

Commentary



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Why I do not support the Black Lives Matter movement

Sonia Orlu

Introduction

The phrase “Black Lives Matter,” as I understand it, can be interpreted in three ways. First, one can consider it to be a philosophical statement affirming and acknowledging that, in the face of current and historical oppression, there is inherent value in the lives and experiences of people of African descent. Second, it represents a global, but mostly Western, social movement against police brutality and other forms of violence perpetrated against Black persons. And finally, it signifies the physical, socio-political parent organization, its chapters/affiliates, leaders, and advocates.

I contend that it is a mistake to assume that all three interpretations are the same or that they all experience the same level of support. While I have no serious issues with those who proclaim the first, it has little personal relevance to me because ascribing value based on immutable characteristics is not how I interact with the world around me. My life matters not because I am of African descent, but because I am human. The second interpretation, which this commentary focuses mostly on, is imbued with kernels of truth but is ultimately founded upon a flawed, cherry-picked, nuance-deficient, and often hyperbolic interpretation of current reality. The third gains no support from me as I subscribe to classical liberal values, which the organi-

zation, its leaders, and advocates have made explicitly clear is somehow racist and white supremacist. They have, instead, promulgated a dogmatic, counter-productive ideology termed ‘anti-racism’ (more on this later) and structured their identity, demands, and vision of the future along Marxist/Marxian lines (Ball 2015; Walcott 2018).

The central thrust of the Black Lives Matter movement is to bring “an end to the criminalization, incarceration, and killing of [Black] people” (Movement for Black Lives Undated). While this seems like a lofty goal, I take particular issue with the assertion that there is a “war against Black people” and that “Black lives” are “systematically targeted for demise” (Black Lives Matter Undated). This rhetoric is ever-present in every chant, banner, talking point, and policy proposal of BLM affiliated organizations and their allies in politics, media, and academia. But what forms the basis of this interpretation of reality? Is it backed by empirical evidence? Is there an epidemic of systemic violence against Black individuals by their non-Black compatriots and/or agents of the state?

My commentary focuses largely on the rhetoric of Black Lives Matter in the United States because the movement remains a predominantly American phenomenon. However, Canada is downstream from US socio-cultural politics, so it is important to also consider, where possible, how Black Lives Matter’s claims apply here given the nature of policing in Canada and our unique demographic makeup. To do this, I will be referring to the Ontario Human Rights Commission’s Use of Force by the Toronto Police Service Report (Wortley, Laniyonu and Laming 2020). First of its kind in Canada, the research conducted in the report provides valuable insight on police practices, although it could benefit from extensive published peer review to corroborate or refute its methodology and conclusions.

The Black Lives Matter movement

The Black Lives Matter movement began as a community response to the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman, a Hispanic American charged with the death of a Black teen, Trayvon Martin. However, it only gained formal, prominent status in the wake of the 2014 officer-involved shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. I had just finished the last semester of my undergraduate career when I watched, in real-time, protests unfold soon after the video of the shooting spammed the Internet. I remember being visibly shaken to tears because I just could not fathom the callous disregard of an unarmed, young Black life shot to death and lying lifeless on the street like a rag doll. The images haunted me for days.

I fully embraced the BLM movement, endorsing the protests and riots. I could feel the anger and pain of the Black citizens of Ferguson. In my then opinion, any actions undertaken (peaceful or not) was justified because the “unheard”

needed to have their voice heard by any means necessary. I bought into and repeated the (still) prevailing narrative that the lives of Black people (especially men) mattered less, to the extent that they were being murdered by Whites and cops on the street with impunity.

To me, the issue at the centre of BLM's focus was simple: Black men were at a disproportionate risk of experiencing and dying as a result of police brutality. The goal was to ensure police accountability, demand prevalent use of body-cams, end qualified immunity and guarantee the swift prosecution of racist, violent and murderous cops. These were ideals that I strongly identified with and, to their credit, the movement has succeeded in broadening the national conversation about police brutality. Indeed, most police departments since Ferguson (Mike Brown), Baltimore (Freddie Gray) and New York (Eric Garner), have embraced some of these reforms.

Nonetheless, my support of BLM began to erode when this conversation morphed into a diatribe. As my personal politics moved more towards the Centre in response to the radical culture shift to the Left, I began to question some of the assumptions of and remedies demanded by the political identity groups I had once subscribed to.



