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From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation

Study & Discussion Guide

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Introduction: *Black Awakening in Obama's America*

1. From reading the introduction, what are your initial thoughts about the ways anti-Black racism has evolved in the United States since the civil rights era? What is the role of what the author calls “colorblindness” in perpetuating racial oppression in the absence of the overtly racist laws of previous eras?
2. Do you agree with the author that the working class as a whole, “Black, brown and white,” has “an interest in exposing the racist nature of US society”? How do you account for the presence of racist ideas among the white working class?
3. What effect has the rise of a Black middle and upper class, as well as the fact that many high-ranking political offices are now held by African Americans, had on Black liberation movements? Does a “Black community” that has a unified set of interests exist?
4. How would you explain the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in Obama’s America, at a time when Black political and economic power has never been greater? More generally, what are the continuities and differences we can see between the movements for Black liberation that were active in the 1960s and today?
5. What does the concept of “institutional racism” add to our understanding of racism? If racism is not only, or even primarily, about individual acts or expression of obvious hate, what does this imply about how racism is generated and maintained and the strategies needed to confront and overcome it? Is working through formal legal and political channels enough to achieve radical change? Can focusing too much energy on those channels actually make it more difficult to achieve such change?
6. The author asks: “Can the conditions created by institutional racism be transformed within the existing capitalist order?” Do you think there is any specific relationship between capitalism and racism? How might oppression on the basis of “race” relate to class?
7. The author criticizes the readiness of many Black elected officials to use cultural arguments to blame other Black people for their condition within society. What does this tell us about the way people’s interests and understandings of racism change as they are absorbed into mainstream politics? Why might Black elected officials, and the Black middle class more broadly, internalize racist discourses?

Chapter 1: A Culture of Racism

1. The chapter opens with quotes from Presidents Johnson and Obama. The former is also later quoted as saying that “freedom is not enough.” How do the two presidents’ statements exemplify changes in the ways in which racism is understood? What do they tell us about how the idea of the role of government has shifted over the last few decades? What do you think accounts for this shift?
2. In quoting Barbara Fields, the author advances a “materialist” understanding of racism as an “ideology” that stands for certain “social relations”; she further relates this to the need of capitalism to exploit labor. What does this imply for explanations of racism as simply an unfortunate symptom of tribalistic, ahistorical “human nature”?
3. This explanation of racism as an ideology developed to legitimize certain social relations implies that its origin is in the ruling class rather than (as arguments attributing racism to “ignorance” often suggest) in the working class. However, the author also states that “ideologies do not work when they are only imposed from above. The key is widespread acceptance, even among the oppressed themselves.” How do ideologies like racism become embedded throughout society and, in particular, how can we account for even those who directly suffer its effects internalizing some aspects of racist ideology?
4. While the “culture of poverty” explanation has now become part of racist ideology, the author argues that it originally had a radical potential as a response to a “scientific” racism rooted in eugenics. In order for that radical potential to be realized, is it necessary to develop a “materialist” analysis of culture? If so, what would that look like in this case?
5. The author quotes President Johnson’s speech at the chamber of commerce, in which he made the case for a “peaceful revolution” to eliminate ills such as poverty and predicted a “violent change” if this was not done. What does this tell us about the role of the state in managing society and capitalism, and the type of movements needed to gain meaningful concessions?
6. At several points, the author notes convergences between liberal and conservative approaches to race and racism. What explains these convergences? Does liberalism have inherent limits as an antiracist political ideology? Is it able to deal with racism as an institutional and systemic phenomenon structurally related to political economy?
7. Do you think that the conclusions of the Kerner Commission, that “white institutions created it [Black poverty], white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it,” still hold today?
8. Are institutional racism and other similar oppressions simply *useful* and in some sense external to capitalism, or are they necessarily *required* and *generated* by capitalism’s need to exploit labor and divide the working class? If the latter, then does any effective antiracist politics have to include a strong element of anticapitalist class politics and vice versa?

Chapter 2: *From Civil Rights to Colorblind*

1. What do the quotes from President Nixon and his chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, tell us about the degree to which ruling classes perceive working-class, multiracial solidarity as a threat? Do Black people and other racialized groups have a special potential to lead this kind of solidarity and radicalize a class movement through their leadership? To what degree can we understand racism as an elite project in response to this?
2. What is the relationship between struggles in different areas—for example, in electoral politics, through street movements, housing, and in the workplace? To what extent is achieving radical change dependent on connecting these struggles by, for instance, unions striking against institutional racism, whether or not this occurs directly in their sector?
3. Capitalism and democracy are often presented as being inherently connected, or at least as being uniquely compatible. What do the quotations from Silk and Vogel’s survey, in which business leaders questioned the principle of “one man, one vote” and hoped for a more severe recession, suggest about the actual nature of this relationship? Is democracy under capitalism necessarily limited and vulnerable to being rolled back?
4. What was the role of the emerging “colorblind logic” in isolating the Black movement and reversing the achievements of the welfare state? Does it enable a “liberal racism” that does not engage in (and can even denounce) openly racist language but nonetheless relies upon assumptions and supports institutions and policies that perpetuate racism as a structured, social relationship?
5. Do you share Nixon’s definition of what a “free and open society” would look like? Can you think of other definitions of “freedom” and “openness” that would require a fundamentally different social foundation?

