6 Socio-Spatial Chances for Democracy: BLM's Contribution to Saving It

The previous chapter and its subchapters have provided a detailed account of the most demanding issues in Washington and Minneapolis, among which are housing, food, and police brutality. It was emphasized that non-existence or limitation of rights and liberties can have decisive implications for the quality of American democracy. Further, BLM was also mentioned since the movement has gained prominence over time in both cities. However, two questions need to be asked now: How can BLM in these two distinctive cities contribute geographically and politically to saving the American democracy? Are there perhaps theoretical approaches that can facilitate the process?

BLM protesters wish to change the situation for Black residents both in cities and on a national level. Among other works, the article by Anna Domaradzka-Widła proves particularly important here (Domaradzka 2018; Robert Zajonc Institute for Social Studies n. d.). Referencing Bitusíková (2015), she explains why the role of local activists has gained increasing importance for cities, which is for two reasons: On the one hand, they actively participate in the political arena 'city,' playing a managerial role. On the other, they can use different elements offered to them, for instance voting and meeting, to influence the decisions made (see Domaradzka 2018, p. 607). If urban spaces are improved by development, this comes with multilayered benefits and changes. However, as Domaradzka (2018) notes, "nowhere is the rise of negative social processes clearer than in urban areas" (Domaradzka 2018, p. 608). This is precisely the motivation for BLM adherents: to underline the disproportionate existence of these processes.

Hence, in the case of Washington and Minneapolis, protesters have evidently provoked thoughts about a concept known as the right to the city, or in this situation: the right to the equal and livable city. Schein (2009), who is referenced on pages 1006/1007 in Allen, Lawhon and Pierce (2018/2019), says this is connected to social justice. However, if taken a step further, there are links to BLM as well. The right to the city is about demanding equality in resource access, distribution, and allocation for every person, as well as about the possibility to join others in influencing present and future city development (see Domaradzka 2018, p. 612). This position, Domaradzka (2018) notes, has brought several critical urban theorists to remark that the right to the city – if understood as ability of resource control – has a multifaceted elitism to it: It is associated with people in higher economic, social, and political positions. Those people tend to weaken, or completely inhibit, the possibility of activists to voice their concerns, and most poignantly develop ideologically charged opinion constructs (see Domaradzka 2018, p. 613). If linked to BLM, racial inequality, and particularly the racialization of space, this dynamic can also be observed: White people claim precisely urban space through gentrification, while deeming Blacks BOPs (see Helmuth 2019).

Henri Lefebvre (1991, p. 34, referenced in Domaradzka 2018, p. 612) answers these critics insisting that the right to the city includes a collection of rights – those rights important to urban residents. Thus, the poor and the various ethnic minorities must be mentioned explicitly. Further, it is a "cry" (Lefebvre 1968, cited in Domaradzka 2018, p. 612), as these groups engage in protests countering immoral behaviors and disadvantageous policies. Harvey (2008) and Mayer (2009) say the concept is "both a political ideal and a mobilization frame" (Domaradzka 2018, p. 613). Even though Domaradzka (2018) does not explain this, it is obvious if considered closely: It is a political ideal because it emphasizes necessary rights: participation and representation. Moreover, it is a mobilization frame as social movements like BLM address continuous urban and societal problems to shape life in the city, claiming this right themselves.

Thus, the right to the city is a democratic concept to be considered when looking at movements such as BLM, and the broader context of inequality in the US. It is the framework whose existence guarantees societal

and political stability, starting in cities like Washington and Minneapolis – with potential to extend to rural places. Edward Soja (2010) provides corroborating evidence for the assertion that the right to the city is a democratic concept, as Domaradzka (2018) hints to: He mentions "human rights" in general and "social and spatial justice" (both Domaradzka 2018, p. 613) in particular. Though he classifies this as related to ethics and morality, it clearly evokes thought about the relationship between the two (for person, UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs & Sharpe 2015). Characterizing what one could call the 'ideal city,' Marcuse (2009) mentions the properties of "justice, the rule of law, democracy, capacity development, as well as balance and diversity" (Marcuse 2009, p. 193, cited in Domaradzka 2018, p. 613). These are the very elements that movements such as BLM and the affiliated groups demand in their urban protests. They realize that inequalities are prevalent and would like to achieve large-scale change in cities across the country, including the two examples.