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With regards to BLM, the Michael Brown grand jury trial to determine whether Officer Wilson would be charged and the subsequent report released by the Department of Justice (2015) served as a turning point in my willingness to buy into emotional rhetoric without factual evidence to support claims. The oft-repeated slogan “Hands up, don’t shoot!” allegedly attributed to Michael Brown, for example, turned out to be a total fabrication. The Department of Justice report detailed that this account is “inaccurate” and “inconsistent with the physical and forensic evidence” (8). In fact, Michael Brown was charging towards Officer Wilson before he was shot, justifying the officer’s claim of self-defence. Prior to this, “Brown had reached into the SUV through the open driver’s window and punched and grabbed Wilson” and “used his right hand to grab and attempt to control Wilson’s gun” (6). This account of events is markedly different from the highly emotional narrative woven by BLM (which they still stick to) and portrayed in the media. I observe a similar trend when the ‘facts’ of the more recent Rayshad Brooks and Jacob Blake cases are relayed by advocates and activists.

Additionally, I began to take issue with the *prima facie* assignment of racism or racial bias to the outcome of any White/police and Black person encounter, whether injurious or fatal. I found such claims increasingly illogical and incoherent. To BLM and its adherents, all cops are racists. All cops like nothing

else than to terrorize and systematically exterminate Black people. All White people are complicit in fostering this system of hate. ‘Systemic racism’ and nothing else is chiefly to blame for the ‘oppression’ of Black people. I also became disturbed by the neo-Marxist bent of the movement’s rhetoric. They argue that capitalism and the system of white supremacy are not mutually exclusive, therefore to liberate Black lives is to tear down the system. I find this ironic because capitalism presents the best chance of lifting all peoples, including Blacks, out of poverty and disadvantage (and it has!). Black Americans, for instance, have high levels of confidence in small business (Brenan 2020), which is significant if we want to have a serious conversation about giving individuals the opportunity to lift themselves out of poverty without resorting to government handouts.

While Black Lives Matter and their White liberal allies have monopolized and weaponized the mainstream discourse on race, there has also been a corresponding extreme reaction from some individuals on the Right of the political spectrum in their dismissal of the need for police accountability and reform. This has made the conversation around race and police brutality increasingly frustrating with little to no potential to reach common ground on what the facts are. However, the data on race and criminal justice does no favours to either side.

We must acknowledge that most western countries *are not* post-racial utopias. Inequality in opportunities and outcomes as a result of racist policies of the past still exist. It is indeed true, for example, that Black people in the US and Canada, men especially, are arrested and convicted at higher rates than their white counterparts. Without resorting to “racism of the gaps” – the argument that any disparity in outcomes between blacks and whites is the direct result of racism, as opposed to class differences, culture, personal “(ir)responsibility”, or any other myriad of situational factors – I believe that there is a conversation that needs to be had about non-violent offences, especially drug-related charges, that seem to disproportionately ensnare (young) black men as well as the social, political and economic policies, past and present, that create hostile environments for Black persons and families to thrive.

Racism and police violence

In response to the assertion that Blacks are “systematically targeted for demise,” every recent compilation of crime statistics in the United States shows this statement to be categorically false (Canada has no comparable robust reporting on race-specific crime statistics). In fact, per the 2018 US National Crime Victimization Survey, the only group of people systematically killing Black people are other Black people and overwhelmingly so. The Bureau of Justice Statistics also reports that “the offender was of the same race or ethnicity as the victim in 70% of violent incidents involving Black victims” (Department of Justice 2019). This directly confronts assertions, especially by celebri-

ties and politicians, that Black people are “literally hunted” (James 2020) or rampantly lynched (Harris 2020) in the streets of today’s society.

Yet another pernicious falsehood is the claim that there is a genocide of Black men by the police. To be clear, police brutality is a pervasive issue for all races and needs to be addressed (McWhorter 2020; Streeter 2019). Granting the State monopoly on violence and the legitimate use of force to protect and execute our social contract does not allow for wanton disrespect and abuse of this privilege. At the same time, there is no empirical evidence to suggest cops are systematically targeting Black people or that every fatal outcome between Whites/cops and Black people is fueled by racism. To bring it back to current events, there is no objective justification for the assertion that race played a primary role in George Floyd’s death, for example. To those who say this would never happen to a White man: unfortunately, it has. His name was Tony Timpa (Aspinwall and Boucher 2019). McWhorter (2020) describes the circumstances that led to the deaths of non-mainstream, non-Black victims of police brutality writing, “just as the Timpa case tragically parallels the Floyd one, there are countless episodes paralleling those we hear about involving black people.” My point is that what happened to Michael Brown, Philando Castile, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Regis Korchinski-Paquet, and Rayshad Brooks can happen and has happened to White persons.



