

BLACK LIVES MATTER AND THE DEMOCRATIC NECESSITY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

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PART ONE

DEMOCRATIC PRECIPICE

“I hold that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical.”

-Thomas Jefferson, Letter to James Madison 1787

“The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims, have been born of earnest struggle [...] If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightening. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, or it may be both moral and physical, but it must be struggle. Power concedes nothing without demand. It never did and it never will.”

-Fredrick Douglass “West India Emancipation” 1857

“We who believe in freedom cannot rest.”

– Ella Baker 1964¹

“It is our duty to fight for our freedom.

It is our duty to win.

We must love each other and support each other.

We have nothing to lose but our chains.”

--Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* 1987

“You must struggle to truly remember this past in all its nuance, error, and humanity. You must resist the common urge toward the comforting narrative of divine law, toward fairy tales that imply some irresistible justice. The enslaved were not bricks in your road, and their lives were not chapters in your redemptive history. They were people turned to fuel for the American machine...Our triumphs can never compensate for this. Perhaps our triumphs are not even the point. Perhaps struggle is all we have because the god of history is an atheist, and nothing about this world is meant to be.”

–TaNehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* 2015

¹ Recorded in the documentary *Fundi: The Story of Ella Baker* (1981)

Introduction

Social movements are often regarded as potentially hazardous disruptions, uprisings that interfere with the normal mechanisms of politics – insurgencies that must be either repressed or swiftly re-incorporated into the regular legislative process. In 2016, three years after its emergence, President Obama chided the Movement for Black lives by saying that it had been “really effective at bringing attention to problems” but claiming, “once you’ve highlighted an issue and brought it to people’s attention [...and] elected officials or people who are in a position to start bringing about change are ready to sit down with you, then you can’t just keep on yelling at them.” He went on to say, “the value of social movements and activism is to get you at the table, to get you in the room, and then to figure out: how is the problem to be solved.”²

Obama’s view is a common one, but it is also incorrect. The value of movements is something much more profound. Movements are what keep democracy from falling irrevocably into the pitfalls of bureaucracy and oligarchy described by Max Weber, chiefly: dehumanization, expropriation, and stagnation. This is important because democracy is more than the institutional – largely electoral – framework that is commonly associated with it. In truth, democracy demands a broad political orientation toward participation and citizenship from “the people” who are to govern. A democracy where people have come to believe that voting is the only kind of participation that matters; that their vote, in any case, doesn’t count; that the system is fundamentally “rigged;” that those who govern are not “like them,” and worse, are unresponsive; is a polity that will struggle (and perhaps fail) to bear the burden and responsibility of self-governance. If citizens, from whose authorization the legitimacy of democratic government

² Michael Shear and Liam Stack, “Obama says Movements Like Black Lives Matter ‘Can’t Just Keep On Yelling’” New York Times, April 23, 2016 retrieved on May 6, 2016 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/24/us/obama-says-movements-like-black-lives-matter-cant-just-keep-on-yelling.html>

arises, come to believe that their capacity to act as authors of their collective fate is a fiction, then what follows is what I call, a *politics of despair*.

In this book, I argue that the force that counteracts the Weberian pitfalls of bureaucratization and oligarchy and which can counteract the politics of despair by “re-politiciz[ing] public life” (Young, (1991) 2011), is social movements. Social movements infuse the essential elements of pragmatic imagination, social intelligence, and democratic experimentation into public spheres that are ailing, and have become non-responsive, stagnant, and/or closed. They are necessary, not only to address the concerns of those engaging in public protest, nor only for the ethical purpose of achieving more just conditions for all, but also, for the health and survival of democracy, as such. However, this book is not only a theoretical exploration of the place of social movements in democracy. If social movements help to re-politicize public life, we should see some observable changes in the polity. Therefore, I also undertake an examination of the ideas and impacts of the ascendant movement of our moment: The Movement for Black Lives.

To be clear, I do not intend to claim that Black Lives Matter is the only movement making a political difference in the second decade of the 21st century. In fact, I would assert that since 2009, the United States and, arguably, the world has been in what social movements scholar Sydney Tarrow calls a “cycle of contention” which is a “phase of heightened conflict across the social system” (Tarrow, 1998, p. 199). Contentious cycles are characterized by the rapid diffusion of collective action and mobilization; innovation in the forms of contention; the creation or major change in collective action frames, discourses and frames of meaning; coexistence of organized and unorganized activists; and increased interaction between challengers and authorities (Tarrow, 1998). The 2009 emergence of the Tea Party movement,

followed by Occupy in 2011, and the Black Lives Matter in 2014, evinces all the above.