Chapter 3: *Black Faces in High Places*

1. The chapter discusses several localities in which police killings made international news. What does the case of Baltimore in particular, with its largely African American political establishment and police, tell us about how racism operates through institutions rather than being a primarily individual failing or due to prejudice?
2. What is the relation of Black elites to the struggle for Black liberation as described in this chapter? Why do you think Black elites often reproduce and reinforce racist narratives about the majority of the Black population? What can we learn from the differences between the Ferguson and Baltimore contexts?
3. Given the increasing stratification between Black elites and the rest of the Black population, does it still make sense to talk about “the Black community” as a more or less unified group with similar interests?
4. The author writes that “the pursuit of Black electoral power became one of the principal strategies that emerged from the Black Power era. Clearly it has been successful for some. But the continuing crises for Black people, from under-resourced schools to police murder, expose the extreme limitations of that strategy. The ascendance of Black electoral politics also dramatizes how class differences can lead to different political strategies in the fight for Black liberation.”

If a strategy based on electoral politics has “extreme limitations,” does this imply that liberal democracy itself has certain limitations? What is the role of grassroots struggle/social movements in driving change? Why would the interests and strategies of working-class African Americans be different from those of the Black middle classes and elites?

5. How significant is it that the Black breakthrough into electoral politics was achieved at the same time as welfare spending came under attack? In such an environment, is it possible to implement the kind of state policies necessary to improve the lives of the majority of Black people? What is the role of the Democratic Party in relation to radical politics?
6. The difficulty of achieving fundamental change through electoral politics has led many people to dismiss this area of political activity entirely. Do you think it is possible for radical movements to pursue positions of power within the state without succumbing to its conservatizing logic, as described in this chapter, and instead operate “within and against” the state? Can radical change be achieved through existing state institutions, or is it necessary to build separate, alternative structures of power within society? What might these look like?
7. Has this chapter changed your opinion of what “sensible,” “mature,” or “pragmatic” politics are? Is it in fact unrealistic, even utopian, to believe that fundamental change can be achieved by working entirely within mainstream politics and the existing structures of power?

Chapter 4: *The Double Standard of Justice*

1. The author writes: “if the task of the police is to maintain law and order, then that role takes on a specific meaning in a fundamentally unequal society.” To what extent is it possible to reform the police without a wider and more radical movement that challenges racism within society and opposes state policies that generate inequality?
2. In light of the above, how should we consider suggestions that movements such as Black Lives Matter limit their activism to “specific demands” about police reform?
3. Would you describe the Black Codes instituted after the Civil War as being primarily motivated by a) racism, or b) the need to address the labor shortage caused by the end of slavery? What does this reveal about the general relationship between race and class, and about how racism divides sections of the working class against both one another and their long-term interests?
4. Considering the Black Codes, convict leasing, and other measures discussed in this chapter, do you think “race” has any meaning outside of or prior to social relations, or is it a social construct formed precisely through such relations? If the latter, then are antiracist politics at least as much about changing material social relations as they are about changing social attitudes?
5. Do you think anything fundamental has changed about the way police relate to Black communities since James Baldwin wrote that “they are present to keep the Negro in his place and to protect white business interests, and they have no other function”? Why has the “professionalisation” and diversification of police forces failed to address the issue of institutional racism? Could we imagine, for example, a 100 percent Black-staffed and -controlled city police force that remained institutionally racist toward African Americans?
6. What is the significance of the cross-party consensus on the need for “law and order” occurring at the same time as an economic downturn? Can we understand the police and prison system as primarily a way of disciplining the working class and controlling its “surplus” population during times of low economic growth? What is the importance of racism in extending this apparatus?
7. The author writes that “the overwhelmingly racist nature of American policing obscures the range of its reach, but it is in the interests of anti-police brutality activists to point out the specific [racial] *and* the generalized [class] nature of police terror.” Do you think that the specific focus of Black Lives Matter helps to advance the general cause of all who suffer at the hands of the police system? Do you think that the slogan “All Lives Matter,” often raised in opposition to Black Lives Matter, is intended to link these aspects or to silence Black voices?

