



The Great Rebellion

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It must be stressed at the outset that this article is not and cannot be a comprehensive narrative or analysis of the great Black Lives Matter Rebellion. It is far, far too big for that and momentous events are happening as I write, such as the formation yesterday (11 June) of CHAZ, the cop-free Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone in Seattle. The purpose of the article is merely to emphasize the scale and significance of the revolt and to offer some comments on its features and dynamics and the challenge it poses for the left.



'A single spark can light a prairie fire' wrote Mao Zedong in 1930. One does not have to be in the least inclined towards Maoism to see the truth of this statement.

On 17 December 2010 the street vendor, Mohammed Bouzizi, set fire to himself in Sidi Bouzid, a small town in central Tunisia and set in motion not just the Tunisian Revolution but the whole Arab Spring. On 22 January 1905 Father Gapon, a priest and a police spy, led a large demonstration of workers to the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, bearing religious icons to meekly ask the Tsar to hear their grievances. When they were massacred by the Tsarist forces it was the start of the great revolutionary process that culminated in the October Revolution. In Paris it was a dispute about male/female access to student dormitories that kick started the great May '68 Revolt. And, of course, on 25 May it was the public murder of George Floyd by a racist cop in Minneapolis that launched one of the biggest rebellions in western societies since the 1960s.

The scale of this rebellion is already enormous and anything written now will be out of date by the time this is published. But in the space of just two weeks we have seen millions taking to the streets right across the United States 'from California to the New York island' as Woody Guthrie sang it. There was rioting and

looting and on 28 May the burning of the Third Precinct police station in Minneapolis to astonishing levels of public approval. But most important there have been tremendous numbers of people out on the streets in mass demonstrations, with their consciousness rapidly radicalising. It is obviously impossible to offer any sort of comprehensive overview of these demonstrations here, but two facts give a flavour of the scale of the rebellion. In New York thousands upon thousands defied curfews in ten successive nights of protests. It is also hugely significant that on the 15 June tens of thousands took to the streets across the US, including a huge rally in Brooklyn, in solidarity with Black trans people.¹ This is the stuff of which revolutions are made. Then there is the fact that there was a mass protest in Austin, Texas. Here is an evocative report:

By 3 p.m., faint chants could be heard in the distance across Congress Avenue that served as the final march point. Under 95-degree weather, the first blurry outlines of people could be seen like a mirage in the desert as the heat from the pavement altered their form. As they neared, their unmistakable chants could be heard: "Whose streets? Our streets!" "No justice no peace! No racist police!" "FTP, f**k the police!" "Black Lives Matter!" "I can't breathe!"

Austin is the capital of Texas, a state which last voted Democrat in a Presidential election in 1976 and a city which is by a large majority White and Latino with only a relatively small minority of African Americans.

It is instructive to look at the responses made by the elite and by mainstream political and social figures. In themselves they can be dismissed as hypocritical or as marginal or as aimed at deflecting and taming the revolt but whatever their motivation they are testimony to its power and to the deep impact it is having on US society. Billionaire Michael Jordan, probably the richest sports

star/ businessman in history, who has never previously lifted a finger in an anti-racist direction, donated \$100 million to the cause. Mitt Romney, Republican Presidential candidate against Obama in 2012, Senator for Utah and well known Mormon (the Mormons have a bad history of racism) joins a BLM demonstration. The NFL announce that they were wrong to ban Colin Kaepernick for taking a knee, despite him having been vociferously condemned by Trump, cops witnessed holding up Stop Police Brutality signs or taking a knee and, most amazing, because it is more than just a symbolic concession, Minneapolis City Council votes to DISMANTLE the City police department.³ Moreover, there are serious signs of a rift between the US state apparatus and Trump over his crass, hardline and dangerous response to the rising.

Then there is the spectacular wave of international solidarity. There have been Black Lives Matter demonstrations from Belfast to Brisbane and many of them have been massive even in the face of official bans and police pressure. On Saturday 6 June 20,000 marched in Sydney, despite the march being ruled legal only one hour before its start and the Brisbane Times offers this report of the protest in that city:

Thousands of protesters ringed the heart of Brisbane on Saturday as the Black Lives Matter movement that began in the United States found a loud voice in Australia.