However, in the following chapters I explore the Movement for Black Lives as a case study, not only because it is the most recent in the cycle of contention to have a measurable political impact, but because if it persists over time, it has the most promise for having transformative, historically unique effects. This is because the movement has a peculiar political philosophy, one for which it is not easy to pick out a recent historical corollary, and has struck a peculiarly resonant political cord, after only four years of existence.

I undertake this study with a concrete example to explicate what social movements *do* for democracy beyond making political claims on behalf of marginalized groups. I investigate whether and how movements can reinvigorate the public sphere and what such remembrance and recommitment to politics, if it occurs, means for the polity as a whole. In the chapters that follow, I analyze the emergence of the movement, its organizational structure and culture, its resources models, and its strategies and tactics, while also laying out and contextualizing its political philosophy and measurable political effects in terms of changing both discourse, public opinion, and policy. Throughout the text, I interweave theoretical and empirical observations, rendering both an illustration of this particular movement and an analysis of the work social movements do in democracy.

The Political Context

The graphic and bewildering 2016 electoral contest, and its surprising outcome, seemed to make the world anew overnight, especially for the 73 million³ voters who had cast their ballots for someone other than President Trump. Those Americans woke on November 9, 2016, to what suddenly seemed a new and uncertain era. However, the political tumult that gave rise to the

³ Final vote counts Cook Political Report retrieved on March 20, 2017 at <http://cookpolitical.com/story/10174>

contentious and surprising election cycle began much earlier. Already, the 21st century had begun to put the lie to the 1990s notion that America and the world had reached “the end of history,” in which the liberal international order and increasing development would lead to ever growing tolerance and prosperity. Instead, the first year of the new millennium showed us the birth of a new form of international conflict and the first decade ushered in the largest financial collapse the world had seen since the 1930s. During what was dubbed the Great Recession, one quarter of American families lost at least 75 percent of their wealth, and more than half had lost at least 25 percent (Pfeffer, Danziger, & Schoeni, 2013). As with almost every indicator of American well-being, for African Americans, the news was even worse: the median net worth of black families fell 53 percent (National Association of Real Estate Brokers, 2013). The national unemployment rate had climbed to above 10 percent, for blacks, the rate topped 17 percent.⁴ When the wave of job loss began to recede in 2013, it left in its wake occupations that did not provide as much stability or income as the ones that had been swept away.

But the economic devastation of the Great Recession and the precarity that it laid bare was not the only tumult testing the temerity of American Dreamers by 2016. Already, a black teenager named Trayvon had been hunted and gunned down by a vigilante as he walked home in a small town in Florida. Already, Rekia Boyd had been shot dead by an off-duty cop on a burger run, while standing in her neighborhood park. Eric Garner, a black man selling loose cigarettes on a New York City street corner, and pleading “I can’t breathe,” had already been choked to death on video by a police patrolman. Twelve-year-old Tamir Rice, mistaken for a twenty-year-old man, had been slaughtered by law enforcement while playing behind a community center. Already, Sandra Bland had been disappeared into the cell where she would die for behaving as

⁴ U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee, Weekly Economic Digest retrieved on March 16, 2017 at https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/7ff3e9c2-136b-4047-97ce-5aa85ac2ce77/wed-03-17-10.pdf

though she were free during a traffic stop. And, Mike Brown's cooling body had already lain uncovered on the hot concrete for four hours after being shot dead by a police officer who claimed the unarmed teen looked like a "demon." In each case, the killings were deemed justified. The perpetrators left free.

The justice system's shrug of acceptance in the face of the violent, unnecessary deaths of black people at the hands of vigilantes and the state, mirrored the unconcern that seemed to suffuse all the institutions of power as they witnessed the post-recession suffering of ordinary people of all colors, seeming to do little or nothing in response. Indeed, in the second decade of the 21st century, the world had already witnessed a series of uprisings demanding democratic accountability and economic fairness around the world. This context made organizer Alicia Garza's hastily typed cry that "black lives should matter," one that entered the political environment resonant with grief and gravitas. Garza's friend and fellow organizer, Patrisse Cullors, put the exhortation behind a hashtag that yet another organizer and collaborator, Opal Tometi, pushed onto what were in 2012, the lesser used social media platforms of Twitter and Tumblr. #BlackLivesMatter quickly diffused across social media and became a part of national discourse, and later, a rallying cry for mass mobilizations in the streets. But what characteristics created a "political opportunity" for the political commotion that has characterized America's early 21st century?

