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## Review

# Reckoning: Black lives matter and the democratic necessity of social movements

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The Black Lives Matter (BLM) mass movement has seemed to reach a precipice. After major uprisings in the summer of 2020, a bewildering two years has unleashed a political backlash targeting anti-carceral advocacy and critical race theory, a pillar of Black political thought. A movement of anti-intellectualism has arisen to counter the political philosophies and contributions of the BLM movement, which Deva Woodly espouses in her thoughtful book *Reckoning: Black Lives Matter and the Democratic Necessity of Social Movements*.

Woodly's focus on the philosophy of the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) coalition (representing over fifty national and local organizations) speaks to the power of radical ideas, even as harsh political realities remind us of the difficulty of bringing them to fruition. She argues that social movements provide a kind of 'swailing', a period of growing pains that can improve democratic systems, make them work for more people, and, in the case of the BLM movement, call out the contradictions inherent in a state where Black Americans are full and equal citizens in name, but suffer police violence and murder (p. 12). Social movements, in Woodly's account, show that democracy is a process—an always incomplete project. What's more, Woodly says that movements can counter the 'political despair' felt by those who are doubtful that democracy can live up to its promise of self-governance (pp. 7–10).

*Reckoning* reminds us of the long story behind the BLM movement, emphasizing that its unique political philosophy has been developing since 2013, from the time of George Zimmerman's acquittal for the murder of Trayvon Martin. Woodly's work takes seriously the theoretical contributions of Black movement and a new generation of activists—particularly Black women and Black queer women. *Reckoning* asks what we have learned from practitioners and scholars who developed and were developed by this iteration of the long Black freedom movement.



At the center of Woodyly's book are a range of Black contemporary thinkers and activists, like the Black Youth Project 100's Jewel Cadet, Jessica Byrd, and Charlene Carruthers; Southerners on New Ground's Mary Hooks and Paris Hatcher; founder of the BLM Global Network, Patrisse Cullors; and Blackbird's Moe Mitchell. Woodyly quotes these figures at length, making space for their stories in their own words, such that the book becomes a chorus of voices. This is a welcome methodological contribution, serving as a practitioner-centered approach to theory-building.

Through these interviews, as well as engagement with their own writings and broader movement literature (including M4BL policy platforms and movement facilitation practitioners, like adrienne maree brown), Woodyly ushers these individuals into intellectual space with more canonical theorists of political praxis, such as John Dewey, W.E.B. DuBois, Iris Marion Young, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks.

Drawing from this medley of thinkers, Woodyly proposes a contemporary political philosophy of M4BL, which she terms 'Radical Black Feminist Pragmatism' (chapter 2). This framework is rooted in a political vision and everyday practices that, she writes, 'provides a lens through which one can view all of the forces that inhibit Black people's ability to live and thrive' (p. 49). In this way, Woodyly characterizes the movement as being guided by the practice of the speculative, putting into action its radical imagination in the present day. Drawing from Dewey's concept of social intelligence, which encompasses (1) a critical orientation toward the status quo, (2) a 'theory of action', and (3) organization, Woodyly shows that movement practitioners do not see their visions as utopian, rather they formulate their political visions around the conditions on the ground (p. 57). In practice, this looks like a national campaign bailing Black mothers out of jail for Mother's Day, or BLM Louisville buying land and restoring homes for Black people dealing with eviction (p. 188 and p. 60). Woodyly is thus amplifying how Black activists produce practical politics as they are guided by visions of structural change.

By locating the M4BL's philosophy in the realm of political pragmatism, Woodyly follows a continuum of contemporary Black thinkers who attend to various conceptions of pragmatism. Dawson (2013), for example, calls for a leftist embrace of 'pragmatic utopianism'. West (1989) proposes 'prophetic pragmatism', engaging deeply with the pragmatic tradition—particularly morality, experience, and political engagement—and marrying it with social analysis.

In Black politics, pragmatism rejects the strictures of ideological purity and politics-in-theory, focusing instead on navigating anti-Blackness in the present while living out liberation. Woodyly's usage of pragmatism also invokes the proactive/reactive political and intellectual work of Black feminists, especially 'visionary pragmatism', which challenges social theories to be both future-oriented and practical for Black women, informed by their intersectional experiences



(Collins, 1998; James & Busia, 1993). This pragmatism is less about a destination; rather, it is more about striving than arriving; it is about breaking with the common sense of the everyday and experimenting with something better. It also recalls Black feminists' commitment to survival, to getting us all to the future by engaging with (and creating) the politics of now. As Alexis Pauline Gumbs writes, quoting Audre Lorde, 'Survival is "a now that can breed futures/like bread in our children's mouths/so their dreams will not reflect/the death of ours"' (Gumbs, 2021, p. 196).

In practice, Woodyly writes that pragmatism looks like M4BL's Black feminist politics of care and their healing justice work. The politics of care framework, derived from movement thought and practice, encompasses acknowledgement of present harm, interdependence, accountability, unapologetic Blackness, joy, and abolitionist restoration (p. 93). M4BL activists are visioning the revolution while simultaneously meeting needs and figuring a route for justice that includes all of us. This leaves more masculinist political ideologies behind, as, according to its values, M4BL is unwilling to sacrifice relational work or quiet the marginal in the name of progress—thus departing from prior modes of Black political movement strategies that counted on respectability among visible leadership and activists.

Woodyly captures the philosophies animating the work of M4BL and makes an important contribution to Black pragmatic and Black feminist thought. As such, the book does not reach much beyond the M4BL and its leadership in its analysis. I am left wondering, however, about M4BL's relationships with local level radical Black movement organizations that are not in the M4BL coalition, as well as more liberal Black legacy organizations. It is important to give space and articulation to the Black feminist organizers and praxes behind M4BL; yet how can we locate the M4BL in relation to other sites of contemporary Black movement?

Furthermore, M4BL's radical political philosophy—particularly its embrace of abolition – is more accessible to the broader public via social media, and it has mounted valuable discursive change. But in its aim for structural change, how has M4BL otherwise connected with the public to develop dedicated cadres of activists for disruption, negotiation, campaigns, and to pressure politicians? While M4BL denotes an important convening point for those already ascribed to or primed to learn about Black Feminist organizing, how do M4BL-affiliated organizations negotiate and push their ideas with new or less ideologically aligned comrades? This work is certainly happening, particularly at the local level, and Woodyly shows the outcomes of M4BL's values by documenting policies passed, public opinion shifts, and the movement's influence on public safety. Yet, with Woodyly's focus on movement leaders and ideology, it is difficult to assess how, especially in moments of tension, the movement's professed values are actualized and how they connect its praxes to impacts on political behavior.

On a final note, Black Lives Matter is not the Civil Rights Movement—its theory of change is located beyond the realm of traditional political representation and participation—and it must be, since Black Americans have reached many pinnacles



of political representation while Black thriving remains elusive. Whereas the Civil Rights Movement had landmark legal wins to claim, I wonder if movements for structural change ever reach their visionary politics? Do we ever get to the ‘radical Black feminism’, or must we always make do with pragmatism?

But the weary question, ‘is it possible’, is probably less important than the question, ‘what are we doing about it, already?’ This is what we gain from Woodly’s book—that the committed practice of visionary politics is part and parcel of making our ideals a reality, which includes the hard work of pushing through struggles and galvanizing people into action. Nearly nine years after the movement’s inception, as we look around at a world that is at once changed and unchanged, it is clear that it will take a broad collective vision and steady, unwavering commitment to put the movement’s theories into practice.

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