



Book Review: *From #blacklivesmatter to black liberation*. Keeanga Yamata Taylor

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BOOK REVIEWS

From #blacklivesmatter to black liberation. Keeanga Yamata Taylor, Chicago: Haymarket Books (2016) 180pp £15.99 ISBN 978-1-60846-562-0

The growth of the US social movement Black Lives Matter (BLM) since the Ferguson uprising of August 2014 is of historic significance. It is the revival and rearticulation of the civil rights movement that peaked in 1968, only to be brutally defeated in a dual process of repression and incorporation which evolved out of the neoliberal American political economy. The strength of Taylor's very important account is that it places BLM within the context of these longer-term changes. We need to trace the trajectory of that part of the civil rights movement that was incorporated into mainstream politics via the Black caucus and the Democratic Party in order to explain how it is that this explosion of police violence took place in the second term of the first black president. This is where Taylor's account begins.

Of course, it is right, as emphasised by commentators in the new Netflix documentary *13th* (2016), to point to the sheer scale of repression that crushed and killed the civil rights leaders – and the fact that the state's fingerprints are all over the weapons that killed Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and the Panthers. But, it is also important to chronicle the pitfalls of the strategies of those reformers that won the ultimate prize of the presidency only to feel powerless in the face of a racist backlash. There are always elements in any movement who believe 'black faces in high places' will defeat racism and empower disadvantaged communities, but Taylor's account illustrates just what a dead end this pragmatic compromise with the system turns out to be.

The author is clearly a part of this growing movement of resistance, and her insider viewpoint allows a true appreciation of how these contradictions play out. She gives an example of how veteran civil rights campaigner Al Sharpton has alienated and patronised the new BLM leaders and their strategy of no compromise or complicity with the forces manufacturing racist violence. She highlights how the May 2015 Baltimore riot following the police killing of Freddie Gray ended as thousands celebrated the announcement of the city's female black prosecutor that all officers involved in Gray's killing would face trial. In December 2015, they were acquitted – an overt denial of justice replicating the very conditions that have given rise to the growth of BLM in the first place.

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Another strength of Taylor's account is the way she links the evolution of administrative criminology to the failure to recognise the damage being done during the course of the 'fight against crime' in the US. She points out 'Kelling and Wilson admitted "broken windows" would turn police into "agents of bigotry."' (126) This path demanded a reaction, especially when the 2012 Trayvon Martin killing was followed by the acquittal of his killer: 'Out of despair over the verdict community organizer Alicia Garza posted a simple hashtag on Facebook #blacklivesmatter...It was everything in three simple word's (150-151).

2016 has seen the publication of a number of important books on this topic such as *Who do you serve, who do you protect? : Police Violence and Resistance in the United States* (Shenwar et al, 2016) and *Policing the Planet: Why the policing crisis led to black lives matter* (Camp & Heatherton, 2016). These edited collections contain much useful material about the burgeoning social movement against Trump already resonating across the streets of the US and Europe. But Taylor's account is an articulate and incisive analysis that will surely serve as a crucial tool for explaining the rhythms of resistance in the coming years.

References

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Matt's book *A People's History of Riots, Protest and the Law: The sound of the crowd* was published in summer 2016 by Palgrave Macmillan.