The Politics of Despair

Scholarly interest in the role that emotions play in social movements was piqued after the intensely emotional political work of attempting to get recognition of and redress for the AIDS crisis in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Veterans of that work, most notably sociologist Deborah Gould, began insisting that studying movement organizations without taking note of the

emotions that motivated, animated, and complicated them, was overlooking a major part of the story of emergence, maintenance and demobilization of movements. In 2012, Gould introduced the concept of “political despair,” which she described as “feeling of inefficacy and hopelessness, the sense that nothing will ever change, no matter what some imagined collective “we” does to try to bring change” (Thompson & Hoggett, 2012, p. 95). Gould goes on to describe political despair as a part of the “affective landscape of the early twenty-first century.” But political despair is more than a public mood, it is also a politics, that is, “the activity through which relatively large and permanent groups of people determine what they will collectively do, settle how they will live together, and decide their future.” (Pitkin, 1981). Politics “concerns all aspects of institutional organization, public action, social practices and habits, and cultural meanings insofar as they are potentially subject to collective evaluation and decision-making” (Young, (1991) 2011, p. 9). For citizens, a politics of despair is characterized by a lack of institutional investment and public trust, suspicion of the social practices and habits of others in the polity, cultural meanings that are illegible across difference, as well as deep cynicism about the possibility of political efficacy. For governors, a politics of despair is characterized by a Weberian retreat to bureaucratized oligarchy particularly marked by either indifference or inability to respond to the concerns of constituents.

Evidence that the United States can be described as in the grips of a politics of despair can be found in several trends that have been intensifying for decades; namely, 1) rising inequality, 2) declining political trust, 3) declining interpersonal trust, 4) declining civic knowledge, 5) declining and stratified political participation, and 6) declining political efficacy. The data demonstrating each of these trends is voluminous and robust. Social and economic inequality has been rising since the mid-20th century, with income inequality currently more

stark than it has been since the Gilded Age imploded in 1928. The top 1% of income earners have seen their share of total income rise from 8.9% in 1973 to 21.2% in 2014 (DeSilver, 2015). This startling proportion doesn't capture the fact that income growth during that time has accrued almost exclusively to the top 1% of income earners.⁵ The data on the increasing wealth gap is even more severe, with America's upper-income families possessing 70 times the wealth of lower-income families and 7 times the wealth of middle income families, the largest gap recorded by the Federal Reserve in the 30 years it has been collecting data (Fry & Kochhar, 2014). When these numbers are parsed by race and ethnicity, the already wide divide reveals itself to be cavernous, with the median wealth of white households increasing by 2.4 percent, from \$138,600 to \$141,900, between 2010 and 2013, while Hispanics' median wealth *decreased* by 14.3%, from \$16,000 to \$13,700, and black households' fell 33.7%, from \$16,600 to \$11,000 (Kochhar & Fry, 2014). These gaps in income and wealth are not unique among indicators of well-being. Egregious and persistent gaps in class, race, and gender are evident in everything from education, to physical safety, health, and contact with disciplining institutions, including carceral and welfare agencies (Pew Research Center, 2016) (Atkinson, 2015; Piketty, 2015) (Bonilla-Silva, 2013).

Additionally, trust in government is at an historic low (Smith & Son, 2013). According to the Pew Research Center, only 19% of respondents trust the government in Washington to do what is right "just about always" or "most of the time." (Pew Research Center, 2015). By comparison, 73% of Americans answered this question affirmatively in 1958; 49% did so in 2001. Questions about individual institutions reveal similar skepticism. The only institutions that

⁵ For the first time since the Great Recession in 2007, most Americans did see some wage and income growth in 2015 and 2016. However, the fastest income growth continued to be among the top 1% of earners. See: Emmanuel Saez "U.S. Top 1 percent of income earners hit new high in 2015 amid strong economic growth" July 1, 2016 retrieved on December 19, 2016 at <http://equitablegrowth.org/research-analysis/u-s-top-one-percent-of-income-earners-hit-new-high-in-2015-amid-strong-economic-growth/>

a majority of Americans trust are the military (73%) and police (56%). Only 36% trust the President and the Supreme Court, 23% trust the criminal justice system and organized labor, 20% trust newspapers, and 9% trust Congress (Gallup, 2016).