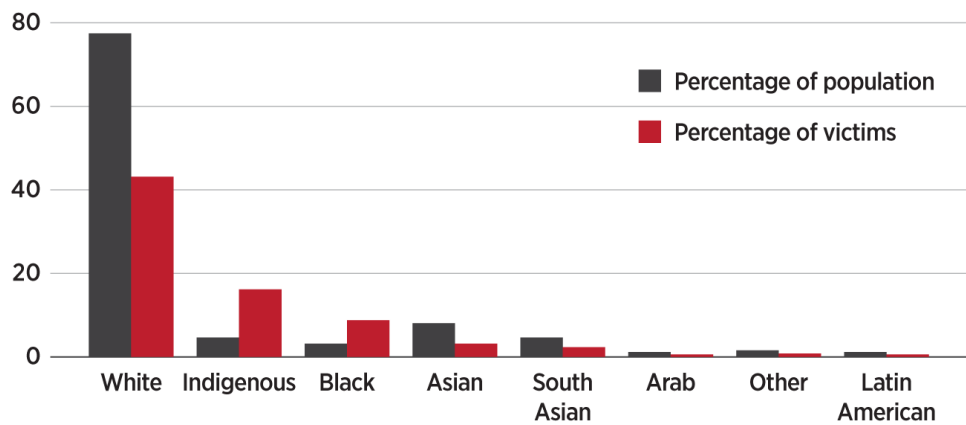
The number of innocent, unarmed, not-resisting-arrest civilians killed in recent years is minuscule.

A consequence of the hyper-focus on Black victims is the enduring belief that Black people “are in mortal danger each and every moment of every day, whether in a public space or in their own home.”* The Ontario Human Rights Commission Report, for instance, emphasises bias “perception” (Wortley, Laniyonu and Laming 2020). We are confronted with more images of Black deaths as well as the accompanying emotional narratives, hence we ascribe more frequency and significance to them in our collective consciousness (see Peeters 1983 and Dreyfuss 2017). In truth, out of millions of police-citizen encounters annually, the number of innocent, unarmed, not-resisting-arrest civilians killed in recent years is minuscule. This is especially true in Canada, which is in general a less armed society than the United States. Note, however, that unarmed does not mean ‘not dangerous.’ Michael Brown was unarmed until he reached for Officer Wilson’s gun. Rayshad Brooks was also unarmed until he attacked and grabbed an officer’s taser. Deaths like George Floyd’s and Breonna Taylor’s are the exception, not the rule.

According to the *Washington Post*’s database on police shootings,² in 2019, 243 Black men were shot and killed (24.3 percent of total), of which only 11

were unarmed. In contrast, 379 White men were killed (38 percent of total), of which 23 were unarmed (*The Washington Post* 2021). This disparity in White-Black, armed-unarmed deaths caused by police plays out similarly in Canada, although to a significantly lesser scale. Of the 555 profiles listed in the CBC’s Deadly Force database (2000-2020), only 48 are coded as Black; 10 out of this number are coded as unarmed. In comparison, 239 profiles are attributed to individuals identified as White, of which 59 are coded as unarmed (Singh 2020). It is important to mention that, in Canada, “68 per cent of people killed in police encounters were suffering with some kind of mental illness, addiction or both.”

Ethnicity of people killed in encounters with police between 2000-20 (Victims of ethnicity compared to that group’s total proportion of the Canada population)



Note: population is based on annualized figure over a 20-year period. Ethnicity is unknown in about 25 percent of cases. *Adapted from: Singh 2020*

Indeed, there is research that supports the hypothesis that Blacks and other Persons of Colour are disproportionately targeted by police for injury and shooting. When addressing fatal shootings in the United States, the most up-to-date study by Edwards, Lee, and Esposito (2019) reached the conclusion that “Black men are about 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police over their life course than are white men. Black women are about 1.4 times more likely to be killed by police than are white women.” This quote is regurgitated *ad nauseum* by politicians, activists, and slacktivists alike. Implicit in this claim is that Blacks are disproportionately killed given their share of the US population.

