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United States

The movement against racism and police violence – an initial assessment

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What is the context of the mobilizations taking place in the United States? How should they be characterized?

What took place on 29 May in the United States is a revolt. It is an organized resistance against the police, the judiciary and the state structures that cover them. It was certainly a revolt, because the demonstrators set fire to a police station in Minneapolis, before attacking two others the next day. This sparked revolts across the country, with looting.

I have been trying to understand for several days why the reaction to the murders was different this time. George Floyd, in Minneapolis, but also Breonna Taylor, in Louisville, who was killed in her home overnight by police, were organized people known in their communities, who have ties to neighborhood structures like churches, human rights NGOs, a broad network of different actors. As a result, Minneapolis and Louisville are cities where communities have been organized and concerned for a long time about the segregation that affects them (Minneapolis is divided into a white city and a black city). This is all the stronger in the southern states.

This started from the contesting of police violence against black people (in particular George Floyd). How do we place what is happening in the history of revolts and resistance against anti-black racism? What echo is there of the mobilizations that gave birth to Black Lives Matter?

Riots and urban revolts are not uncommon in the history of the black movement and in black neighborhoods as forms of protest, since the 1960s. From 2014, with Ferguson and Baltimore, we had organizational experience with Black Lives Matter. There was an attempt to develop a national network, but it did not work. The Black Lives Matter members decided to develop more local structures. National coordination has not been completed.

It is important to note that since Donald Trump's election in 2016, racist violence has experienced very significant growth against black communities, including police violence. This time, there is a determination on the street not to give in, which is already shown by two weeks of uninterrupted demonstrations. Often, the police, with their budgets, pay the families of victims of police crimes. But here, George Floyd's family is determined to have the four police charged, it's a very important step. This made it possible to highlight other cases: Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Ahmaud Arbery [a young black man killed while jogging by a father and his son, linked to the Ku Klux Klan] and many others.

The conditions are in place to create a nationwide network, which Black Lives Matter has not been able to do so far. Black leaders have lost their moral authority. Indeed, racist police violence continued during the Obama years, the time when there were the most black political representatives, black judges.

Who are the protesters? It seems to be multi-racial, young; how do you explain this?

In Minneapolis, the black community began to mobilize and demonstrate on 26 May. But, quickly, the protest took over the country. We had just experienced a year of mobilizations, including teacher strikes in 2019, actions in

hospitals linked to the Covid-19 crisis. Many things were moving. The women's movement was mobilized when Trump was elected. There was also the youth movement on ecological issues, such as Sunrise Movement, Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future.

There is clearly a generational process, made up of young people more open to sexual diversity, against racism, who accept ethnic minorities. The demonstrations are multiracial, and it is adolescents, sometimes as young as 12, who mobilize. The leaders are between 19 and 20 years old. They are a generation very aware that their future is in danger. Solidarity is an almost natural issue among these young people, solidarity with their friends and their communities. More and more, the demonstrations are intergenerational and widening.

This movement is very determined, as evidenced by the non-observance of the curfew in several cities, even leading some of them to suspend it, like Seattle and Los Angeles. In the midst of a pandemic, it is also a strong political commitment to take a risk to show solidarity.

These revolts seem spontaneous: how much spontaneity and organization are there? Who is calling for mobilizations?

In Minneapolis and New York, protests were called by black community organizations. In other cities, it was Black Lives Matter groups or local organizations that built the mobilization. But the massive participation also rested on a certain spontaneity which is based on affinity groups in high schools and universities.

Some calls to demonstrate come from these networks of people who want to be in solidarity. In the state of Maine, for example, 90% of the population is white, and there have been demonstrations. They were organized in particular by people who have acquired experience in environmental movements recently and who have gained confidence in their ability to mobilize.

What demands are made?

The demands have evolved rapidly. It started with the demand to charge the police responsible for the murders and put them in prison. The national demand today is to reduce or even cut public and local budgets allocated to the police. In the epicenter of the protest, in Minneapolis, the demand to abolish the police has been raised.

Already, this has effects. For example, in Los Angeles, the city hall is debating the annual budget. Three billion dollars was to go to the police. Under pressure from the protest, the town hall proposed to reduce it by \$150 million, but people want to see it reduced even more. There is also a halt to programs to recycle army weapons for the benefit of the police.

In Minneapolis schools, contracts with the police are broken. This is not insignificant in the American context. Indeed, there is violence with firearms and the presence of gangs in educational institutions. The treatment of this problem is punitive and, as the organization of education is very racialized, there is a discourse on the problem of violent young blacks. In black and poor neighborhoods, in order not to let weapons into the school, police intervene and are present in the institutions.

