

# Recuperation and Cooptation in Undermining the BLM Movement Neutralizing the 2020 Black Lives Matter Protests

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**ABSTRACT:** The Black Lives Matter movement, originating in 2013 is “a Black-centered political will and movement building project” (Howard University School of Law, 2018). In the spring and summer of 2020, the BLM movement was reinvigorated by the murder of George Floyd at the hands of police officers, resulting in some of the biggest protests America had ever seen. In order to deal with these protests and the demands for radical systemic change while maintaining the status quo, American corporations, government bodies, and law enforcement agencies engaged in a number of tactics broadly belonging to the idea of recuperation, the idea that “capitalism [can] appropriate even the most radical ideas and return them safely in the form of harmless ideologies” (Vague, 2012). In this paper, I use the frame of recuperation and cooptation to analyze how the demands of the BLM movement were undermined and neutralized.

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**KEYWORDS:** BLM, Black Lives Matter, Cooptation, Social Movements, Activism, Socio-economic Inequality

## Introduction

In the 50s and 60s, “the [Situationist International] identified the threat of revolutionary tactics being absorbed and defused as reformist elements” (Kurczynski, 2008, p. 295). Further, they “pinpointed the increasingly evident problem of capitalist institutions subverting the terms of oppositional movements for their own uses” (p. 295). In this paper, I use the framework of recuperation and cooptation to analyze the lack of successes of the Black Lives Matter movement and the broader 2020 summer protests in achieving radical transformative goals. Black Lives Matter, “a Black-centered political will and movement building project” began in 2013 following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the murder of Trayvon Martin (Howard University School of Law, 2023). Throughout the 2010s, as cases of police brutality against Black people and white supremacist violence received more attention, the movement grew, placing increased attention on the historic and continued inequality of Black people in the United States and abroad. In May 2020, the movement was reinvigorated once more with the murder of George Floyd by police officers in Minneapolis, made public by bystanders turned civilian journalists armed with phone cameras. In following months, some of the biggest protests in American history took place largely under the banner of Black Lives Matter and connected calls to action such as defunding the police and an end to the prison industrial complex. While nation- and world-wide conversations were prompted because of these protests, major transformative change that reckoned with police brutality, the racism in the criminal justice and prison industrial complex systems, and socio-economic inequality in America was avoided through methods of reframing, rebranding, and strategic cooperation by the media, corporations, and governments. These methods are not a new phenomenon and have been organized under the ideas of recuperation and cooptation.

## Definitions

In 1967, leading figure of the international, Paris-based radical artist group Situationist International, Guy Debord, wrote *The Society of the Spectacle*. An understanding that we live in a society of the spectacle is crucial as “the spectacle actively alters human interactions and relationships” (Morgan & Purje, 2016, par. 7), influencing the ways in which we view and

communicate with each other, especially in the context of those who seek to upset the status quo.

Further, to make sense of Debord’s idea of recuperation, it is necessary to understand that recuperation is the means by which the spectacle is reinforced and maintained. In his influential book, Debord (2012) explains the spectacle as “both the result and the project of the existing mode of production” (thesis 6), “world vision which has become objectified” (thesis 5), as “not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images” (thesis 4) and “[in] all its specific forms, as information or propaganda, as advertisement or direct entertainment consumption, [...] the present model of socially dominant life” (thesis 6). Dr. Eric-John Russell analyzes Debord’s philosophizing of the spectacle as “a social separation of human beings from each other, from their own alienated activity, and from their own sense of historical experience” (2021, par. 8). Simplified, Debord defines the spectacle as “[the] moment when the commodity has achieved the total occupation of life” (as quoted in Vague, 2012, p. 7). According to Debord, largely through mass communication technology and systems, “capitalism [controls] the very conditions of existence” and thus, “the world we see is not the real world but the world we are conditioned to see: *The Society of the Spectacle*” (Vague, 2012, p. 7). This brief summary of the politico-philosophical idea of the spectacle is necessary to understand the frame that I utilize in this paper, the Situationist International idea of recuperation.

In the socio-political context, recuperation is the idea that “capitalism [can] appropriate even the most radical ideas and return them safely in the form of harmless ideologies” (Vague, 2012, p. 7). Sam Cooper (2012) further explains the effects of recuperation in terms of the spectacle:

[Recuperation is] the process through which the spectacle can hollow-out any gesture of resistance, re-represent it, and divest it of its radical content. The recuperated gesture can then circulate harmlessly in the spectacle to placate or distract any would-be antagonists. The spectacle thrives through reducing real opposition to the image of opposition, repackaged as an exchangeable commodity. (p. 27)

Jan D. Matthews defines recuperation as simply “the channeling of social revolt in a way that perpetuates capitalism” (2005).

