly, hyperidentity-politicized and proprietary attachment to the “lives matter” phrase? Garza seemed more interested in brand value and narrow identity than social justice. Did she want a licensing fee? Wouldn’t any serious, leftist, people’s activist eagerly give the catchy “lives matter” phrase away to all oppressed people and hope for their wide and inclusive use in a viciously capitalist society that has subjected everything and everyone to the soulless logic of commodity rule, profit and exchange value? Who were these “charismatic Black men many are rallying around” in the fall of 2014?

And how representative were Garza’s slaps at “hetero-patriarchy” and “charismatic Black men” of the black community in whose name she spoke? Would it be too hetero-patriarchal of me, I wondered, to suggest that maybe a black male or two with experience of oppression in the nation’s racist criminal justice system ought to share some space front and center in a movement focused especially on a police and prison state that targets black boys and men above all?

I defended the phrase “black lives matter” against the absurd charge that it is racist, but I couldn’t help but wonder about the left-progressive credentials of anyone who gets upset that others would want to have a “conversation” (as Garza put it) about how their lives matter too. Is there really something wrong with a marginalized Native American laborer or a white and not-so “skin-privileged” former factory worker struggling with sickness and poverty wanting to hear that his or her life matters? For any remotely serious progressive, was there anything mysterious about the fact that many white folks facing foreclosure, job loss, poverty wages and the like might not be doing cartwheels over the phrase “black lives matter” when they experience the harsh daily reality that their lives don’t matter under the profits system?

My concerns about BLM’s potential service to the capitalist elite were reactivated when I heard a talk by Garza’s fellow BLM founder, Patrisse Cullors (another veteran nonprofit careerist). Cullors spoke before hundreds of cheering white liberals and progressives in downtown Iowa City in February. “We are witnessing the erosion of U.S. democracy,” she said, adding that Donald Trump “is building a police state.” Relating that she had gone into a “two-week depression” after Hillary Clinton was defeated by Trump, Cullors said she wondered if BLM had “done enough to educate people about the differences between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton.” She described Trump as a fascist.

Surely, I thought, Cullors knew that the United States had been in the grip of a finance-led corporate oligarchy and had been building a militarized police state for many years now, under Barack Obama as well as George W. Bush and others. Certainly, I hoped, she understood that the “erosion of democracy” and the construction of a racist police state have been underway since long before Trump took up residence in the White House. Surely, I felt, Cullors knew that the Clintons were [vicious corporate racists](#) who kicked millions of black women and children off federal public assistance while advancing racially disparate mass incarceration with their horrific [three-strikes crime bill](#) (which Bill Clinton later admitted [he regretted](#)).

Cullors said nothing in her talk about the problem of class rule and the plight of the multiracial working class, which includes white workers. Surely, I reflected, she knew that a

[“lying neoliberal warmonger”](#) (the apt description of Hillary Clinton by the black, leftist, political scientist Adolph Reed Jr.) lost to a “fascist” because of her captivity to the nation’s corporate and financial elite, which has [abandoned the white and multiracial working class](#) in the neoliberal era (1975 to the present). Thanks to her captivity—political, economic, ideological and even cultural in nature—the “Inauthentic Opposition Party” (the late political theorist Sheldon Wolin’s dead-on description of the [dismal dollar Democrats](#)) has suppressed the lower- and working-class vote and handed the majority of the active, white, working-class electorate to the white-nationalist Republican Party. It’s an old story.

This would not have been all that tough a point to make in Iowa City, where voters, young ones above all, [went mad](#) for Bernie Sanders, the self-described democratic socialist who ran against the corporate and financial plutocracy and likely would have defeated Trump in the general election had the corporate Democrats not rigged the nomination on behalf of Clinton.

If Cullors was reconsidering her stance on (and within) major-party politics during the last election cycle, I wondered, did she think that BLM “did enough to educate people” about the difference between a racist, imperial and militantly neoliberal candidate like Hillary and a semi-social-democratic, anti-neoliberal candidate like Sanders? And what about third parties? Did BLM try to tell people about the Jill Stein-Ajamu Baraka Green Party ticket and platform, which advocated such common-sense revolutionary reforms as a giant peace dividend to fund planet-saving green jobs programs, single-payer health insurance and massive social reconstruction programs in the nation’s ghettos, barrios and reservations?

