

## Death and Democracy

Cathy J. Cohen

University of Chicago

Come celebrate with me that every day something has tried to kill me and has failed.

Lucille Clifton, *Won't You Celebrate with Me*, 1991

Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters.

Frederick Douglass, *West India Emancipation Speech*, 1857

Since the video of the execution of George Floyd was made public, I have, at times, found it hard to sleep. I am haunted by the cavalier expression on the face of Derick Chauvin, with his hands in his pockets and his sunglasses pulled back on his head, as his knee presses the life out of George Floyd.<sup>1</sup> As has been reported, Mr. Floyd told his state-authorized killers more than 20 times that he could not breathe.<sup>2</sup> Eventually, all he could do was call out for his mother as the life was literally squeezed out of him.

In my waking hours, I find it hard not to think about the words of 23-year-old Elijah McClain, who was killed after he was accosted by police officers walking home from a local convenience store. The officers were responding to a call about a suspicious person wearing a mask. Mr. McClain, who “suffers from anemia and sometimes gets cold” was wearing an open-faced ski mask. Through the body cam transcript, we learn that Mr. McClain cried, apologized, and tried to explain to officers that he “wasn’t that type of kid,” declaring “I’m just different! That’s all!” The officers on the scene in Aurora, Colorado, ignored Mr. McClain’s instructions to “let me go” and instead put him in a carotid hold, a form of chokehold that cuts off blood flow to the brain. Eventually, like Mr. Floyd, Mr. McClain would tell those on the scene that he could not breathe. Summoned paramedics injected Mr. McClain with ketamine, a potent sedative, as he lay on the ground with his hands cuffed behind his back. On the way to the hospital Mr. McClain went into cardiac arrest and later died in the hospital where he was declared brain dead.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, there are no video or audio recordings to tell the full story of Breonna Taylor’s death in Louisville, Kentucky, from her perspective. It has been reported that Ms. Taylor was alive after being shot eight times by the police.<sup>4</sup> We are left to wonder how she made sense of officers bursting through her door, executing a no-knock warrant for someone already in police custody.<sup>5</sup> What were the last looks Ms. Taylor exchanged with her boyfriend, Kenneth Walker, as she tried to figure out what was going on? Like Mr. McClain and Mr. Floyd, might she have, with difficulty, whispered that she could not breathe? Or, like Mr. Floyd, did she call out to her mother, hoping for some tender reprieve from the pain of dying after her body was riddled with bullets?

It may seem strange to some to start an essay meant to answer the question: What is the most important challenge facing our democracy over the next 10 years and what role can philanthropy

play in addressing that challenge, by focusing on death. However, for me as a Black queer woman in a country built on anti-Blackness and the physical and emotional slaughtering of Black people, that is the way I understand democracy and its future. There is no saving, repairing, or reimaging democracy, at least for me, that does not start with the cessation of our systemic death. To save democracy, first and foremost, you have to stop killing us.

By killing us, I do not mean only the public spectacles of policing by both state-sanctioned officers and want-to-be vigilantes, captured increasingly on cell phone video, that ends with the brutal murder of yet another Black person. I mean also—and especially—the systemic killing of Black people in disproportionate numbers that is routinely made evident in public health crises such as the coronavirus pandemic. In these moments of outbreak, the veil is pulled back and we are able to see (again) the uneven distribution of coveted resources such as housing, health care, wealth, and education and how such inequality and insecurity—resulting from a system of racial capitalism<sup>6</sup>—leads to “disproportionate” death in Black communities.

Dr. Marcella Nunez-Smith, Director of the Equity Research and Innovation Center at Yale School of Medicine, notes in an interview on NPR, “that these racial ethnic disparities in COVID-19 are the result of pre-pandemic realities. It’s a legacy of structural discrimination that has limited access to health and wealth for people of color.” She goes on to explain that “African-Americans have higher rates of underlying conditions, including diabetes, heart disease, and lung disease, that are linked to more severe cases of COVID-19. . . . They also often have less access to quality health care and are disproportionately represented in essential frontline jobs that can’t be done from home, increasing their exposure to the virus.”<sup>7</sup>