Cooptation, a more common term in today’s socio-political language, is a form of recuperation. Cooptation refers to “the process of absorbing new elements into the leadership or policy- determining structure of an organization as a means of averting threats to its stability or existence” (Selznick, 1949/66, as quoted in Birn et al., 2016, p. 735). Further, cooptation can take the form of a surface level cooptation of language or a deeper ill-willed cooperation or compromising. The cooptation of language consists of the group attempting to neutralize opposition using the same language as said opposition to refer to ‘toned down’ or completely different ideas in order to “[elicit] support from many audiences who are unaware that progressive agendas might have been taken over and distorted” (Armada et al., 2001 as cited in Birn et al., 2016, p. 753.) The latter form of cooptation consists of adopting certain, intact or distorted, portions of radical opposition demands or demands from less radical sectors of the opposition in order to “absorb those who seek change – to make them work with elites without giving them any new advantages,” thus pushing “those who seek change [to] alter their positions when working with elites,” making “the challengers become politically irrelevant” (Holdo, 2019, p. 444).

**Corporations: Cooptation as ‘Benevolent Racism’**

As the BLM movement once again took off across the United States in the spring and summer of 2020, corporations launched social media posts, ad campaigns, and open letters to claim that they supported the fight against racial inequality and systemic racism. While corporations made seemingly grand gestures in the way of brand activism such as making Juneteenth a corporate holiday, diversifying boards, and pausing promotion of products that fetishized law enforcement, many of these same corporations continued practices, policies, and funding that directly promoted systemic racism (Duarte, 2020; Jan et al., 2020). Luigi Esposito and Victor Romano describe how this act of “co-opting many of the race conscious demands of [the Black Lives Matter movement]” embodies what they call ‘benevolent racism’ (2016, p. 3). Esposito and Romano describe benevolent racism as doing three things:

advocating for accommodations for racially oppressed groups, as opposed to calling for transformative and systemic change; framing racist practices as unfortunate but necessary steps on the road to a better future for Black people and for society; and arguing against policies meant to address systemic racism by labelling them “as not only ‘unfair’ or ‘unjustified’ [...], but also counterproductive and ultimately detrimental to Blacks” (2014, p. 70).

I argue that the cooptation of Black Lives Matter’s demands and rhetoric undermines the original movement by simultaneously redefining what meeting those demands looks like as well as taking attention away from grassroots organizers and movement leaders. By claiming to have met movement demands while making minimal, surface level, and often symbolic gestures, companies are able to capitalize on the wide social support of the movement without taking any of the risk that ‘on the ground’ protestors and leaders took. Further, when companies are able to associate themselves with a social movement without making structural changes, they undermine the legitimacy of the movement and the radical nature of its demands by making them appear easily attainable and harmonious with capitalist corporate structures. In this same motion, corporate attachment to social movements inherently recuperates, deradicalizes, and capitalizes on the social movement as corporate backing symbolizes the backing of the very structures that the social movement originally fought against.

**Political Leaders: Cooperation and Symbolism**

Politicians often participate both in the cooptation of social movement language as well as cooptation through ill willed cooperation. These two types of cooptation often go hand in hand as politicians meet with movement leaders, publicly utilize words and actions associated with the movement in an attempt to portray solidarity, and make meaningless symbolic changes with little follow through on more transformative demands. Further, politicians are notorious for unveiling seemingly monumental projects in support of social movements which, in the end, offer little more than symbolism that is quickly forgotten, yet offers a flurry of headlines attaching the politician’s name to the movement. Countless examples of this type of empty symbolism were witnessed during the height of the Black Lives Matter

movement in 2020. One of the most famous examples is that of Democratic Party leaders taking a knee while wearing Kente clothing from Ghana in front of cameras (Paquette, 2020). While moves like this attached Democratic politicians to the image of Black Lives Matter, across the US the party acted in opposition to demands from the movement, strongly opposing the idea of defunding the police and, in fact, supporting increased funding measures as well as openly fighting for hard-on-crime policies (Seitz-Wald, 2022).

