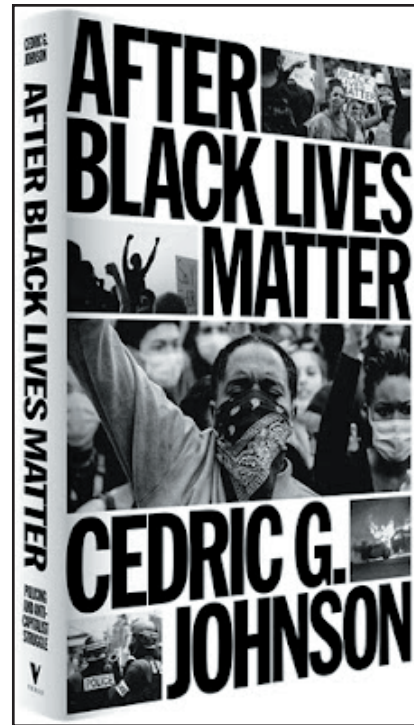


What Comes After Black Lives Matter?

By Ed Meek

Listening to Republican politicians talk about the other party, you might come away with the idea that President Biden and his supporters are a gang of Marxists and there is nothing worse than that. Americans associate Marx with Russian and Chinese communism, yet the co-author of *Das Kapital* and *The Communist Manifesto* is one of the most interesting and important thinkers in history. Labor unions are beginning to enjoy a resurgence in the United States shifting power to employees. Marx would take this a major step further and insist that the workers own the means of production. Employees would then have the same decision-making power as those elite executives who own shares of the company, enjoy profit-sharing, and vote on how the company is run. Marx pointed out that both capitalism and communism have a tendency to become “overdetermined.” This means that, in communism, over time, more and more power is accrued by the Communist Party. In capitalism, more and more power is vested in the moneyed class of capitalists. In the United States, this burgeoned in growing income disparity — there is a chasm between the rich and everyone else. Eventually the power of wealth supersedes the power of democracy. Will the working class ever demand a change in the distribution of wealth and power?

One particularly appalling aspect of capitalism identified by Marx is the need for surplus people. Because the economy inevitably goes up and down, the US needs extra people to hire when the economy is robust and to lay off when things slow down. In *After Black Lives Matter*, Cedric Johnson informs us that, following WW11, the government and big business shared a similar anxiety: white and Black soldiers had developed friendships during the war. That means that they might well join together in peacetime to demand fair wages and rights for all Americans. To prevent this from happening, the white power structure created the suburbs. These ‘utopian’ communities would provide citizens with their own houses and yards to take care of, giving their owners their own little kingdoms to worry about. (And it would assist the ascension of the automobile.) Of course, the suburbs would be restricted to whites. Cities would then be (mostly) left to minorities and immigrants, who would serve as Marx’s surplus people. The role of the police would be to control the unruly elements. Predictably, this arrangement resulted in periods of high urban unemployment, which led to crimes of survival: theft, drug addiction, drug dealing, and prostitution. Eventually, the highly profitable carceral state (private prisons) was created when imprisonment became



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the chosen (and profitable, via private prisons) means to control crime in the surplus population.

What is the best way to overcome the racial divide in the United States? Is the answer to change the way we think about race and judge people by “the content of their character” rather than “the color of their skin?” Or is the racial divide really a problem of class? Johnson argues for the latter point, insisting that if our class divisions were addressed poverty would be eliminated, which would take care of most of the racial conflicts in our country.

The Black Lives Matter movement began after the shooting of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman in Florida and gained momentum with the choking of Eric Garner (arrested for selling cigarettes), followed by Michael Brown, a teen shot and killed by a white police officer and culminating with the murder of George Floyd who died when a white officer, Derek Chauvin knelt on his neck for nine minutes while Floyd pleaded for his life. These and other acts of police violence were caught on video by bystanders. They led to mass protests and demands by both white and Black Americans for change. The Black Lives Matter movement brought about some changes in policies, but the calls to ‘defund the police’ by Black and white activists floundered when it threatened the safety of Black and white citizens and their businesses. One of Johnson’s concerns is that, for neoliberal whites and Blacks, change means urban gentrification and development that does little for the poor while it makes the wealthy wealthier.

Johnson is convinced that we’ve failed to address the underlying causes. After Black Lives Matter asserts that police violence is directed toward the lower class as a whole, which makes it a threat to a much wider group than Black Americans. In the same vein, Johnson finds our current emphasis on identity politics a troublesome diversion because various groups end up treating improvements as a zero-sum game. For Johnson, the way to change the dynamic is to provide housing, jobs, and education for the poor. The best way to jumpstart that, from his point of view, is through a public works program like The New Deal. Such a program in the cities could ameliorate these problems and provide a way out of what seems to be the unending conflicts we find ourselves mired in. “Abolish the conditions,” Johnson insists.

One of the developments in the United States over the last fifty years is what is now a thriving, robust class of Black intellectuals. We can read their columns in the major newspapers, their articles in the best journals, and grapple with their arguments in dynamic and influential books. One sure sign of a maturing “intelligencia” — there are vibrant disagreements between points of view. In this book, Johnson stakes out a brave position that crosses political lines and brings valuable and historically informed perspectives to shine a light on the lingering problems of class divides in the United States. For good reasons, the right wing is threatened by Black intellectuals. Hence the campaign to ban critical race theory, which argues that America has a long history of systemic racism (redlining and restrictive zoning are obvious examples). In *After Black Lives Matter*, Johnson shows us what conservatives are afraid of — a clear-eyed analysis of the problems we face and practical ways to move forward.