However, there is another dimension that makes the approach useful as both an argumentative and an analytical tool considering American race relations, the BLM Movement, and geo-political implications: In 2005, the concept was formally codified in the World Charter on the Right to the City, after an event known as the Second World Urban Forum in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre (see Domaradzka 2018, p. 613). This institutionalization, apart from being a democratic process *per se*, makes the concept widely accessible and creates transparency. Hence, the concept can be adopted in many cases, among which are the clear demands of BLM supporters and the general situation of Black residents in Washington and Minneapolis. The right to the city should thus be important for urban scholars, analysts, (political) geographers, and evidently for residents. For the latter, it is a form of identity-politics and self-affirmation as they connect to the city they live in and their respective social environment.

Since the demands of the BLM Movement show a clear similarity and are indeed part of the right to the city, an indispensable relation to space and place can be observed. Black residents in Washington and Minneapolis strongly identify with the neighborhood they live in and thus link geographical space to emotions and feelings. Yi-Fu Tuan (2001, p. 3) says "place is security, space is freedom" (Tuan 2001, cited in Combs 2018, p. 49).

These are two human and social needs that form part of a collection of rights for individual people. A place is rather fixed, for example a home. Typically, it is associated with close social relations, family, and friends – people that support, comfort, and inspire one another. Thus, it is something that makes one feel secure, away from external harm. Space is, it might be said, an extension of place: It is combined of many places one can go to. One is – and should be – *free* to travel, walk or drive through this space, which automatically establishes the connection to a human right: freedom of movement. Moreover, it connects to all the (positive) freedoms, for instance freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. However, saying one's opinion freely, moving through and congregating in a space for special purposes such as church service is often difficult for many Black residents. Evidently, this is also true in Washington and Minneapolis. It leads back to the earlier explanation of racialized spaces – spaces in which race, and obviously skin color, overwhelm and thus block manifestations of the rule of the people.

Arguably then, the notion of space and its variations described by Edward William Soja cannot be left out when analyzing BLM's responsibility in fighting against injustice and for the American democracy (see Combs 2018, p. 41). This is particularly true in the two example cities. Marcuse (2009, p. 195) asserts that in cities and more generally, "most problems have a spatial aspect, but their origins lie in economic, social, political arenas, the spatial being a partial cause and an aggravation, but only partial" (Marcuse 2009, cited in Domaradzka 2018, p. 613). It is true that the spatial dimension is not the root of problems. Rather, the "arenas," hence systems or sectors, are responsible for arising inequalities because of mismanagement as well as wrong resource allocation and distribution. Further, it is also fair to say that the spatial dimension is an exacerbating factor: Multifaceted problems can transcend several boundaries, like neighborhood or class, extending into geographical space and leaving more and more people exposed to them over time.

However, to only describe the effect of space as "partial" – a word without clear quantification – is a blatant disregard of its actual significance. This is especially the case for Blacks in cities like Washington and Minneapolis. An extreme racialization of space, as well as the practice of White

space-claiming described before, demonstrate the pervasiveness of concepts and ideologies in different parts of cities. Moreover, if the effects of space are dismissed and relativized, it is an obstacle to the "democratization of cities" (Domaradzka 2018, p. 613) like Washington and Minneapolis, essential for a large-scale modification of the socio-political order. This would have serious methodical and operational implications for movements like BLM, for their mission toward democracy.

Rather, then, a middle path should be aspired: This means neither to overstate the explanatory power of space, but nor to completely disregard it. Economic geography becomes important here, because like the general, triangular approach in this thesis, this sub-discipline also looks at social factors. Geography in general was for a long time criticized under the impression that researchers had "an obsession with the identification of spatial regularities and an urge to explain them by spatial factors" (Massey 1985, cited in Bathelt & Glückler 2018, p. 38). However, Massey (1985) says, this is not true, as "[t]here are no such things as purely spatial processes; there are only particular social processes operating over space" (Massey 1985, cited in Bathelt & Glückler 2018, p. 38).

Moreover, there is simple evidence to discourage, or at least question, Marcuse's earlier statement, most prominently when looking at the cities' black residents: McKittrick (2006) says "Black matters are spatial matters" (McKittrick 2006, cited in Combs 2018, p. 52), and despite differing interpretations and perceptions of space, for Blacks it is always a connection back to past experiences and their horrifying legacy today. Further, BLM adherents marched and still march through an urban space during their protests in Washington and Minneapolis, addressing issues and calling for political modifications being inextricably linked to spatial considerations. Among them are those described in earlier chapters. Therefore, the movement is not only *Democracy in Action* – as the title of a 2017 article by Barbara Ransby suggests – but also democracy in motion.