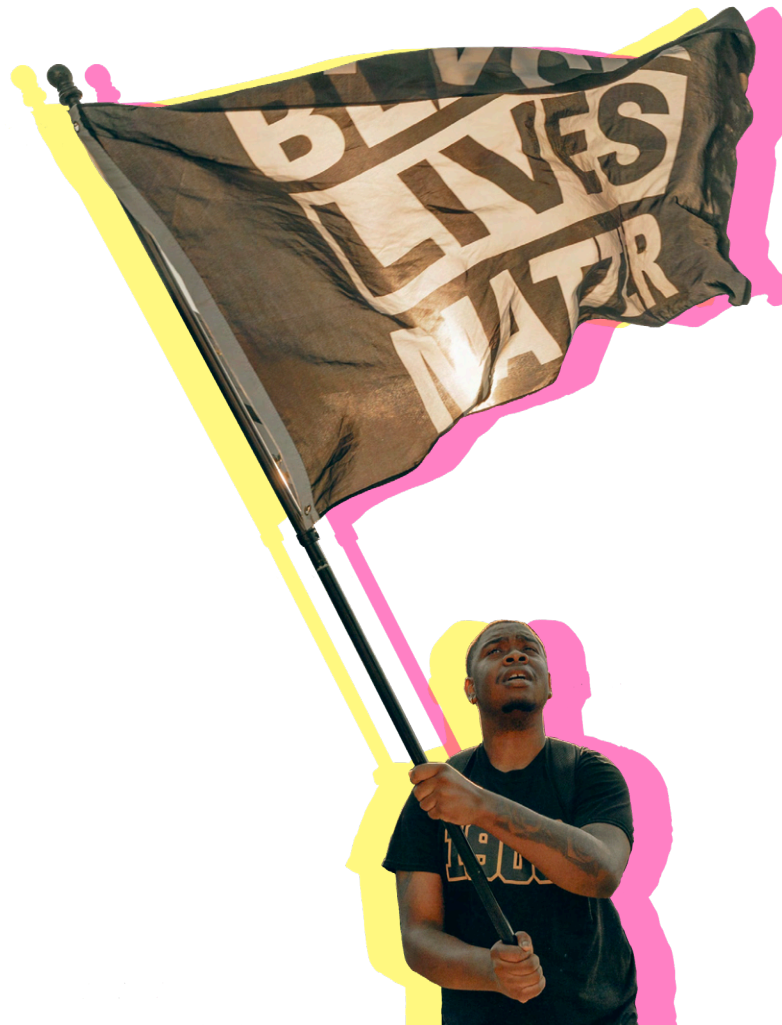
In the same vein as corporate backing of a social movement, support from politicians immediately enacts the process of recuperation as the social movement struggles to be seen as fighting against the system that is seemingly supporting it. Furthermore, symbolic support such as renaming streets and taking a knee in front of the media offers the movement little more than a feeling of dehumanization and delegitimization as political leaders receive media attention and headlines while front line protestors struggle to make their messages heard.

#### **Law Enforcement: This Time, Reform Will Work**

In the wake of the murder of George Floyd as a result of police brutality targeting Black people as well as many similar incidents, police departments came under enormous pressure from the public. One of the main strategies for police departments to counter this pressure was the cooptation of language. While much of the Black Lives Matter movement called for defunding of the police, less radical participants called for reformation of policies and training. In order to appear sympathetic to the movement's demands, police departments nationwide engaged in the rhetoric of reformation. This strategy successfully kept police departments functioning essentially the same and even garnered increased budgets for new training, in direct opposition to many Black Lives Matter organizers and leaders (Department of Justice, 2022). By using this cooptation of the less radical language from the Black Lives Matter movement, police departments were able to appear to be bending to the demands of the movement while maintaining budgets. In other words, police departments successfully recuperated the Black Lives Matter movement into a reformist movement, requiring little change from law enforcement.

#### **Conclusion**

This paper is extremely limited in scope as it does not even begin to cover the number of institutions which engage in the process of recuperation and cooptation, and did so, in order to undermine the Black Lives Matter movement throughout 2020. Analyzing how institutions take radical movements and ideas and regurgitate them as harmless ideals, which can be capitalized on, is crucial to understanding why so many social movements fail under our current socio-economic system. I argue that Debord's theory of recuperation, as well as the current language of cooptation, is a key factor to this understanding. Through cooptation of language, the usage of symbolism as low stakes solidarity, and ill willed cooperation, major institutions such as corporations, political parties, and law enforcement engage in recuperating and, thus, undermining 'social revolt' (Matthews, 2005). In the case of the Black Lives Matter movement, these practices meant the deradicalization and undermining of demands and rhetoric aimed at uprooting systemic racism and racial inequality.



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