Alongside this lack of trust in institutions, Americans have become much more likely to sort themselves by party sympathies now than two decades ago (Lupia, 2015). This partisan sorting is not limited to issue positions, with more Democrats and Republicans espousing policy preferences that align with their chosen party, but also includes social sorting. Democrats and Republicans are now less likely to participate in the same entertainment, live in the same neighborhoods, or consume the same goods (Pew Research Center, 2014) (Bingham, 2012) (E Poll Market Research, 2016). Perhaps because of this sorting, there has also been a stunning increase in personal antipathy between Democrats and Republicans, with 86% of Democrats reporting that they have an “unfavorable” view of Republicans and 55% “very unfavorable.” Likewise, 91% of Republicans report that they view Democrats unfavorably and 58% very unfavorably (Pew Research Center, 2016). The personal antipathy between partisans hints at an even more troubling phenomenon: Americans’ declining trust in each other generally. In 1974, 46% of Americans reported that they trusted most people; by 2012, only 33% said the same, with millennials reporting less trust in others than any other generation (Twenge, Campbell, & Carter, 2014). To make matters worse, Americans know less about how their government is structured and how it is supposed to function than ever before, with only one quarter of Americans able to name the three branches of government and one third of Americans unable to name any of them (Annenburg Public Policy Center University of Pennsylvania, 2016) (Lupia, 2015).

These changes in fortunes, trust, and knowledge have taken a toll on the belief that democratic government can be responsive to most citizens, producing dramatic and widespread

disillusionment with the idea that political participation by ordinary citizens can create positive change. This bleak view of the effects of traditional political participation is not merely the result of a cynical outlook. Americans have good reason to doubt their ability to effect national politics. Political scientists have shown that government responsiveness is stratified by socioeconomic status (Gilens & Page, 2014) (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015). Is it any wonder, then, that political participation is stratified in the same way, with the wealthy and educated much more likely to contribute their “money, skills, and time” in the political arena than those who have fewer resources, but need more responsiveness (Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2013; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). For black Americans, the reality of stratified representation is even more severe. Though the Civil Rights movements of the 1950s and 60s opened pathways for more African Americans to participate in the political process and elect some members of the group as political representatives, but “the price of the ticket” has been electoral capture by one, increasingly unresponsive party, and the decline of a politics dedicated to confronting racial inequality head on (Frymer, 2010) (Harris, 2012). Given these realities, the breadth of the crisis we now face is profound.

However, the conditions that give rise to this democratic despair should not be that surprising. Analysts of democracy spanning diverse political times and traditions, from Thomas Jefferson to Max Weber, John Dewey, and Rosa Luxemburg, warned that though the form of governance is based on the idea that the people will govern checking governors and institutions tendency toward consolidating power and ruling in the interest of the few, is work that requires muscular and, at times, rebellious engagement by “the people,” if they are to retain the authority to “ordain and establish” a “more perfect union” and preserve their form of government.⁶

⁶ The Constitution of the United States of America, 1789 retrieved on March 20, 2017 at https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/United_States_of_America_1992

The American pragmatist, John Dewey, reasoned that since “progress is not steady and continuous [and] retrogression is as periodic as advance” (Dewey, (1927) 2016, p. 254) citizens will often find themselves in a situation in which they must “build power external to the state” in order to “create, through protest or violence, a new space where inquiry may once again thrive in the service of collective problem-solving” (Rogers, 2010, p. 88). Because democratic institutions derive their legitimacy from the people and exist to serve them, the bureaucratic disconnect is particularly toxic in democratic systems. Indeed, the lack of responsiveness or lopsided responsiveness that results serves up conditions ripe for a politics of despair.

A series of pointed and urgent questions arise from these facts: what helps members of the polity to recover from the cynicism wrought by insufficiently responsive governance? What reminds us of the power of the public sphere? What causes governing officials to be responsive to new or neglected constituencies and attentive to their causes? What helps us to feel that our opinions and political actions matter –that “we the people” have power? What makes a citizenry both believe and act on behalf of the belief that “another world is possible?”

The answer is social movements.