It is democracy in action, she says in *The New York Times*, because the power of the movement lies in the "cultivation of skilled local organizers who take up many issues beyond police violence" (Ransby 2017). When many areas crippled by injustice are addressed, planning strategies and the development of combative concepts is more promising for the Move-

ment, all Blacks in the two cities, and those throughout the country. Not only, however, does Ransby (2017) mention that BLM and the affiliated organizations are "radical democracy in action" (Ransby 2017). She also sees, acknowledges, and highlights the importance of the right to effective political participation: It is crucial for the movement that "people on the ground make decisions, articulate problems and come up with answers" (Ransby 2017), she notes. This should increase both efficacy and effectiveness over a longer time. Additionally, then, it must be emphasized that this drives confidence that change is indeed achievable by working on a local level. For Ransby, "[taking] ownership of the political struggles" (Ransby 2017) by local engagement is something crucial in the fight for a better life – and a better democracy, apparently. Some other authors are also willing to take such a holistic approach to the situation.

Hathaway and Markovits (2020), for instance, point at the necessity for BLM to attack the whole discriminatory system: The problem they find is that what now discriminates against Black Americans and other minorities has been made by voting and educating the country's citizens to abide by certain laws. Nevertheless, city policies must "[p]rotect and enhance voting rights and fair representation" (Johnson & Russell 2019, p. 6), as "electoral and institutionalized politics" (Franklin 2016, p. 10) are one way to demand social justice. As the name law *enforcement* indicates, the socio-political system of the US has selected officers to represent an institution that can oversee citizens – and sanction transgressions of norms (Hathaway & Markovits 2020). Monica Bell, the authors highlight, has referred to a mechanism among several police departments as "pro-segregation policing" (Hathaway & Markovits 2020), obviously highlighting the spatial dimension. If Black citizens are now confronted with a police force showing increasing racial bias and brutality, they might refrain from political support and participation opportunities, an essential to democracy that BLM must fight for.

Moreover, the authors insist that "resuscitating […] institutions as true tools of justice" (Hathaway & Markovits 2020) is among the most pressing tasks for the movement, holding particularly true for Washington and Minneapolis where several institutions were rendered almost powerless over the last few months and years. Therefore, it can be said BLM

must signal to people a responsibility to protect institutional integrity and persistence. The movement must contribute to establishing a framework based on "checking state institutions that control people through violence and boosting institutions that empower democratic citizenship" (Hathaway & Markovits 2020). This is an important point as these institutions are also responsible for structuring the spatial sphere for all citizens, such as the placing of stores and facilities. Thus, there is another link forming the triangle of BLM/black lives, geography, and democracy.

Besides these two authors, there are others who find important strategic approaches for BLM in the fight for the American democracy. Russell Rickford (2016) says the success already achieved by BLM is substantial. Not only did it give a new chance to more radicalism in the overall political discourse through "reinvigorated confrontation politics" (Rickford 2016, p. 35). More so, it started "providing a vibrant model of democratic participation" (Rickford 2016, p. 36), giving Blacks a voice in political decision-making. Its intersectionality creates transparency and opportunity over time – and most importantly, over space. It aims to end the "paralysis and isolation" (Rickford 2016, p. 35) of Blacks that is certainly not only political, but inherently spatial. Young activists engaging in these "confrontation politics" can make their voices heard and formulate exigencies from the grass-roots level. By holding up a mirror to politicians and society in general, the movement can give new energy and hope to societal progress regarding racial justice.

However, observations by Frank Roberts are notably the most evident manifestations of why BLM's activism is and continues to be important for the American democracy: He is convinced that among other practices and realities, "[r]acism arrests the development of American democracy" (NYU Gallatin 2016). However, those who support and engage in BLM, he explains, are "young people who are saying that the millennial generation will be the generation to finally dismantle this hurdle to realizing the uniqueness and potential grandness of the democratic experiment" (NYU Gallatin 2016). The national process instigated by BLM is a "profound democratic reawakening in the United States" (NYU Gallatin 2016), Roberts insists. This holds especially true as the events in the two example cities, and the whole Trump presidency, have contributed to

the US sliding into the category of "uneven democracies" (Hooker 2016, p. 463) in the last years. Roberts implicitly warns that the socio-spatial possibilities of the BLM Movement should never and nowhere be underestimated, as Black activism has always built on "forcing the American democratic project to actually reach its ideal" (NYU Gallatin 2016). So far, however, it can be noted that, to use Amy Gutmann's (1996) words, America has made an "unfulfilled promise of a constitutional democracy with liberty and justice for all" (Gutmann 1996, p. 108). Thus, for both example cities, indeed the whole country, BLM could be the most successful social, political, and geographic contributor to reinvigorate and literally save the American democracy.