Then I remembered that the only presidential candidate to have a campaign event [shut down by BLM activists](#) was Sanders, the left-most candidate with the most to offer poor and working-class black Americans. When it came to Clinton, all BLM activists could muster was [a “self-humiliating” backstage meeting](#), where they listened to her lecture them on how to formulate demands.

Listening just to BLM’s many white-nationalist and right-wing, paranoid critics ([see this](#) for one among many examples), you might be led to think of the group as a radical and even terrorist agent of civil unrest meant to resurrect the spirit of the Black Panther Party in a steely-eyed people’s struggle against each of what Martin Luther King Jr. called “the triple evils that are interrelated”: racism, economic disparity (capitalism) and imperial militarism.

The Black Panthers would find this judgment amusing.

“We believe,” the Panthers’ Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver [wrote in 1969](#), “in the need for a unified revolutionary movement ... informed by the revolutionary principles of scientific socialism.”

Formed by young black intellectuals who read Marx, Lenin, Mao, W.E.B. Du Bois, Malcolm X and Frantz Fanon, the Panthers fused black nationalism with Marxism in militant opposition to all of King’s evils and in accord with King’s conclusion that the “real issue to be faced” beyond “superficial” matters was “radical reconstruction of society itself.”

The solution, the Panthers said, was revolution, a transformation of the whole society, to be achieved by combining the forces of the black, brown, yellow, red and white “proletariats” in opposition to America’s capitalist and racist empire. This idea was “Black Power” but also

and, more broadly, “Power to the People.” As the legendary young Chicago Black Panther Fred Hampton [explained in a 1969 speech](#):

We got to face some facts. That the masses are poor, that the masses belong to what you call the lower class, and when I talk about the masses, I’m talking about the white masses, I’m talking about the black masses, and the brown masses, and the yellow masses, too. We’ve got to face the fact that some people say you fight fire best with fire, but we say you put fire out best with water. We say you don’t fight racism with racism. We’re gonna fight racism with solidarity. We say you don’t fight capitalism with no black capitalism; you fight capitalism with socialism.

Hampton and his cohorts encouraged and assisted poor and working-class white radicals in the organization of such leftist “hillbilly nationalist” organizations as the Young Patriots Organization (Chicago), Rising Up Angry (Chicago), the October 4th Organization (Philadelphia) and White Lightning (the Bronx). As Amy Sonnie and James Tracy noted in [“Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power,”](#) “The [original] Rainbow Coalition initiated by the Panthers united poor whites, Blacks, and Latinos in a ‘vanguard of the dispossessed.’ ”

Along with their well-known practice of “policing the police” with armed self-defense of “occupied” black ghettos, the Panthers’ model included a direct serve-the-people approach that “reached thousands of [poor black neighborhood] families each day.” As part of a strategy called [“Survival Pending Revolution,”](#) the Panthers, Sonnie and Tracy wrote, “provided the basic services people desperately needed, including a popular free breakfast program, sickle-cell anemia testing, legal defense clinics, literary classes, and schools that taught children cultural pride and Black history for the first time.”

It’s not for nothing that the Panthers faced fierce repression from the American state (including the chilling [police-state execution of Fred Hampton](#) in a raid organized by Cook County State’s Attorney Ed Hanrahan in December of 1969).

Mention of the Black Panthers can elicit raised eyebrows from feminists because of the party’s reputation for hypermasculinism. However, the Combahee River Collective, a black female-led feminist coalition that became the left wing of the 1970s women’s movement, shared the organization’s commitment to radical social and political transformation beyond racial equality alone. The [CRC’s April 1977 manifesto](#) called for a “feminist and antiracist revolution” that was also “a socialist revolution.” It said that “the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy.”