The truth is that the pairing of death and democracy is not new to political science, which is my discipline. Numerous books, articles, and reports have been written recently about the impending demise of our democracy.<sup>8</sup> In many of these texts, there is a deep concern that the traditional guardrails of democracy, such as adherence to and respect for the Constitution, an attitude of mutual toleration, and the practice of forbearance have been under assault in recent years, especially during the Trump administration, threatening the health and, dare I say, survival of our democracy. As political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, authors of the bestseller *How Democracies Die*, write:

Democracies work best—and survive longer—where constitutions are reinforced by unwritten democratic norms. Two basic norms have preserved America’s checks and balances in ways we have come to take for granted: mutual toleration, or the understanding that competing parties accept one another as legitimate rivals, and forbearance, or the idea that politicians should exercise restraint in deploying their institutional prerogatives. These two norms undergirded American democracy for most of the twentieth century . . . . Norms of toleration and restraint served as the soft guardrails of American democracy, helping it avoid the kind of partisan fight to the death that has destroyed democracies elsewhere in the world . . . . Today, however, the guardrails of American democracy are weakening.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, for these authors, it is the death of democracy, not the death of any specific group of democratic citizens or participants that has generated such concern. And while Levitsky and Ziblatt acknowledge that “the Civil War broke America’s democracy,” and that “the norms that would later serve as a foundation for American democracy emerged out of a profoundly undemocratic arrangement: racial exclusion and the consolidation of single-party rule in the South,”<sup>10</sup> theirs is still a story of rebirth, with American democracy once again establishing guardrails that would facilitate its growth. Left unattended in their account and those of so many other accounts of American democracy are how the history of slavery, the white supremacist legacy of Jim Crow, and the current era of mass incarceration imperils any claim to having a fully functioning democracy in the United States. What Professor Sadiya Hartman so aptly calls the afterlife of slavery, I believe, continues to be the biggest threat to our democracy.

If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment.<sup>11</sup>

What Hartman brings into focus is this question: What is the fundamental crisis that democracy faces? Is it a threat to the functioning of a system of governance that Levitsky and Ziblatt define as “government with regular, free, and fair elections, in which all adult citizens have the right to vote and possess basic civil liberties such as freedom of speech and association”?<sup>12</sup> Or is it that democracy seems to function despite the fact that significant numbers of its citizens continue to suffer from systemic racism and inequality, unable to fully participate in or benefit from it? The significance of this juxtaposition of analyses, I believe, is that it substantially alters what we think must be done to prop up, rein in, and reimagine democracy. I suspect that those who start with a concern about democracy will emphasize a response that includes restoring citizens’ faith in our institutions, addressing the deep polarization that plagues policymaking and governing, reestablishing governing norms such as mutual toleration and forbearance, and ensuring that every citizen has equal and full access to the ballot.

While I agree that all the issues detailed above are fundamental challenges that must be addressed, these are all issues that can be solved without the significant shift in power that would protect and preserve the lives of Black people living under this democracy. For example, solving the problem of polarization will not prohibit millionaires with no understanding of the underbelly of racial capitalism from continuing to dominate the ranks of Congress. Moreover, ensuring that everyone has an equal chance to vote does less than we might like to admit to guarantee that politicians, once elected to office, will pursue an agenda meant to address the structural disinvestment that continues to burden far too many Black communities. Similarly, addressing the cultural norms thought to undergird our democracy might return us to an era when political polarization was less extreme and worrisome, but it will not address the fact that in such an era the most marginal among us were routinely ignored when policy was made by both parties.

Again, I believe all the aforementioned issues must be addressed if we are truly to have a working democracy, but these reforms alone will not produce the systemic transformation needed to stop the killing of Black people and to ensure that our humanity and longevity are

recognized and protected by our democracy. Such a transformation will happen only through a shift in power to the people, not only through periodic votes, but through continuous organizing. The rebirth of our democracy lives in the possibility of protest, organizing and, as Frederick Douglass famously insisted, agitation.

Thus, I am urging philanthropy to invest in what may be the most important guardrail of them all: protest and organizing. Creators of the GroundTruth project note that as populist leaders in Brazil, Colombia, Italy, Hungary, Poland, and India seem to be using “the same playbook in exploiting divides, undercutting institutions and attacking the media,” people in those countries are taking to the streets to reinforce and serve as their own guardrails to democracy.