We talk about a "school to prison pipeline", that is to say that there is a direct path from schools, which increasingly follow a punitive and prison model, to prison. You should know that in the United States, 8.5% of prisons are privatized and represent a juicy market for the economy. There is therefore an interest in this ultra-neoliberal logic in having an incessantly renewed prison population.

Can we make a link between what is happening and the crisis linked to the Covid-19 pandemic, which particularly affects the black and Latino communities? Can we make a link with the economic and social crisis, and in particular mass unemployment?

The numbers are catastrophic because the government has not taken the pandemic seriously. Here, there is no welfare state to deal with the economic crisis and unemployment. The government's only promise was a check for \$1,200 that no one has received yet. You should be aware that essential workers are for the most part from ethnic minorities and many work in the post office, in hospitals. Many Latino and Black workers died from the Covid, while in contact with the public. Polls show that 70% of Latinos and Blacks are afraid of infecting their families

The reason for this strong presence of blacks and Latinos in these essential services is that historically it has been a means for them to improve their economic and social situation and to gain access to stable and integrated occupations. During lockdown, structural racism was revealed all the more clearly. On the way to work, the black population was exposed to disease and police control on the street. By wanting to do physical activity outside the home, black people could be the target of a racist neighborhood, as revealed by the murder of Ahmaud Arbery. Staying at home, blacks were still in danger, as shown by the murder of Breonna Taylor by police.

How is repression against the movement presented?

The media show images of fraternization between the police and the demonstrators with the aim of attenuating the rupture which exists between the police and the people. But make no mistake, the same policeman who kneels on the ground in tribute to George Floyd is clubbing protesters a few hours later. These images circulate on social networks which have an important role in raising awareness of police violence.

In the movement, in the street, on social networks, there is a debate on the role of the police with new questions and rapid awareness. Indeed, there is a strong anti-racism consciousness, but there was no widespread questioning of the role of the police at first. However, there are real contradictory phenomena among the police. In the United States, there is a difference between the police force which is a career and that of the National Guard which is part of the army and which intervenes in the event of an emergency. The National Guard is made up of people who exercise this profession for a few years, often to access free education, for example.

Cracks therefore exist: members of the National Guard laid down their shields in solidarity with the movement; an army veterans' petition was sent to National Guard soldiers to side with the protesters; in New York, about six police officers resign every day; the Houston police chief, a Latino, stood in solidarity with the movement and acknowledged the racism he suffered from the far right. Demoralization is significant among the forces of order.

However, the repression is strong, especially in Washington where the secret services, the National Guard and even the army are deployed to protect the White House. People were killed in the protests, others injured, gassed and beaten by the police.

In recent years Trump has attacked the Latin community and the undocumented, notably with the construction of the wall at the Mexican border. Are there links between this issue and police violence?

There is a direct link between the struggles of the black and Latino communities to fight the prison state and the privatization of prisons and detention centers. Locking people up is a business in the United States. For the Latin community, this is a lesson we have learned from the black abolitionist movement that preceded our structuring. The police and the far right have attempted to generate racial conflict between these two communities in the movement against police violence. For example, they incited vandalism in Latino neighborhoods against traders and small

businesses.

However, we have some areas of convergence. On the one hand, there is in black popular culture the expression of solidarity between these two communities. In Minneapolis, black and Latino gangs allied in the protest. Latinos in the southern United States see border police come to support the police in suppressing protests. The Latin community has also been targeted by Trump, who developed the ICE, the immigration police. This appears in demonstrations with slogans like “Abolish ICE”. This community still has in mind the massacre at El Paso in August 2019 where a racist killed 23 people, targeting in particular people of Mexican origin. This police force, which tracks undocumented Latinos, refers to the historical genesis of the police in the United States created to find and punish fugitive slaves.

Is there a place for the feminist movement in this mobilization? What is its state in the United States? What meeting is possible between the feminist movement and the anti-racist movement?

There is not a direct link between the structured feminist movement, which is not as militant and massive as in Latin America or Europe, and the anti-racist movement against police violence. But leaders of protests, such as black communities, are often women. Women play both a leadership role, speaking out publicly, being the voice of the movement, but also a role in the technical organization of demonstrations, for example by providing water, food and masks for the protesters. For example, in Long Beach, California, there is a group of lesbian women, “Assistance for the Resistance”, who have a popular canteen and intervene in demonstrations.