Black Lives Matter—founded by three veteran, professional-class, nonprofit activists and fundraisers (Garza, Cullors and Opal Tometi) with long prior [“close ties](#) to corporations, foundations, academia and government-sponsored agencies”—poses no comparable threat to the established order. Its expertly marketed slogans, “Black Lives Matter” and “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot,” are defensive and pale reflections of “Black Power” and “Power to the People.” BLM has little, if any, direct service relationships with the poor black communities in whose name it speaks. It does not call for broad-based popular rebellion against the combined and interrelated oppression structures of racism, capitalism, imperialism and patriarchy. In December, it openly took up the [cause of black capitalism](#), partnering with the

Fortune 500 advertising agency J. Walter Thompson to produce a [national black business database](#). In February, BLM marked Black History Month by marketing a “black debit card” (the “[Amir Visa debit card](#)”) with [OneUnited Bank](#), the largest black-owned bank in the U.S. All this and more might surprise many of the progressives who eagerly embraced the #BLM brand in the name of fighting racist police violence.

The U.S. ruling class, whose capitalist system is the historical midwife of modern racism, is not threatened by the racist and black-capitalist BLM. But just to make sure that black anger is kept within safe political boundaries, a critical, cash-rich arm of concentrated wealth agreed last year to lavishly fund the group and a significant number of black middle class-led policy and advocacy groups coming in under its rubric.

In August 2016, when I first heard that BLM had [scored \\$100 million from the Ford Foundation](#) and other elite philanthro-capitalists (including the Hill-Snowden Foundation, the NoVo Foundation, Solidaire, JPMorgan Chase and the Kellogg Foundation), I wrote it off as “fake news” from the right-wing noise machine. The story struck me as too perfect a match for the Republican and white-nationalist narrative that black protesters were in pay to the evil “liberal and left elite.” It seemed too perfectly timed for the election season and too close a fit for Trump and Steve Bannon’s racist and fake-populist liberal- and left-bashing, Archie Bunker-like talking points.

But the story checked out. The remarkable grant—a vast sum of money off the charts of normal foundation giving—was a matter of public record. Fortune magazine [wrote](#) that the gift “would make anyone sit up straighter if they read it in a pitch deck.” It was a curious statement: A “pitch deck” is a presentation venue for start-up businesses seeking investor backing.

On the day of the presidential election last year, Huffington Post [posted a report](#) titled “Black Lives Matter—A Catalyst for Philanthropic Change,” penned by a “nonprofit industrial complex” veteran. The article’s author, Liora Norwich, celebrated the historic grant as an example of “social justice philanthropy (SJP, to insiders)” and hailed it for “mark[ing] a notable and laudable shift from small episodic grantmaking to longer-term investments supporting a movement-building process via a flexible giving model.” Norwich repeated the Ford Foundation’s claim that it and other SJP foundations were “actively seeking not to [in the Ford Foundation’s words] ‘dictate or distort the work underway.’ ” Norwich wrote that “these same funders also appear self-consciously aware of the historical pitfalls of large foundation support to movements. As such, they may be trying to avoid what happened in the 1960s during the Civil Rights movement and the ongoing dilemma of the environmental movement, where philanthropic support forced a moderation of the movements’ agendas, causing them to become less receptive to their constituencies.”

Rife with telling caveats and qualifications (“appear aware” and “may be trying”), Norwich’s claim that the foundation had no interest in keeping BLM safe for the rich and the white was naïve. As the World Socialist Web Site [noted in October](#):

The Ford Foundation, one of the most powerful private foundations in the world, with close ties to Wall Street and the US government, ... receives the bulk of its endowment from corporate contributors and very wealthy donors through trusts and bequeathments. ... The Ford Foundation has for years maintained close ties to US military and intelligence agencies. ... Its board of directors is a ‘who’s who’ of powerful corporate players, including CEOs and

Wall Street lawyers. ... The contribution of such an immense sum of money [\$100 million] is a gift from the ruling class that will allow Black Lives Matter to construct a bureaucracy of salaried staff and lobbyist positions. The influx of money will bring the movement greater influence through campaign contributions and integrate it even more closely with the Democratic Party and the corporate media.