In Italy, the “guardrails” have been reinforced by millions of protesters who have mobilized in opposition to right-wing Lega Party’s policies that target immigrants . . . . In Colombia, people are protesting against a conservative government’s efforts to undercut the peace treaty that the country voted for. They’re taking to the streets and, to be sure they are heard, they’re banging pots and pans with cooking utensils, a form of protest called “cacerolazo.” And in India, protestors of various faiths are standing up to the Hindu Nationalist government’s efforts to strip millions of Muslims of their citizenship.<sup>13</sup>

The impact that protest, and more important, those movements can play in helping our democracy reach its promise, is also currently on display in the United States. During these unprecedented times, we are watching people—a great many of them, young people—take to the streets in all 50 states in support of justice for George Floyd, but also seeking to address the current failures of policing, criminal justice, the economy, and the existence of white supremacy and anti-Blackness. It is through participation in activist and protest organizations that young people are provided a deeper analysis of root causes, in which they are provided an alternative political education, in which they are introduced to mobilization and protest strategies, in which they learn how to build winning campaigns, and in which they are connected to groups of similarly situated young people insisting on systemic change in their lives. And because of their efforts, our political domain is forced to grapple with new and courageous ideas and policies such as defunding the police, abolishing prisons, ending mass incarceration, and implementing a comprehensive strategy of divest/invest in communities ravaged by racial capitalism.<sup>14</sup>

There is an understanding among scholars of social movements that what often garners the most attention is people taking to the streets in protests, but what often achieves institutional change are the myriad organizations, networks, and indigenous institutions that help facilitate the sustained collective participation demanding a shift in power. For example, sociologist Aldon Morris reminds us that only by understanding the movement infrastructure of the Civil Rights Movement can we understand what it takes to produce systemic change. In his seminal text on that movement, Morris writes, “Mass protest is a product of the organizing efforts of activists functioning through a well-developed indigenous base. A well-developed indigenous base includes the institutions, organizations, communication networks, money, and organized masses within a dominated group.”<sup>15</sup>

Morris points us to the broad infrastructure of movements needed to build power controlled by marginalized communities. So, while Morris writes about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's leadership and the work of movement organizations such as the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference), the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), CORE (Congress of Racial Equality), and SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), he also examines the work of the Highlander Folk School, the American Friends Service Committee, and the War Resisters League among other groups and organizations he calls movement halfway houses, all necessary entities "involved in [and supporting] efforts to bring about a desired change in society." <sup>16</sup>

More recently, historian Barbara Ransby, in her book *Making All Black Lives Matter*, details the extensive movement infrastructure undergirding the Movement for Black Lives Coalition (M4BL). Like Morris, Ransby details important movement organizations such as BYP100, the Dream Defenders, and SONG (Southerners on New Ground). She also points to intermediary entities or "halfway houses" such as BOLD (Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity), Blackbird, and the BlackOUT Collective that are integral to the work of M4BL. She writes that these organizations engage in what she calls the "political quilting" of the movement infrastructure:

Thus, it is not just protest that will safeguard our democracy, but the building of an extensive movement infrastructure that will sustain our much needed protest. And it is the funding of such movement infrastructure across the country that I believe philanthropy should devote itself to over the next 10 years. By movement infrastructure, I mean the seeding and growth of organizations, networks, movement halfway houses, and other "political quilters" needed to bring people together to articulate their concerns, sustain collectively mobilization, shift power, and hold our precious representational democracy accountable for the systemic change people are demanding. The Grassroots Policy Project reminds us that an investment in movement infrastructure will move us closer to "our nation's ideas and aspirations for a more equal, just and democratic society."<sup>17</sup>

I recognize that the call for funding movement infrastructure may seem like an abstract or unwieldy agenda, but I believe that such work can be pursued by many philanthropic organizations. For example, funders might set as a goal ensuring that the neighborhoods, cities, and regions where they work are *movement ready*. To evaluate movement readiness, they might ask the following questions:

1. Is there a comprehensive civics curriculum in local schools available to all K-12 students that teaches that social movements, protests, and organizing are central acts of democratic political participation and that allows students to practice democratic participation in their schools?
2. Are substantial funds available to sustain existing organizations and seed new ones committed to organizing in marginalized communities?
3. Are there funds to support intermediary organizations, centers, and movement halfway houses that will offer political education and convene activists across various sectors to strategize and work collaboratively?

4. Are there funds to support investigative and participatory civic media that will publish research and reports meant to hold public officials accountable, uproot systemic corruption, and support activist campaigns?
5. Are there funds for data-gathering projects through which researchers, community and activists groups work together to monitor the attitudes and preferences of the public and amplify their voices, especially those most vulnerable and too often ignored?

