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The power of images and the role of social media in Black Lives Matter's social justice demands[1]

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Abstract. The proliferation of connections between the digital world and social activism shows that social media have become fundamental tools for collective action strategies. This article analyses the case study of Black Lives Matter, a movement that is expressing strong potential at a social and cultural level. The aim of this article is to observe the key role played by social media and images on the strengthening of identity, on the (re)signification of collective values, on the radicalisation of the action of the transversal demand for social justice. The previous study on the organisational and structural characteristics of the movement, and their intertwining with the maximisation of the possibilities offered by digital ecosystems, highlights in our conclusions the creation of a new social narrative that has modified perceptions and behaviour, and the strong pervasiveness of #BLM at a socio-cultural level opens up interesting possibilities in terms of pressure on the political-institutional system, political legitimisation and the creation of a structured dialogue between the establishment and civil society.

Keywords. Black Lives Matter, narrative, social media.

1. INTRODUCTION

The problematisation of the relationship between social movements and the broadening of democratic bases is a crucial reference for understanding modern socio-political dynamics, through a focus on the area in which collective action, conflict and politics overlap, that is, the area of the "politics of conflict". In this area, the social movement identifies a particular structured, durable and productive form of social-political conflict, which is important for understanding parallels in the way different forms of conflict operate and showing how their differences are the result of various combinations of mechanisms in different contexts (Tilly, Tarrow 2015). Moreover, the study of the historical-political and structural specificities of collective action cannot be separated from the observation of the impact that the capitalist process, urbanisation, globalisation, the new digital and communication technologies have on the socio-cultural configuration of social movements, because

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these phenomena become a fundamental means for the purposes of collective action strategies. In this sense, Tilly and Wood (2012) emphasise that the key to reading the influence of the new communication technologies is not rooted in the properly media elements, but in the political-cultural specificities: in this sense, therefore, the influence of the new communication technologies is always mediated by historical, political-cultural and organisational factors.

In recent decades, we have witnessed the consolidation of the process of mediatisation of political and social spheres, in which the media have become the frame, the object, the arena (and in some cases even the subject) of political debate and confrontation (Sorice 2009; 2011). It is a process characterised by many complexities and contradictions, especially in its relations with the democratic process. The future pushing towards increasingly immaterial and liquid information (Bauman 2002), and new forms of communication can become a tool with significant socio-educational potential, helping to channel social effervescence towards "solid" forms of community. The proliferation of studies on the links between the digital world and social activism shows that social media have become fundamental tools for social movements in the 21st century, because they enable the mobilisation and dissemination of information – and in the most complicated contexts create "safe meeting spaces" for participants (Khamis, Vaughn 2012: 157) – , have a strong potential to generate digital crowdfunding campaigns (Sommerfeldt 2013; Doan and Toledano 2018), encourage opportunities for recurring interactions between activists, creating and conveying shared collective meanings and ideologies that can influence the public discourse (Milan 2015; Olesen 2013). Therefore, the accessibility of digital spaces has enabled collective action to "have frequently been larger; have scaled up more quickly; and have been flexible in tracking moving political targets and bridging different issues" (Bennett, Segerberg 2012: 742).

The hybridizations and rapid experimentation of the New Media and Social Media enable a different kind of dialogue with social space and change the relationship between politics and the community, because these media can offer an interesting challenge in terms of participation, democracy, resistance, resignification of identity and redefinition of priorities (Picarella 2020). But we cannot overlook the dark side of such dynamics. The Cambridge Analytica scandal has shown one of the ways in which social networks have been used to undermine democracy, because those who control the machine have a dashboard with which to heavily influence the democratic process, a threat that governments must recognise and neutralise with effective laws and regulations. It is not easy to delineate a clear perimeter of reflection, because if the importance of digital ecosystems for the creation of alternative spaces of democratisation is proven, nevertheless the consideration of less analysed issues, related to the understanding and proper management of the potentialities of the digital era, highlights the danger of a "bubble democracy" (Palano 2020), i.e. a fragmentation of public opinion into highly polarised "bubbles", which could be countered by collective social action aimed at developing citizen "counterpowers" (Rosanvallon 2008).

This discussion evidently encompasses another complex issue, concerning the relationship between participation, protest, media mainstream and social networks. For Rucht (2004) the relation between protests and mass media is "breakable and unequal". The mainstream media selects «groups, issues, and actions according to their own criteria» (Rucht 2004: 45), as such social movements could be ignored when they do not follow these criteria, and as a result be exposed to damaging coverage or no coverage at all. Indeed, in this sense, Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993: 121) emphasise the importance of the specific culture of social movements and how this culture can clash with the "political culture of the mainstream media", and warn that if social movements are significantly dependent on the increased power of the media system, activists should be cautious about pursuing the attention of the mainstream media, as such action could result in a simplification and homogenisation of their ideologies and practices. Aware of these analytical difficulties, this contribution focuses on social networks, because BLM fully identifies the socio-political phenomenon of redefinition of social movements and transformation of their action through the potential offered by new technologies, simultaneously representing a relevant example of widening participation and opening and impacting on decision-making through the internet.