Chapter 5: *Barack Obama: The End of an Illusion*

1. To what extent has the “de-racialization” of Black politics been the condition of the admission of African Americans into electoral politics? Has Obama acted, for example, as a “Black president,” or simply a president who is/happens to be Black? How has he contributed to the continuation of “colorblindness” and the upholding of the myth of “the American Dream”?
2. “The American Dream” is just one example of a national myth, and “the American people” of a national community. Is a politics which seeks to gain acceptance for certain excluded groups within these national imaginaries necessarily a limited one? To what degree would a more radical liberation struggle require an opposition to all forms of nationalist politics and, by extension, the state?
3. Can you draw parallels between Obama’s relation to Black liberation and, for example, the relation of Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign to women’s liberation? To what extent is the identity of a public individual an indicator of their ability and willingness to represent and improve the conditions of any particular group of people?
4. The author mentions debates held by the Occupy Movement over whether the police should be included in the “99%.” How would you analyse the class position of the police and other similar state representatives?
5. How would you summarize the author’s argument as to why the radicalization of Black struggle has occurred under a Black president and, more generally, at a time when Black political and economic power has never been greater?
6. How did the Occupy Movement help to develop understandings of the relationship between economic and racial inequalities? What was its role in re-legitimizing street politics?

Chapter 6: *Black Lives Matter: A Movement, not a Moment*

1. How did the aftermath of the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson illustrate the differences in objectives and strategies of the emerging street movement in relation to established civil rights activists like Al Sharpton? At heart, is this divide a generational one, implying an opposition based on levels of “political maturity,” or a political one, implying conflicting aims and interests?
2. How would you explain the prominence of women and queer activists in the broader Black Lives Matter movement? Does this have any implications for how we understand the relationship between oppressions based on gender, sexuality, and race with class?
3. What is “state violence” and why is this concept important? Can it help us understand the intersections of different oppressions? Why does the state target particular groups of people with violence?
4. The author criticises the “narrowly crafted agendas of the liberal establishment organizations, like Sharpton’s National Action Network,” which came into conflict with the emerging left street movements. To what extent is liberalism able to advance an adequate systemic or structural critique of the conditions which drive racial oppression, and what might the reasons be for its limitations?
5. While praising the new street movements and contrasting their democratic structures to the ossified establishment organizations, the author also writes that “the larger the movement grows, the more need there will be for coordination.” In recent years, movements based on “horizontalism” often explicitly contrasted to “hierarchical” left organizations of previous eras, have become increasingly widespread. How important do you think the form of movements and organizations is in terms of their ability to bring about change? How can a movement retain an internal democratic culture, but also achieve organizational efficacy and efficiency?
6. What role do you think corporate philanthropy has had in de-radicalizing the civil rights-era Black organizations? Is such funding ever apolitical, and can you relate the observations made in this chapter to the wider “NGO-ization” of social movements?
7. How would you distinguish between a reformist movement and a movement that sees, in the author’s words “the struggle for reforms that are possible today” as part of “the struggle for revolution, which is a long term project”? What would differentiate reforms that are part of such a project from those that are part of a purely reformist agenda?
8. How and why are links developing between Black Lives Matter and organized labor? What accounts for the unique power of organized labor under capitalism?
9. The author writes that “in the contest to demonstrate how oppressions differ from one group to the next, we miss how we are connected through oppression - and how those connections should form the basis of solidarity, not a celebration of our lives on the margins.” Without denying the different ways in which oppression is experienced and manifested, a “connection through oppression” implies some kind of commonality. What is the basis of that commonality? How would we distinguish “solidarity” with people’s whose oppression you do not personally experience from “allyship”?

Chapter 7: From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation

1. The author quotes Martin Luther King Jr.'s conclusion that "I've come to believe that we are integrating into a burning house." After reading the book, do you think that Black liberation can be achieved within capitalism's "political economy of racism"? Conversely, would the achievement of a socialist society in and of itself signal the end of racism and other forms of oppression?
2. Socialists, and in particular Marxists, are often accused of ignoring or downplaying oppression on the basis of gender, race, sexuality, or other aspects of identity, to focus more or less exclusively on the white male worker. Does this chapter successfully challenge that view? Based on the author's use of Marx and later Marxist thinkers, and the way she develops their insights, do you think that Marxism provides a useful framework for understanding such oppressions?
3. What is the significance of the long C. L. R. James quote, as well as the author's assertion that "the Black movement is an independent force that has its own timing, logic, and perspective based on the history of racism and oppression in this country. . . . It is also the case that when the Black movement goes into motion, it destabilized all political life in the United States." Why does the Black movement have this capacity? How can it be both independent and an integral part of wider struggles?
4. The author writes that "under capitalism, *wage slavery* is the pivot around which all other inequalities and oppressions turn." What is meant by the term "wage slavery," and how can this be applied to formally free labor? In describing this as the central "pivot" under capitalism, is the author assigning priority to class relations as a way of understanding oppression and exploitation? If so, what kind of priority?
5. Why does the author criticize the notion that Black people in positions of power are "acting white" when they reproduce racism?
6. What is the significance of the concept of "contradictory consciousness"? How is the "achievement of consciousness" linked to the Marxist distinction between a class "in itself" and a class "for itself"?
7. Do you agree with the author that "immigrant issues, gender issues, and antiracism issues *are* working-class issues"? If you agree that they are (or at least should be), then how does the articulation of these issues as integral parts of working-class politics differ from the way that they are articulated by middle-class activists and movements?
8. Has this book changed the way you think about concepts such as race, class, capitalism, socialism, and democracy?