

## **Black Lives Matter and the Public Rediscovery of Structural Racism**

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*Asset-Based Community Development promises to empower local communities while failing to address racialized disparities. We must look to broad-based social movements such as Black Lives Matter if we wish to create a genuinely more equitable and anti-racist world.*

Recent protests mobilized under the banner of the Black Lives Matter movement have reanimated a long overdue discussion of racism as a structural and systemic issue, rather than as a reflection of insensitive behaviors or as manifestations of the conduct of a few “bad apples.” To some extent, the public and political failure to acknowledge the structural foundations of racial inequality has been one consequence of the shift to neoliberal social and economic policies, which both explicitly and implicitly repudiated the calls to address inequality articulated by the War on Poverty and the Civil Rights movements of an earlier era. Whatever their shortcomings may have been, both the War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement mobilized to demand governmental action aimed at remedying the injuries of racial discrimination and deprivation. In contrast, with its emphasis on individual responsibility and reliance on market mechanisms, the neoliberal policies that followed obscured the role that the state had played in creating and sustaining the very policies that have produced skyrocketing

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levels of inequality along axes of race (and other markers of differentiation), thereby quelling direct action and dissent.

Since the early 1990s, these same neoliberal policies have also reshaped community development at the local level. One such example is the emergence of a program for community development that has underplayed, if not denying entirely, the structural causes of inequality and disadvantage. Known as Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), this wildly popular strategy advocates the notion that communities can rebuild themselves from within. However, the basic values of ABCD show that it is not really a blueprint for community development; rather, it is part of a wider political trend aimed at discrediting the efficacy of broad-based social movements like Black Lives Matter.

With its use of collective action, its coalition building among marginalized groups, and its clear demands to combat racist violence, [Black Lives Matter](#) calls attention to the fact that inequality is not a naturally occurring phenomenon; rather, it has been constructed and continues to be buttressed by social institutions that are saturated with white supremacy. In reanimating discussions of structural racism, while also pushing for specific changes that address these larger issues, Black Lives Matter calls for a restructuring of local economies that, unlike ABCD, will actually create meaningful community development by providing concrete amenities such as affordable housing and better access to services such as health care.

An image of a mural with a blue background, representing the sky, painted on a paved street. The image captures a view of the mural from its right side. A sun and rays are portrayed in the upper

left-hand corner of the mural and clouds and curved lines representing birds are scattered throughout. In the foreground of the mural is a painting of an upraised skin-tone brown fist holding an orange and red flower, two protest signs adorned with orange and red flowers, and a black, orange, and red butterfly. #BLM is painted in black on the wrist of the upraised fist. One of the protest signs says, “Black Dreams Matter.” The text on the other sign and half of the upraised fist have been obscured by a splash of white paint that has been thrown over the mural. The mural is painted in the middle of the street and the double-yellow line that separates lanes has been incorporated into the bottom of the mural.

In contrast to the expansive vision of Black Lives Matter, ABCD advocates a kind of purposeful myopia; it imagines that struggling communities can rebuild themselves through identifying and marshalling their internal “assets,” rather than through seeking remedies from outside. In place of the oppositional and broad-based activism of earlier decades, ABCD advocates that community residents must look within their own worlds, imagined as bounded and encapsulated, where they can discover the hidden talents and local resources that were there all along.

The brainchild of two former community organizers from Chicago, John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann, the rise of ABCD coincided not only with the acceleration of radically neoliberal policies but also with the implementation of increasingly punitive austerity measures. [In their 1993 guide to ABCD, McKnight and Kretzmann state](#), rather cynically, that “It is increasingly futile to wait for significant help to arrive from outside the community. The hard truth is that development must start from within the community and, in most of our urban neighborhoods, there is no other choice.” They contrast their asset-driven approach with what they describe as

“the traditional approach—A needs-driven dead end.” They characterize particular areas, including the South Bronx and South Central Los Angeles as well as public housing as “environments of service” and the residents who live there as people who have “become consumers of services, with no incentive to be producers.”