The huge crowd shouted “Always was, always will be Aboriginal land” and “I can’t breathe” as helicopters swirled overhead and microphones electrified the echoing chants.⁴

Thousands marched across Germany, particularly in Munich and there was a substantial march in Paris, maybe 10-15,000 and in other cities in France including Bordeaux, Lyon, Lille, Rennes and Marseilles – where some skirmishes were reported. The interior ministry estimated the number of protesters in France at 23,300, of whom 5,500 were in Paris.

Fortune Magazine, of all people, lists also London, Copenhagen, Barcelona, Lausanne, Naples, Rome, and Brussels as sites of significant protests.⁵ Then, of course, there was the amazing demonstration in Bristol which tore down the statue of 18th century slaver, Edward Colston, and dumped it in the River Avon. This dramatic action has echoed round the world. It was referred to

by Rev. Al Sharpton in his oration at George Floyd’s funeral. It resulted in the taking down of the statue to the genocidal racist, King Leopold II, in Antwerp, the removal of statues to slave traders in London and has pointed the finger at memorials to slavers and racists in Galway (Christopher Columbus), Oxford (Cecil Rhodes) and everywhere else. It is important to note that what made this possible was the huge size of the mobilization in Bristol – about 30,000 in a town of about 600,000. This is equivalent to half a million or so in London and organised ‘spontaneously’ at a few days notice. If the demonstration had been smaller the police would undoubtedly have intervened to stop the take down happening.

Here in Ireland there have been two very big demos and many others. The two largest were in Dublin on Monday 1 June and in Belfast on Saturday 6 June. The march in Dublin on 1 June, which assembled at the Spire and went to the US Embassy drew up to 10,000 people; it was possibly Dublin’s largest ever anti-racist march and certainly involved the largest number of Black Dubliners. For seasoned anti-racist campaigners and socialists (and the organisers) the turnout was unexpected, astonishing and magnificent. It was ‘spontaneous’. As Gramsci has said there is no ‘pure’ spontaneity in history so I should explain this comment. The demonstration was called and organised by young, mainly Black, Irish without previous campaigning experience, and not by any pre-existing campaign, union or party. In many ways this was an advantage but had the downside that the march had little infrastructure (sound system, stewards, megaphones etc) and social distancing broke down.

The Belfast rally attracted several thousands, was called by Belfast United Against Racism, was totally peaceful and maintained excellent social distancing. This has not stopped the reactionary PSNI (Police Service of Northern Ireland) pressing for the prosecution of the organisers. Derry also had a large rally (500 or more) on 6 June, following on a previous vigil of two hundred, and it has been met by a similar but even more severe response from the PSNI – with 57 fines issued as opposed to 11 in Belfast. Also on 6 June there were about 1000 at the US Embassy, called by MERJ and MASI, and 3-400 at the Spire, called by UAR. Then there were substantial marches and rallies in Waterford

with 700(!) Bray (200), Carlow, Balbriggan, Cork, Monaghan, Navan, Castlebar and many other places North and South including a brilliant 300 in Falcarragh in Donegal as well as a number that were cancelled due to police pressure.

But the purpose of this brief survey is not to provide an accurate or comprehensive inventory of the BLM movement either in Ireland or elsewhere, least of all the US – that will require much more time and space – merely to give an indication of its great scale and reach as a foundation for some analytical comments.

The first point to make is that sparks can light prairie fires only when the prairie is dry and ready to burn. And the fact is that when it comes to police brutality and racism the prairie of US society was utterly parched. Readers of Irish Marxist Review will probably be familiar with the litany of names: Eric Garner (43, killed by choke hold in Staten Island in 2014); Corey L. Tanner (24, shot five times in Florida in 2014), Michael Brown (18, shot six times in Ferguson in 2014), Tamir Rice (12, shot November 2014 in Cleveland), Ahmaud Arbery (25, shot while jogging in Brunswick 23 Feb 2020, by an ex-cop), Breonna Taylor (26, emergency medical technician, shot eight times in her apartment in Louisville, March 2020). And these are only the recent cases and only the famous ones of those.⁶ The truth is extreme brutality against and murder of African Americans by police and racists goes back to the beginning of the slave trade and has never ceased. Moreover, these cases of police murder are only the tip of an iceberg of racist oppression and exploitation which permeates every aspect of US society.