It is in terms of demands that the link with a feminist consciousness is created. The idea that it is not only black men who are victims of police violence begins to emerge. The case of Breonna Taylor is significant. Thus, there is the demand “Say her name”, to make visible the black women killed by the police. The role of the police is also beginning to be called into question in rape cases. According to the *Star Tribune*, 1,700 cases of rape in Minneapolis have not been resolved in the past 30 years due to lack of investigation. On the other hand, cases of domestic violence have high rates among the police. According to two surveys, 40% of the police perpetrate domestic violence. These are figures that the feminist movement keeps repeating and that are starting to enter the public debate today.

Now, it should be noted that many of the contemporary intellectuals of the black left are women, like Angela Davis or Ruth Wilson Gilmore, an activist for the abolition of prisons. Their ideas and theories are taken up in the movement and on social networks. In the United States, there is a cliché conveyed by the right, that of “Angry Black Woman” to silence black women. Last week broke this reactionary cliché, because black women are angry and acknowledge it.

It should also be noted that, since the 1990s, there have been movements against the death penalty and prison led by mothers of victims of the prison system. These networks of mothers are very active in their communities and are linked to the churches. Since this week, they have taken an important place in the movement. Signs in the protests say that when George Floyd called on his mother at the time of his murder, he called on all of the mothers who are fighting for their sons.

We've seen the Sanders phenomenon and the emergence of the DSA in recent years. How does this revolt shake up and/or reinforce this trend? Are links possible?

The current movement seems to settle two debates which took place in the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and in the Sanders campaign. On the one hand, the DSA were 100% in the Sanders campaign, with an electoral orientation. In March, when Sanders announced his withdrawal from the Democratic Party primary, he supported candidate Joe Biden. This has robbed him of legitimacy, particularly among women participating in his campaign, as Biden is accused of sexual assault. As a result, the DSA did not support Biden but developed a strategy of mass politics through the electoral struggle, by supporting independent Democratic and social democratic candidates in

local elections.

This orientation was underpinned by the absence of social street movements. The current movement questions this strategic axis. The Sanders campaign and its networks of activists have also not been used in the context of the pandemic to support caregivers working without protection or victims of evictions. There was no clear leadership to guide the movement.

On the other hand, some sectors of the American left suffer from an economist and reductionist vision of what is the class struggle. This vision results in the failure to take into account intersectionality and identity politics as an entry point for raising awareness of people of color. Sanders' anti-racism program was therefore weak. There has been a high concentration of discourse on economic issues and the idea that identity politics divide. This economism also leads Sanders to think that everything that is public, health and the police, are therefore socialists. This logic has no place in light of the current movement.

This problem cuts across the DSA. There is a national statement from the organization in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, but no call to action. Many DSA cells and tendencies have therefore published more militant calls, with slogans taking up the radical demands of the movement. In this context, the Afro-socialist collective in DSA is carrying out important work.

The revolt took the entire left by surprise. I think it will shake up a lot. There is a national DSA convention planned for this year, and it is possible that this may push them to the left. Conditions are favorable for a more militant socialist left, which must acquire a culture of calling for mobilization and intervention in mass combat.

What position does the trade union movement have on the ongoing mobilization?

Important things are happening on the union side. In New York, Minneapolis and Chicago, the transport unions, which are a historic sector of unionism, refused to transport intervening police officers to suppress the demonstrations, or to transport demonstrators to prisons. Drivers are rebelling with the support and support of their union like in Brooklyn where a driver got off his bus.

Last year's teacher movement revealed democratic and supportive trades unionism, including the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) led by a black woman, Stacy Davis Gates. It is in solidarity with the demonstrations since it has developed social unionism which includes the fight against racism in its demands. It is not only focused on the working conditions of teachers, but also on the communities in which it is present. Groups of black students at universities are calling on education unions to take a position.

The Minnesota AFL-CIO (the main union federation in the United States) has called for the resignation of the secretary of its police union. There are also calls to exclude police unions from workers' representative associations.

What are the prospects for the continuation of the movement?

There are mobilizations planned until June 15. The pride marches that had been canceled due to the Covid-19 health crisis are being rescheduled. In various cities, they will take place in honor of trans black women like Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, two figures from the Stonewall riots. In Los Angeles, the June 14 Pride March will take place in honor of Black Lives Matter. It could be historic. The demands of the Afro-transgender community, and trans people in general, are the same as those of the movement against police violence, because they are also victims.

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Many already existing demands have achieved new life through the movement. The situation opens a new historical period in the United States. That also includes risks, as we have a president like Donald Trump and a strong far right. There is a beginning of awareness that this struggle is also against the far right, since Trump has sought to criminalize the anti-fascist movement by distinguishing good and bad demonstrators. We also see the destruction of monuments glorifying the leaders of the Confederacy.

In several of the country's cities, there are demonstrations every day. In New York, on Tuesday 9 June there will be a march called by the families of 16 African Americans killed by the New York police.

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