Theorizing Social Movements as Democratic Institutions

When people think of the structure of democratic societies, they often think of the institutions formalized in the American Constitution: the legislature, the executive, the judiciary, and the press (as acknowledged and protected in the First Amendment). I argue that a complete theory of democratic politics ought to include social movements as another essential institutional element, a Fifth Estate that is an indispensable check on institutional tendencies toward bureaucracy and oligarchy. Although social movements scholars generally do not spend much

time contemplating the function of social movements in democracy, sociologist Hank Johnston writes in *States and Social Movements* that it is crucial to understand the role that social movements have played in the formation of the modern state:

“let us be clear: for most of history, when a ruler’s attention turned to the common folk, it was usually not from compassion or concern for their well-being or a desire to protect their interests, but for practical considerations of maintaining power and squelching the threat of rebellion. The long-term effects of popular mobilizations and protests have been to force the ruling classes [...] to consider the popular will in state politics. [...] Although this is not usually the intended consequence of social movements, to this day they continue to bring new challenging groups, new ideas, new coalitions, and new interests into today’s system, such that the strong undemocratic tendencies are often mitigated to the extent that social movements mobilize” (Johnston, 2011, p. 3).

Democratic theorists sometimes point out the essential functions movements play, but often without realizing that movements are not an intervention from outside routinized democracy, but are instead an essential part of democracy, in practice. Sheldon Wolin, for example, famously declares that democracy cannot be had as a form of governance or through a set of procedures and that, indeed, the form of government usually devolves into “democracy without the demos as actor,” (Wolin 1994, 13). Wolin goes so far as to dismiss contemporary instantiations of representative democracy as “various representations of democracy” bolstered by “the political burlesque hustled by the pundits” (14). Democracy worthy of the name, by this account, only erupts spontaneously and temporarily, via revolutions that “activate the demos and destroy boundaries that bar access to political experience” (18). This activated populous, though, creates a tumult, one that comes to appear as surplus democracy once revolutions are ended and the permanent institutionalization of politics is begun” (19). Wolin contends that this is because the democratic notions of “citizen-as-actor” and “politics-as-episodic” is incompatible with the modern choice of “the State as the fixed center of political life” and consequently “Democracy in the late modern world cannot be a complete political system, and given the awesome

potentialities of modern forms of power [...] it ought not be hoped or striven for” (23). Instead, he asserts, we ought to make our peace with the idea that democracy “is doomed to succeed only temporarily, but is a recurrent possibility as long as the memory of the political survives” (23). Wolin concludes, “the possibility of renewal draws on a simple fact: that ordinary individuals are capable of creating new cultural patterns of commonality at any moment [...] renewing the political by contesting the forms of unequal power” that characterize society (24).

I agree with Wolin’s account of the way that democracy is, in practice, periodically recalled to itself because of the political action of resistant and organized members of the polity. However, what if these periodic democratic renewals are not outside the bounds of regular democratic politics? What if, they are not paradoxical or contradictory? What if they are not evidence, as Wolin colorfully puts it, of “democracy [...] betraying its own values” (24). Perhaps these seeming disruptions are actually part and parcel of the democratic package and should be theorized as such. More pointedly, what if periodic insurgency is the way that democracy survives?

The idea that social movements might be vital for a well-functioning democracy rather than inimical to it may seem dramatic, but there are both logical and historical reasons to believe the assertion is true. We might look to the physical sciences for an analogy. Take the concept of “swailing.” It is a word used in forestry and farming, which means “controlled burn,” it is the practice of setting small parts of the forest on fire to reduce hazards that accumulate during the colder seasons and prevent hotter, more destructive fires from erupting in Spring. This process also stimulates the germination of some desirable forest trees, and reveals soil mineral layers that increase seedling vitality, thus renewing the forest. Without seasonally appropriate swailing, forests become moribund. I contend that the democratic environment, one filled with the hazards

of structural inequalities and manifold cross-cutting difference, is one that requires the political swailing that social movements provide.

Contrary to the theoretical balm of balanced pluralism offered by American democratic theorists in the mid-20th century (Dahl 2006 (1956)), social scientists have consistently demonstrated that empirically, the “heavenly chorus,” that is – collection of voices raised to speak their interests and policy preferences in democracies – sings with a decidedly upper-class accent (Schattschneider 1960). To wit, nothing explains differences in political participation better than socioeconomic stratification (Schlozman, Brady and Verba 2012). Likewise, elected representatives are most likely to listen to upper class constituents and make policy in accordance with their wishes (Gilens and Page 2014). Suppositions by mid-20th century political scientists that perhaps stratified participation in electoral politics was voluntary, and therefore a benign expression of disinterest rather than a reflection of structural disadvantage have been proved false (Verba and Kay Lehman Schlozman 1995) (Bartels 2008) (Schlozman, Brady and Verba 2012). Accompanying, equally optimistic, notions that perhaps the policy preferences of the upper and lower classes were not very divergent have also show themselves incorrect (Page, Bartels and Seawright 2013) (Flavin 2012) (Kelly 2009). Additionally, though socioeconomic status is the most predictive indicator of political participation and influence, race and gender matter most in terms of the way members of the polity understand the political world as well as how they develop and express political attitudes and policy preferences (Hochschild 1996) (Kinder and Sanders 1996) (Dawson 1994) (Sears, Sidanius and Bobo 2000) (Lopez 2004) (Lien 2001) (Dittmar 2015) (Caroll and Fox 2013) (Pew Research Center 2016) (Fingerhut 2016).