It is significant that these particular neighborhoods are predominantly Black. Their charge that the residents of these neighborhoods have “no incentive to be producers” positions Black and poor people as “dependent” on the hard work of [white] taxpaying citizens, thereby disregarding a long and rich history of participation in unpaid volunteerism and self-help, initiated and sustained primarily by Black women. By creating a portrait of local communities as bounded entities that are disconnected from one another and are responsible for their own fates, ABCD accommodates itself nicely to the imperatives of our late neoliberal—and increasingly anti-democratic—political and economic order. There is no acknowledgement of the role that state-sponsored racism, sexism, xenophobia, and homophobia have played in generating what used to be called “uneven development.”

Examples of the consequences of ABCD abound. [The story of one church in Indianapolis is illustrative.](#) Rather than turning to a structural analysis of the challenges confronting their community, the church simply rejected programs that did not seem to be bringing about the desired results. For example, following what had appeared to be a successful summer program for young men, the program was judged a failure and was simply discontinued after nine of the program participants died violent deaths in close proximity to the church. When school drop-out rates continued to climb, a 30-year after-school tutoring program was also abandoned. Following the termination of these programs, neighborhood residents were then asked about what “gifts and

talents”—assets—they could offer to the community, such as cooking, gardening, or car repair. Out of this new approach, a few fledgling community-based enterprises were ultimately established. In sum, in discontinuing the earlier programs, the church rejected the notion of service or “charity” in favor of creating the kind of entrepreneurial do-it-yourself and very limited welfare state that is characteristic of ABCD.

While it is clear that both charity and entrepreneurship fall short as development practices, what they share in common is their failure to examine critically how and why resources are distributed so inequitably. Instead of dismantling the church programs described above, an analysis of their shortcomings might have led congregants to expand their vision of other possible strategies. The need to address escalating youth violence might have led to a campaign for gun control, or for a youth employment program, or for better neighborhood schools. These local-level efforts might then have sparked the establishment of broader campaigns and city-wide coalitions aimed at realizing more ambitious goals such as access to universal health care and to mental health services. Residents might have lobbied for the passage of a living wage ordinance and increased availability of affordable housing. These mandates are part of the Black Lives Matter movement, and they hold the promise for genuine long-lasting community development. Furthermore, while service delivery projects do not rectify structural inequalities, they can and often do provide fertile terrain for people to come together to recognize the fact that their struggles are collective rather than individual. Many a neighborhood campaign has been born in just these kinds of spaces.

In an article in the *New Yorker*, reporter [Masha Gessen describes Black Lives Matters protests](#) as a practice of democracy, one that is rooted in a necessarily messy and disorderly confrontation with the state and its role in creating the fundamental and racialized disparities that have produced communities like South Central Los Angeles and the South Bronx in the first place. Gessen also reflects on why the mass protests associated with Black Lives Matter have not generated the spikes in COVID-19 infections that other recent social gatherings have, focusing on the [coordination, service delivery, and care](#) that has characterized these spaces of collective action.

At marches large and small—beginning with the very first night of protests in New York City, which I spent with a jail-support team outside One Police Plaza, in Lower Manhattan—I have watched protesters handing out hand sanitizer and masks at all times, and there is always food, water, and first aid available. In my thirty-five years of protesting and reporting on protests, in this country and elsewhere, I have never seen this level of detailed, organized, and consistent mutual care.

When we awake from our COVID-enforced hibernation, may this vision be the one that moves us forward toward creating a genuinely more equitable and anti-racist world, a destination that neighborhood programs like ABCD will never help us reach, and one that it may have prevented us from striving for in the first place.



**Figure.** A photo of a Black Lives Matter street mural taken in Indianapolis, Indiana. (Photo credit: Angela Herrmann). An image of a mural with a blue background, representing the sky, painted on a paved street. The image captures a view of the mural from its right side. A sun and rays are portrayed in the upper left-hand corner of the mural and clouds and curved lines representing birds are scattered throughout. In the foreground of the mural is a painting of an upraised skin-tone brown fist holding an orange and red flower, two protest signs adorned with orange and red flowers, and a black, orange, and red butterfly. #BLM is painted in black on the wrist of the upraised fist. One of the protest signs says, “Black Dreams Matter.” The text on the other sign and half of the upraised fist have been obscured by a splash of white paint that has

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