Similarly, the CBC reports that “Black people form 8.63 per cent of deaths and only 2.92 per cent of the population.” Delving deeper, the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2020) also concludes that “between 2013 and 2017, a Black person in Toronto was nearly 20 times more likely than a White person to be involved in a fatal shooting by the TPS [Toronto Police Service]. Despite making up only 8.8% of Toronto’s population, Black people were over-represented in SIU use of force cases (28.8%), shootings (36%), use of

force cases that resulted in civilian death (61.5%), and police shooting deaths (70%).” These claims, while superficially coherent, belie assumptions that are misleading or incomplete.

Population ratio has been heavily criticized as a benchmark for adjudicating racial disparity in lethal police-citizen encounters and when researchers account for other variables, these disparities most times disappear or become negligible. For instance, Shjarback and Nix (2020) find that “the overwhelming majority of offense-related benchmarks (i.e., criminal activity) ...have uncovered no anti-Black/racial disparities in fatal officer-involved shootings... This is especially the case for arrests regarding violent crime and weapons offenses” (3). They assert that “using benchmarks based on the general population may be fundamentally flawed since data from the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) system and the Bureau of Justice Statistics’ National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) consistently find that the racial/ethnic makeup of both offenders and victims of crime do not mirror the racial/ethnic composition of the general population. White Americans tend to be underrepresented as offenders and victims of violent crime, whereas racial/ ethnic minorities, especially African-Americans, tend to be overrepresented”.¹

Interrogating the population ratio benchmark further, it is important to note that not every member of the population (Black or otherwise) has an equal chance at an encounter (especially a violent one) with the police, so including them in the data set only serves to obstruct any clear inference about the lethality of police-citizen relations. A crude example to illustrate this would be saying that Whites are more likely than Blacks to die of shark attacks. This is superficially true but hides the fact that more White people take to open waters compared to Black people. Similarly, if you are interested in figuring out the survival rate for cancer, you do not look at the entire population, just the ones that have cancer.* Another example could be death caused by doctor error. It makes no sense to include in the data set people who have not undergone a medical procedure in which a licensed medical doctor was present.

In Canada, the Ontario Human Rights Commission Report claims that “gross racial disparity cannot be easily explained away by racial differences in criminal history, civilian behaviour towards the police at the time of the incident, civilian weapons use, civilian mental illness, civilian intoxication or local crime rates” (Wortley, Lanionu and Laming 2020, 136). However, in contrast with American studies with more extensive benchmarks and controls, the report falls short. It does concede, however, that given the dearth of race-specific data on crime in Canada, it “cannot statistically control for race-specific arrest rates or race-specific police contact rates,” which would “estimate racial disparities in police use of force relative to arrest or the likelihood of police-citizen contact” (ibid., 125).

In short, there is no definitive conclusion that racism plays a primary or significant role in citizen deaths at the hands of the police. This also applies to non-police killings of Black persons, so it is unfortunate that some people

reflexively jump to this conclusion. While research uses the terms “racial bias” or “racial disparity,” they only account for race being the descriptive factor based on the demographics of individuals involved (for example, “White cop shoots Black man”). It does not necessarily prove that racism, in its negative sense, was at play or indicate that cops are racially motivated to cause death or injury. The Ontario Human Rights Commission Report tries to pre-empt this critique in its dismissive assertion that a “counter narrative will hold that racial disparity does not mean racial discrimination” (Wortley, Laniyonu and Laming 2020, 136). Nonetheless, the criticism holds. Research, so far, has not “proven” the hypothesis that (white) racism is to blame for racial disparity in the use of force. Any such attempt will be correlational at best, with a variety of variables to consider. Equally as important but rarely addressed, what explains the underrepresentation of other minority groups?

Lack of nuance

There is a lot of nuance in the current discourse on race that gets shut down if one does not subscribe to the narrative of “White man/cop, bad. Black man, victim.” The new hyper-emphasis on “anti-racism” by the neo-cultural moral imperialists (influenced by activist-scholars like Ibram X. Kendi and Robin DiAngelo), while to the layman may seem perfectly innocuous – a call to treat everyone without prejudice – only serves to perpetuate bigotry, engineer racial differences and reinforce victimhood. In cases of police brutality involving Black persons, the question is no longer “is there evidence of racism?” Instead, adherents ask, “how did racism manifest itself in that situation?”

Anti-racism, the ideology (which has and will inform legislation, public policy, corporate practices, and academic curricula), “requires us to think about people in almost essentialist terms and to presume that our experiences are uniform on account of our races; to presume that our innate characteristics suggest that we embody privilege or disadvantage.”* Its effect is not equality and the elimination of racism (to the extent that this is naturally/objectively possible), but increased racialization and the never-ending reification of racial categories and hierarchies in all spheres of life. It ascribes an indefinite status of ‘oppressor’ to one group and ‘oppressed’ to a markedly dynamic yet construed as homogenous ‘Other,’ despite this ‘Other’ currently having significant political and cultural pull.