These stratifications do not balance out at any point in the electoral process, national or local, during campaigns or once representatives are situated in office. Instead, our regular

electoral process routinely leaves some – usually white, upper class men and associative conglomerations thereof, on top, and others arrayed in an intersectional hierarchy that cascades below. The well-documented stratification evinced in the electoral system means that the United States is, in fact, not hyperbole, governed by and for the benefit of the few, rather than the expansive swath one might imagine with the echo of the words “we the people” ringing in the *doxa* of our imagined community (Anderson 2006 (1983)).

This idealized form of this arrangement, which Iris Young calls “interest group pluralism,” is predicated on the idea that coalitions of interests will be voluntary, based on associative rather than structural or immutable categories, and able to combine in a variety of ways. The acknowledgement of difference is an underpinning of the idea of democratic pluralism, but the understanding of difference, and its implications for justice and the possibility of a well-functioning democracy, is so flawed as to be counterproductive for the ideal. The kind of contestation that proponents readily acknowledge as endemic to the political includes competing interests, competing values, competing ethics, competing norms, competing discursive lexicons, etc. Traditional proponents of pluralism like Dahl argue that such conflict can and should be salved through the normal process of institutional politics, because satisfying the demands made in these contests, is simply a question of organization on the part of citizens and responsiveness to that organization by elected officials. Those with competing views must organize with others who share their perspective and the most organized interest will win out, with no win ever being permanent, and power shifting over time. However, the problem as we know, is that pluralism is not only characterized by conflict between equals who have differing perspectives, but it is characterized by inequality, structural disadvantage, and if not immutable, then demonstrably enduring exclusion based on ascriptive characteristics.

The issue of inequality is of great concern because it is not simply a matter of inequality among different social groups in the current generation, but *inequality that compounds over time*, giving rise to a cumulative effect or legacy, that, while it does not always arise from the actions of the current members of the polity, nevertheless conditions the material opportunities granted in their lives, shaping the political meaning of their social understandings and the effect of their political actions. In short, interest group pluralism might, in ideal theory, be able to solve the problem of difference, but it is only because the concept of difference is so thoroughly misconceived as to leave out consideration of the reality of inequality and its political and economic consequences.

But inequality is not the only concern. Interest group pluralism also “depoliticizes public life” (Young, (1991) 2011, p. 72). Because we carry out democratic politics in a way that restricts legitimate political concerns to personal interests, we have developed the habit of making “no distinction between the assertion of selfish interests and normative claims to justice or right” (Young, (1991) 2011, p. 72). Indeed, the most common political insults leveled in contemporary politics, “snowflake,” and “social justice warrior,” treat genuine emotional investment in political topics and commitment to the ideal of justice, respectively, as infantile, undesirable attributes.

Politics is supposed to be made of sterner stuff, namely, a naked “competition among claims,” where the only worthy consideration is winning and, “one does not win by persuading a public that one’s claim is just,” but instead by “making trades and alliances with others, and making effective strategic calculations about how and to whom to make your claims.” This process “collapses normative claims to justice into selfish claims of desire” (Young, (1991) 2011, p. 72).” This way of conducting democratic politics is not damaging merely because its

presents ethical problems, but instead because it “fosters political cynicism” and convinces people that democratic politics is less about participation, representation, and problem-solving, and more a great game where the powerful compete and the rest of us clamor through our lives trying to stay out of the dangerous messes they make.