Sadly, we know that democracy, as a system of governance, did not save the lives of George Floyd, Elijah McClain, Breonna Taylor, or so many others. It has been only through extended protest and uprisings, facilitated by strong movement infrastructures, that our country has been forced to respond to their deaths and demands for systemic change. Thus, if we are truly committed to moving toward a fully functioning democracy, we must do all we can to ensure that vibrant movement infrastructures are in place and protected all across the country. It is an effort that philanthropic organizations would do well to bolster as it might produce the most important guardrail of them all—for Black lives and for the full promise of our democracy. Such work may lead us to a time when Black people will be able to alter the prophetic words of Lucille Clifton and say that *no longer* “every day something has tried to kill me.”

**Cathy J. Cohen** is the David and Mary Winton Green Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago. She is the author of two books, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* and *Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of American Politics*. Cohen is also coeditor of the anthology *Women Transforming Politics: An Alternative Reader* (NYU Press) with Kathleen Jones and Joan Tronto. Her articles have been published in numerous journals and edited volumes including the *American Political Science Review*, *NOMOS*, *GLQ*, *Social Text*, and the *DuBois Review*. Cohen is the founder and director of the Black Youth Project and the GenForward Survey.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> *How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody | Visual Investigations, 2020*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vksEJR9EPO8&has\\_verified=1&bpctr=1594570270](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vksEJR9EPO8&has_verified=1&bpctr=1594570270).

<sup>2</sup> Maanvi Singh, “George Floyd Told Officers ‘I Can’t Breathe’ More Than 20 Times, Transcripts Show,” *Guardian*, July 9, 2020, sec. US news, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jul/08/george-floyd-police-killing-transcript-i-cant-breathe>.

<sup>3</sup> Angelina Chapin, “Is Ketamine the New Police Weapon Against Black Lives?,” *The Cut*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.thecut.com/2020/06/elijah-mcclain-injected-with-ketamine.html>.

<sup>4</sup> “Breonna Taylor Reportedly Survived for 5 Minutes After Police Shooting with No Medical Help,” *MSNBC.com*, <https://www.msnbc.com/the-beat-with-ari/watch/breonna-taylor-reportedly-survived-for-5-minutes-after-police-shooting-with-no-medical-help-87899205571>.

<sup>5</sup> Richard A. Opiel Jr and Derrick Bryson Taylor, “Here’s What You Need to Know About Breonna Taylor’s Death,” *New York Times*, July 9, 2020, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/article/breonna-taylor-police.html>.

---

<sup>6</sup> “Race & Capitalism,” Race & Capitalism, <https://www.raceandcapitalism.com>.

<sup>7</sup> Maria Godoy et al., “What Do Coronavirus Racial Disparities Look Like State By State?,” NPR.org, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/05/30/865413079/what-do-coronavirus-racial-disparities-look-like-state-by-state>.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*, Revised edition (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017) 1-2; Robert R. Kaufman and Stephan Haggard, “Democratic Decline in the United States: What Can We Learn from Middle-Income Backsliding?,” *Perspectives on Politics* 17, no. 2 (June 2019): 417–32, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592718003377>; Benjamin I. Page and Martin Gilens, *Democracy in America?: What Has Gone Wrong and What We Can Do About It* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2017) 3-4; Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018) 8-9.

<sup>9</sup> Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018) 8-9.

<sup>10</sup> Levitsky, *How Democracies Die*, 122, 124.

<sup>11</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, First edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008) 6.

<sup>12</sup> Levitsky, *How Democracies Die*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> “Epilogue: Guardrails of Democracy,” *The GroundTruth Project* (blog), January 17, 2020, <https://thegroundtruthproject.org/epilogue-guardrails-of-democracy/>.

<sup>14</sup> Our Agenda to Build Black Futures, <https://www.agendatobuildblackfutures.com/view-agenda>.

<sup>15</sup> Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, 1st Free Press Pbk. Ed edition (New York: Free Press, 1986) xii.

<sup>16</sup> Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, 139.

<sup>17</sup> Building Social Movement Infrastructure,” *Grassroots Policy Project: Opportunities for Building Progressive Infrastructure*, [https://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/socialmovement\\_infrastructure.pdf](https://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/socialmovement_infrastructure.pdf).