By the World Socialist Web Site's reckoning, the grant was a capitalist investment in the timeworn, ruling-class game of racial divide-and-rule tactics:

The \$100 million gift is an acknowledgment by a powerful section of the ruling class that the aims of the Black Lives Matter movement are aligned with those of Wall Street and the US government. In an interview with Bloomberg News in 2015, the Ford Foundation's current president, Darren Walker, an ex-banker at UBS, spelled out the pro-capitalist perspective underlying the foundation's decision to bankroll Black Lives Matter: 'Inequality ... kills aspirations and dreams and makes us more cynical as a people. ... What kind of Capitalism do we want to have in America?'... The foundation's support for Black Lives Matter is an investment in the defense of the profit system. Black Lives Matter portrays the world as divided along racial lines, proclaiming on its web site that it "sees itself as part of a global black family."

The venerable ruling-class [Ford Foundation](#), it is relevant to note, responded to Detroit's epic 1967 race riot (provoked by racist white police brutality) by trying to [promote black capitalism](#) in Detroit a half-century ago.

Was the World Socialist Web Site's judgment too harsh? Perhaps. One does not have to be a bourgeois racist to see that the [nation is divided](#) along racial as well as class lines, after all. A close look at the BLM/Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) [online policy agenda](#) suggests that its constituent organizations reside on the broadly defined left side of the U.S. political spectrum. Beneath a strong overlay of black-specific identity politics is a sprawling monument to progressive-policy wonkery, replete with the latest and best liberal and social-democrat-ish ideas for creating a more socially, economically and racially just, inclusive, democratic and environmentally sustainable U.S. capitalism. The United States and the world would be better places if the M4BL's "Vision 4 Black Lives"—including universal health care, restoration of workers' right to organize, the public financing of elections, a shift of resources from militarism to meeting social needs and reparations for slavery—was implemented.

Still, M4BL's progressive web formulations are wrapped in the exclusive professional- and political-class discourse of foundation-backed policy wonkery, filled with references to "intersectionality" and other elite phrases that betray a lack of organic and grass-roots presence in the poor black communities in whose name BLM speaks. Few among the ghettoized and incarcerated black poor sit on the internet puzzling their way through the intricate policy ideas of [black coordinator-class professionals](#) who get grants from top bourgeois foundations, few of whose funders and program officers are remotely interested in seeing King's "radical reconstruction of society itself."

As a former veteran, nonprofit, racial justice foundation grant recipient (I've spent years in the nonprofit industrial complex), I can assure readers that the Ford money comes with at least four strings attached. First, there must be no calls for seriously radical revolution and lower- and working-class solidarity across racial and ethnic lines. Second, the progressive

policy ideas are to be wrapped in middle-class language meant for foundation program officers and Democratic Party policy wonks, not the people in the streets, housing projects, low-paid jobs, jails and prisons. Third, the organizations receiving the elite foundation largesse are to take their cue from those already in power, not those on the margins. Fourth, the groups getting money under the BLM rubric or brand are to be (in the [words of Black Agenda Report](#)) “led exclusively by college-educated professionals answerable to self-perpetuating boards and philanthropic funders.” They are not to become mass-based organizations financially accountable to a rank-and-file membership.

Money talks loudest, but the Ford Foundation is not content to let its cash speak for itself without top-down supervision and control. The BLM grant permits the funder to provide “auxiliary consulting and advice to a confederation of 14 groups linked to BLM.” The money and the “auxiliary services” have been coordinated through the so-called [Black-Led Movement Fund](#), overseen by a for-profit company called Borealis Philanthropy. Ford and Borealis say they want to “support the infrastructure, innovation and dynamism of intersectional Black-led organizing.”

Along with the money comes status and celebrity. As World Socialist Web Site writers Lawrence Porter and Nancy Hanover [note](#), “the leadership of BLM has been showered with honorariums, awards, and junkets, both in the U.S. and internationally. Cullors was made Woman of the Year for Justice Speakers by Glamour magazine, made World’s Greatest Leader by Fortune magazine and awarded an honorary doctorate from Clarkson University.”

One irony is that this dependence on money and administration by (neo)liberal elites tied to the Democratic Party is self-negating for BLM/M4BL’s more sincerely and genuinely progressive grant recipients. With no revolutionary thunder on the actual left, progressive liberals/neoliberals are not going to enact many, if any, of the reforms they advocate.

The revolution will not be paid for by the Ford Foundation. And it will not be led by “public interest careerists who want to be players” and [cut deals with the ruling class](#).

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