A further concern is that when the goal is only to win and not to deliberate and persuade your fellows regarding what is right, the range of arguments that circulate in public discourse is narrower and the content more superficial. Young contends that this leads to “a fragmented public life” in which people only give an audience to the arguments of their group. Today, the media environment, which features cable news sub divided by political attitudes, websites and blogs precision-tuned for ideological preferences, and social media feeds personally and algorithmically curated to perfect comportment with our pre-existing ideas, this tendency has only grown worse. Our discursive environment now provides structural support for public fractionalization. This means that “there is no forum within the public sphere of discussion and conflict where people can examine the overall patterns of justice or fairness produced by these processes.” Additionally, because the political habit is to evaluate politics based on who’s winning and who’s losing (Bartels, 1988) (Capella & Jamieson, 1997) (Patterson, 2005) rather than what is just or good and for whom, it is exceedingly difficult to bring “the basic structures, assumptions, constraints, and decision-making procedures” that coalesce to produce political outcomes into public discussion “because, for the most part, these [structures] are not effectively public” (Young, (1991) 2011, p. 73). The consequence is that political proposals are not directed at “persons as such, but at persons constituted piecemeal as taxpayers, health service consumers, parents, workers, residents of cities, and so on.” This kind of fragmentary public sphere’s most negative impact is not polarization, but instead incoherence. Not only are there a dearth of public

forums for discussion of issues outside the rubric of our selfish interest, even if there were such settings, our political culture has not taught us what we ought to do in them. This kind of depoliticization, more than conflict or polarization, is the death of democracy because it means that the nation, has become a mere territory, rather than a polity, because people have forgotten how to be citizens

I have listed the empirical and conceptual deficiencies of interest group pluralism, but, it is also important to remember that since inequality is structured and difference is a social fact any way of arranging power that starts from the world as it exists will be frustrated in its attempts to attain a just political and social relations. Likewise, there are no ideologies, procedures, or policy agenda that can permanently or entirely undo the material and political consequences of the historically compounded legacies of structured inequality. Of course, that is not to say we cannot and should not strive to do better. What is required for a political project that can meet the world where it is and take it someplace new, is an ethic for deciding what political remedy looks like and a political culture that facilitates revising structures, laws, and routines so that they can be in comportment with what the polity conceives as just as much as possible in a given time and place. Fundamentally, this is what democracy is built to do. However, since democracy, like all governing systems, develops strong oligarchic tendencies over time, it is necessary to push through periods of political stagnation, and social movements provide the way.

In this way, movements are a potential antidote to the politics of despair. They allow us to enact citizenship, not only through performing duties, but by authoring new understandings, priorities, and even governing institutions. Unlike other forms of participation, which can also teach valuable civic skills, social movements show us how to make change. Even if we don't immediately change policy or restructure institutions, we change our ideas, we change our

minds, we change our associations, we change public understandings, and we change the scope of political possibility.

It is important to note that I do not assume that all social movements will be progressive. Nor do I think the political swailing of contention is only delivered from the left. Democracy is difficult and risky, it is so because it entrusts people who have divergent understandings of the world and deviating interests in it, to govern themselves collectively, with no power above them that can right the ship of state should they decide through recklessness, blundering, or honest error, to dash it against the shores of history. A democratic society is ever in danger of doing itself in, but democratic polities are also incredibly resilient when they maintain public belief in and commitment to engaged citizenship that relies on debate, persuasion, and participation rather than resentment, cynicism, and violence. That is to say, when the democratic polity remains properly political.

At the point at which belief in the efficacy of politics becomes tenuous in the majority, when people begin to despair, not about the consequences of decisions that they have made in collective contestation, but instead at the very possibility of governing themselves, then the only hope for repair is a re-politicization of public life, an exercise of the political that reminds people that they are citizens. When anti-democratic movements arise and do this work, it is the responsibility of the citizenry to evaluate and answer. Sometimes, as we learned from the rise of the Third Reich in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century, the polity will make catastrophic choices. But at others, it will author principles and construct institutions that bring future generations closer to the ideal of justice. For these reasons, it is important to take social movements seriously as a pragmatic political solution to a real democratic problem.

The Re-politicization of the Public Life

Social movements' greatest good derives from re-politicizing the public sphere. That is, reminding "the people" that they are the root of all legitimate democratic authority. When they arise, movements disrupt the formation of the bureaucratic "iron cage" that Max Weber warned of, in which elites organized into efficient establishments forget that their purpose is to serve the polity and instead spend their energy and resources defending the perpetuation of power and knowledge as it most benefits the artifice of the organization (Weber, *Economy and Society*, (1922) 2013) (Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, 2004). As such, "movements arise within welfare capitalist society, on the fringes of bureaucratic institutions or carving out new social spaces not dreamt of in their rules" to "exploit and expand the sphere of civil society" and challenge the forms of oppression and domination that structure contemporary social and political relations (Young, (1991) 2011, p. 82).