It is a mistake to think about the plight of Black people in 2021 as in any way, shape or form similar to what it was in the decades preceding it. Such imageries are purely based on rhetoric and not on factual, empirical reality (Hughes 2019). One need not proclaim racism in response to every disparate outcome between groups in order to effectively deal with real social problems.

It is important to note that:

- One can promote community-focused and engaged law enforcement (Crabtree 2020), police accountability, and citizen oversight without calling for defunding the police (Brunson 2020).
- One can support demilitarization and denounce the arbitrary and lethal use of force by the police without demanding abolition.
- One can support the address and redress of structural inequality without violently tearing down the pillars of the system (Garver 2020).
- One can support tempering capitalism with conditional welfare for the vulnerable without calling for socialism or communism.
- One can do all of the above while advocating for and uplifting Black individuals without supporting the Black Lives Matter movement and organization.

Conclusion

Maintaining a society where all citizens are treated as equal and accorded due process is the paramount duty of every self-proclaimed liberal society. However, a movement that resorts to emotional blackmail and actively encourages compelled, performative speech (Carter 2020) and the silencing of reasonable dissenting perspectives does more harm than good for this end. Black Lives Matter may imagine itself as a useful social movement against injustice but, in reality, it is founded on a faulty and racially divisive premise, with equally faulty and racially divisive demands. Black people are not “systematically targeted for demise.” There is no evidence of widespread systemic violence against Black individuals by state and non-state actors. This imagined reality is even less defensible in Canada where there remains no credible, objective evidence that Black Canadians are knowingly targeted by the police, especially in high proportions, for harm and/or death.

It is necessary that we take care to not import the hyperbolic emotional rhetoric that plagues sociocultural politics in the United States, lest it corrupts our sense of cohesion and community. It is also incumbent on us to resist the pressure to acquiesce to a movement and organization that allows itself to be co-opted by “revolutionaries” hell-bent on destroying civilization as we know it, which they see as the “ugliness surrounding us” (Black Lives Matter Canada Undated), to usher in a history-proven tyrannical, genocidal, repressive, and ill-defined political ideology. A free, just and equal society for all depends on this commitment.

About the author



Sonia Orlu is a PhD student in Political Science at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver. Her academic research focuses on state sovereignty, its contemporary evolution and its implication for human rights, specifically in Africa. More recently, she has begun studying issues relating to identity politics, diversity and inclusion, and free speech in the era of social media as the new public square. She previously held a sessional teaching position at Langara College in Vancouver, and currently maintains political and cultural commentary accounts on Substack and Instagram.

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Endnotes

- * This is from a Twitter account that I regrettably did not save and do not remember.
- 1 The *Washington Post*'s police shooting database is constantly being updated. Figures in this essay may be different, although not by much, from what is currently available on the site.

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WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT MLI

The Right Honourable Paul Martin

I want to congratulate the **Macdonald-Laurier Institute** for 10 years of excellent service to Canada. The Institute's commitment to public policy innovation has put them on the cutting edge of many of the country's most pressing policy debates. The Institute works in a persistent and constructive way to present new and insightful ideas about how to best achieve Canada's potential and to produce a better and more just country. Canada is better for the forward-thinking, research-based perspectives that the **Macdonald-Laurier Institute** brings to our most critical issues.

The Honourable Jody Wilson-Raybould

The **Macdonald-Laurier Institute** has been active in the field of Indigenous public policy, building a fine tradition of working with Indigenous organizations, promoting Indigenous thinkers and encouraging innovative, Indigenous-led solutions to the challenges of 21st century Canada. I congratulate **MLI** on its 10 productive and constructive years and look forward to continuing to learn more about the Institute's fine work in the field.

The Honourable Irwin Cotler

May I congratulate **MLI** for a decade of exemplary leadership on national and international issues. Through high-quality research and analysis, **MLI** has made a significant contribution to Canadian public discourse and policy development. With the global resurgence of authoritarianism and illiberal populism, such work is as timely as it is important. I wish you continued success in the years to come.

The Honourable Pierre Poilievre

The **Macdonald-Laurier Institute** has produced countless works of scholarship that solve today's problems with the wisdom of our political ancestors. If we listen to the **Institute's** advice, we can fulfill Laurier's dream of a country where freedom is its nationality.

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