It is also clear that the inflammable material is by no means limited to racism or to African Americans. The question of racism has always been the key touchstone for the left in America from the Civil War onwards and time and again it has been the struggles of Black people that have led the way for the radical movement in the country as a whole – think of Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights, of Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Black Power and the Black Panthers. However in recent years we have seen the re-emergence of a mass left in the US on a wider front than this: the predominantly white Occupy Movement in 2011, the Bernie Sanders movement in 2016 and 2020; the Me Too movement and the massive women's movement against Trump;

Standing Rock and a new environmental consciousness; the emergence of the Democratic Socialists of America with 60,000 members; the Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez phenomenon with the Green New Deal and so on; plus, very immediately, the creation of mass unemployment through the Covid crises and the threat of deep recession.

A consequence of this has been much higher levels of non-African American participation in both rioting and in the mass demonstrations than was the case in the uprisings of the sixties or the 1992 Los Angeles Rodney King revolt. Obama, who is both a loyal servant of US imperialism and an intelligent man, noticed this. These protests, he observed, were much more 'reflective of America' (ie. multicultural) than in the past. And Trump's bizarre claim that the movement was being orchestrated by 'Antifa' was his own twisted recognition of white involvement. Keannga Yamatta Taylor, writing in *The New Yorker*, puts it this way

Unlike the uprising in Los Angeles, where Korean businesses were targeted and some white bystanders were beaten, or the rebellions of the nineteen-sixties, which were confined to black neighborhoods, today's protests are stunning in their racial solidarity. The whitest states in the country, including Maine and Idaho, have had protests involving thousands of people. And it's not just students or activists; the demands for an end to this racist violence have mobilized a broad range of ordinary people who are fed up...

The protests are building on the incredible groundwork of a previous iteration of the Black Lives Matter movement. Today, young white people are compelled to protest not only because of their anxieties about the instability of this country and their compromised futures in it but also because of a revulsion against white supremacy and the rot of racism. Their outlooks have been shaped during the past several years by the anti-racist politics of the B.L.M. movement, which move beyond seeing racism as interpersonal or attitudinal, to understanding that it is deeply rooted in the country's institutions and organizations.⁷

The question of White and Latino participation or solidarity is not a matter of morality or motivation or even ideal preference, as it is sometimes posed and

debated, but a strategic necessity for victory. Here, according to the 2019 US Census Bureau, is the ethnic composition of US society.

White	60.4%
Hispanic and Latino Americans	18.3%
Black or African America	13.4%
Asian	5.9%
Native Americans and Alaska Natives	1.3%
Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders	0.2% ⁸

If the struggle for racial justice is posed as one to be waged by Blacks alone versus the rest defeat is certain. Even if one includes Hispanics and Latinos in an alliance of People of Colour the balance of forces is still unfavourable, especially as the power structure (army, police, judiciary, prisons etc) and the wealth are predominantly in white hands. Unless one hopes or believes that this white controlled power structure can be induced to cede much of its power by logical arguments or moral persuasion, i.e. by appealing to the consciences of the bankers, industrialists and generals, there is no alternative but to split the white majority politically and by far the best chance of doing that is on class lines. The condition of achieving such unity cannot be shelving the question of racism or subordinating the demands of Black people to a purely trade unionist focus on economic demands – on the contrary the foundation must be uncompromising opposition to racism in all its forms and solidarity with Black struggle. But in so far as Black, Latino and White unity can be forged on such a class basis the resulting alliance will be capable not only of winning racial equality but also overturning the whole of US capitalism.

The huge international resonance of the Black Lives Matter struggle is a product of the interaction of two factors. The first, and this is a product of the structure of global capitalism, is the huge global hegemony of US culture. The fact that for a hundred years or more US capitalism has been the world's leading economic and military power has had the side effect of giving us Hollywood, Disney and MacDonalds, Frank Sinatra, Elvis and Beyoncé, Time Magazine and CNN, Friends and Oprah Winfrey. And a side of effect of this is that revolts and radical movements in the US and their political representatives have, in general, a far greater

international impact than their equivalents in other countries.⁹ We may not like this but it is a fact and a fact that makes the current rebellion, and the current resurgence of the US left, a phenomenon of huge global importance.

But this is not the whole story. When people have mobilised in solidarity with Black Lives Matter around the world they seem invariably and immediately to have linked this mobilisation to racism in their own countries: to Aboriginal land rights and deaths in custody in Australia, to Britain's history of slave trading and its current racism, to Direct Provision and Traveller's rights and racist attitudes in Ireland and so on. The fact is that the basic experience that produced the US revolt, ie racist policing, is an international experience. The key slogans of the movement, Black Lives Matter, and No Justice No Peace, can be deployed and taken up virtually everywhere. The dying words of both Eric Garner and George Floyd, 'I can't breathe', give expression to the feelings of the oppressed across the globe in this suffocating neo-liberal capitalist society on which the sun never sets and the blood never dries.