Movements are a pragmatic politics in process; they are the performance of the political. They remind members of the polity that there is a public sphere where politics can and must take place if democracy is to be both authorized by and responsive to the people. In this way, social movements are not only instrumental, but institutionally important themselves. They teach us how to reclaim citizenship in times when public life has become anemic or repressive and many have forgotten that their political action is both necessary and beneficial.

In 2013, the Movement for Black Lives arose as the current iteration of the American black liberation movement. As we shall see in the following chapters, it has inspired new political activism, developed a unique political philosophy, imagined new horizons for institutional change, and invented new tactics for contestation. Participants report a natal belief in their ability to be authors of the social and political arrangements that will characterize the

new century. Herein, we will explore their claims, examine their organizations and actions, evaluate their influence and impact, and envisage the possibilities that their action has revealed to the American polity.

Plan of the Book

I carry out my examination of social movements' place in democracy using the concrete case of the Movement for Black Lives in several ways. The book proceeds in three parts. Each chapter includes both theoretical and empirical evidence, utilizing a multi-methodological and interdisciplinary approach to advance the argument that social movements have an institutional function in democracy, one that is evinced in M4BL as it unfolds in our politics as a concrete example.

Part one, which includes the present introduction, describes the “Democratic Pecipice” that the politics of despair has pushed Americans toward. Chapter 1 describes the emergence of the movement and broadly outlines the key aspects of M4BL’s political philosophy. Utilizing original interview data, I illuminate the thinking of activists who have mobilized to “end the war on black people” and, by their own description, discover what “true democracy,” a liberatory, pragmatic politics, entails and requires from individuals, institutions, and societal structures.

Part two, “Democratic Necessity,” begins with the second chapter, which pairs the thought of John Dewey and Ralph Ellison for a theoretical examination of the concept of *pragmatic imagination*. In this chapter, I use empirical evidence from interviews and content analysis of news websites and social media to show the ways that #blacklivesmatter and terms that are key to its political philosophy like “intersectionality,” “self-care,” “police brutality,” and “abolition,” (among others) has changed the way race, policing, and equity are understood and discussed in public discourse. Chapter 3 is predominantly theoretical and explores what John

Dewey has calls the “*social intelligence*” of the movement. Social intelligence is the ability to “effect a working connection between old habits, customs, institutions, beliefs and new conditions.”⁷ Using an examination of the intellectual foundations of the movement and interviews with participants, I show how the movement seeks to press foundational American ideals into service to salve and correct the structural conditions that enable domination and oppression in present day. Chapter 4 is predominantly empirical and investigates the *democratic experimentation* of M4BL, focusing on its innovations in organizational form and impacts on public opinion. In this chapter, I present original survey research which shows that the way the movement expresses its political philosophy and discursive inventions can accomplish the “ethnization” of blackness for those who are exposed to the ideas and images that participants circulate online, and which bubble up into mainstream discourse. I posit that the ethnicization of a racial category changes the way that people view the people who are ascribed to it, causing them to focus less on supposed inherent characteristics and more on non-essential, but actively chosen cultural behaviors. The chapter ends by considering the conflicts, tensions, and setbacks that the M4BL has weathered as they have experimented with new ideas and organizational arrangements.

The third and final part of the book takes a step back to consider the “Democratic Possibility” of social movements writ large, using the still-evolving Movement for Black Lives as an exemplary case. Possibility, in my usage, includes not only the vista of potential that M4BL brings to American politics, but also its limits. In chapter 5, I observe whether M4BL has *re-politicized the public sphere*. I apply the movements’ published policy platform, “Vision for Black Lives,” to measure its success in changing public opinion and winning candidate races and policy outcomes in areas that are key to its cause. In addition, utilizing the social movements

⁷ John Dewey. *Liberalism and Social Action*. 2000. New York: Prometheus Books, p. 56

literature on “co-optation,” or, more gently, “incorporation,” and the late 20th century rise of the “non-profit industrial complex” along with interviews with activists, I consider the challenge that the movement faces as it matures: how to “scale up” without “selling out”? Finally, I take step back and return to the idea that animates this exploration of #BlackLivesMatter. I elucidate the function that social movements play from the theoretical perspective of pragmatism and contemplate the road ahead for the Movement for Black Lives.

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