The international working class and the challenge for the left

All of these developments – the sheer scale of the US rebellion, the multi-racial solidarity, the massive international resonance – are reflections of a deeper change of great significance: the reshaping of the working class. I have written about this before so I will be very brief.¹⁰ Thirty or more years of neo-liberal capitalist globalisation has profoundly restructured the working class, particularly in its former heartlands of the industrialised west. It has substantially downgraded and dismantled the bastions of white western labour movement – the mines, the car plants, the engineering factories, the shipyards and docks [some still exist of course, but in much reduced numbers] – while increasing and proletarianising the number of white collar workers and the low paid service workers and enormously expanding the size of the global working class in China, India, Latin America, parts of Africa and so on.

This new working class is in the process of reconstituting itself and recognizing itself. It is beginning to make the transition from class-in-itself to class-for-itself and it is doing it in struggle – in the

Arab Spring and its reverberations in Europe and North America (the Indignados in Spain, Occupy etc); in the Sudanese Revolution, in Haiti, Algeria, Iraq, Puerto Rico, Ecuador, Lebanon, Chile and more in 2019 and now in the Black Lives Matter Rebellion. This class is multi-racial, multi-cultural, and multinational within countries as well as between them. It is female and LGBTQ and many other things as never before and it is increasingly in revolt against inequality in all its forms from the economic to the racial and the sexual. Tackling racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia is an essential part of the process of unifying itself to fight and win. The process is far from complete [It will not be completed while capitalism exists and presses in the opposite direction] but on a global scale the glass is filling up not emptying.

This poses an immense challenge to the left everywhere. To rise to this challenge we must be both revolutionary and non – sectarian. By being revolutionary I mean understanding that the multiple crises of capitalism in decay – economic, racial, environmental – cannot be resolved within capitalism by means of parliamentary reform or electing a ‘good’ president but require the overthrow of the system. And by being revolutionary I mean not just be vaguely in favour of revolution but being serious about building revolutionary organisation. I am not being prescriptive about how that must be done – there may be different roads in different countries and situations – but done it must be. By being non-sectarian I mean not refraining from all debate on the far left but not being mainly focused on that debate. Rather we have to be focused on how to relate to the great forces on the move in the world today.

This is easier said than done but it is necessary if we are to rise to the challenge of our times. And not for a moment must we forget that the clock is ticking; that neither in the Covid-19 crisis, nor the BLM rising has the humanity threatening crisis of climate change gone away; nor will it in the developing great recession. In late May the temperature in Delhi reached 47C and elsewhere in India it reached 50C, while there were hundreds of thousands on foot on the roads, displaced by cyclones and Covid-19. The prairie is getting dryer by the hour, not only metaphorically but literally.

Notes

- 1 See report in *The Guardian*, 15.06.2020.
- 2 <https://patch.com/texas/downtownaustin/black-lives-matter-rally-draws-thousands-austin>
- 2 What this will mean in practice remains to be seen but is nevertheless unprecedented.
- 3 <https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/politics/queensland/it-can-t-just-be-the-minority-thousands-raise-their-voices-in-brisbane-20200606-p5505u.html>
- 4 <https://fortune.com/2020/06/08/black-lives-matter-protests-global-paris-london-rome-photo-gallery-images/>
- 5 The Silver-Lake Memorial in Los Angeles to black victims of police murder stretches two miles. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-06-08/george-floyd-black-lives-matter-police-protest-art-silver-lake-memorial>
- 6 <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/how-do-we-change-america>
- 7 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race_and_ethnicity_in_the_United_States#Racial_categories
- 8 It may be regrettable but it is fact that a video of act of police brutality and racist murder in Hong Kong or Kashmir or Catalonia or even the banlieus of Paris (never mind in Africs) will not have the same impact as one on the streets of New York or Minneapolis.
- 9 John Molyneux, *The Future of Marxism*, *Irish Marxist Review* 23, <http://www.irishmarxistreview.net/index.php/imr/article/view/313/304#>
- 10 See John Molyneux, ‘A New Wave of Global Revolt?’, *Rebel News*, <http://www.rebelnews.ie/2019/11/06/a-new-mass-wave-of-global-revolt/>