The impact that the Black Lives Matter movement has had on the perception of the racial question in American society has been enormous, just as extraordinary was its global projection, because it was able to put the spotlight once again on the issue of racial segregation -which remains an open cut at the heart of American democracy – through the development of horizontal, bottom-up, grassroots action. Despite the incredibly unfavourable historical conjuncture, the incisiveness of this movement – if not yet in terms of full political planning – is profoundly reflected at a social and cultural level, because it is precisely in this sphere that Black Lives Matter is expressing its potential. The aim of this article

is to observe the prominent role played by social media and the enhancement of an interesting form of narration, which has taken place mainly through hashtags and images, which have produced a new sensitivity, changing perceptions and behaviour. This objective is based on the study of the main theoretical sources and secondary analytical data, which will highlight that among the characteristics of Black Lives Matter, we certainly encounter a relevant mediaticity of the movement that has allowed its strong pervasiveness in the international cultural scene. Definitively identified as a global movement for racial equality, Black Lives Matter has been nominated for the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize, making it one of the largest movements in US history. At its core, the story of anti-violence and civil rights is narrated and amplified through the unprecedented rise and integral role of digital and social media. As will be shown in the conclusions, these characteristics have strengthened the movement's claim and call for social justice, especially at a time when the American social context is marked by increasing and worrying levels of social conflict. And, undoubtedly, these peculiarities are crucial to the movement's ability to exert blunt pressure at the political level, changing the variables that influence the socio-economic outcomes associated with ethnicity.

2. BETWEEN RACIAL SEGREGATION AND THE PRESSURE FOR CHANGE: BIRTH OF #BLACKLIVESMATTER

At the end of the 1960s, during the harshest moment of the civil rights protests, the concept of "institutional racism" (Carmichael, Hamilton 1967: 5) opposed arguments that explained inequality based on cultural practices and the low sense of self-sufficiency of Afro communities. This contraposition was strongly supported within the Kerner Commission's report (1968: 10), which emphasised the presence of a form of structural racism «created by white society, maintained by white institutions, enabled by white society». In order not to stray from the objective of this paper, we will not analyse the struggles and racial movements of that period, whose vast scientific literature evidently also represents our theoretical mark of reference, but it is important to refer to that opposition because it still represents an important variable for understanding the oppression, exploitation, marginalisation, and social exclusion of the black communities. There are periodic ruptures in the US narrative concerning the fight against racism. These disconnects trace back to the rhetoric of moral and democratic superiority (assassination of Emmett Till in 1955, during critical moments of the Cold War), project a country that is sharply split between international action in the name of freedom and democracy and a domestic implosion in terms of deeply reactionary views on equality and respect for civil rights (the swing during the 1960s between the war in Vietnam and the long trail of domestic unrest on racial grounds), through the Miami, Los Angeles and Cincinnati uprisings of the 1980s and 1990s and the quagmire at the beginning of the new century that rekindled the debate on the persistence of internal social inequalities and the export of freedom and democracy (war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the shameful answer to the disaster of Hurricane Katrina) and, finally, the development during this last decade of a new movement that opposes the post-racial illusion with a profoundly colour-blind society and system. A past that seemed to have been overcome with the election of Barack Obama, with the black elite of administrators and white collar workers, of sportsmen and Hollywood industry protagonists: successes narrated as the result of the vindication of the black conflict and identified as the definitive consecration of social justice, but the data relating to that period show a different reality[2].

The cracks opened by the 2008 financial crisis have again exacerbated the endemic racial issues in US society, telling a story of painful continuity with the past. In a strongly neo-liberal system, black communities are the ones most affected by the erosion of welfare policies, an erosion that has been accentuated in recent years and that during the current health pandemic has turned the cracks of the financial crisis into chasms that have fuelled the development of new ideological platforms in which past and present inexorably mix. Between the spring of 2014 and the winter of 2015, the streets of the United States were occupied by massive protests against the killings of black people by police officers.

These deaths became the driving force behind the growing anger of the black communities, triggering powerful mobilisations that clustered around the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, which provoked a dense Afro storm against state violence. Briefly, the hashtag appeared after the absolution of the security guard who had killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Florida in 2012

[2] In 2012, 12% of black graduates were unemployed, compared to 4.9% of white graduates. In the period 2009-2014, the average salary of a black person decreased by 10.9% compared to a 3.6% reduction in the average salary of a white person (i.e., $33,500 per year for a black person compared to $58,000 for a white person). To these data we must add that, still considering the same period, 26% of black families lived in a condition of food insecurity, 30% of black children were in a condition of poverty, 25% of black women did not have the means to access health care, and 65% of new cases of AIDS affected black women (Cohen 2014; Hickey 2014).

because he was considered a suspect, a rage that quickly fuelled the famous inflection point, a worldwide channeller of the black cry #BlackLivesMatter, represented by the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson (Missouri) and by the inhumane attitude of the police, who let the young man's body decompose under the scorching sun of a summer afternoon[3].

The severe police response to the protests failed to cover up the state of police subjugation of the black community[4], nor did it stem the new wave of black resistance that spread and ricocheted across the country. Brown's killing coincided with the killing of St. Louis teenager Vonderrit Myers, and was preceded in New York by the death of Eric Garner, who was asphyxiated by a policeman, and in Ohio of John Crawford, who was killed for carrying a toy revolver while was on the phone with his family, in a state that allows the personal possession of firearms. Deaths followed in Los Angeles by Ezell Ford, unarmed and pinned with his face against the pavement, in California by Dante Parker, who was shot several times with a teaser, by the murder of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, by Tanisha Anderson in Cleveland who was killed with a judo stroke (Swaine 2014; Harkinson 2014). The media resonance of the scream of protest sent out through the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, highlighted the important role that black women have traditionally played in the struggles for freedom and civil rights, from the movements of the 1960s to the leadership of the current #BLM conceived and founded by three black women (Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi).

The transformation from "moment to movement" (Harris 2014) also materialised with the rapid embodiment of the hashtag in the famous die-ins – collective performances in which participants lay down, as if dead, to represent lethal police violence – organised by students at major universities across the country (from Princeton to Stanford), but also by lawyers, civil servants, Congress officials and assessors who walked off the job in protest, and by the union of seventy medical schools who represented their die-ins with the slogan #WhiteCoats4BlackLives. The connection was now firmly established, the focus on the outpouring of social energy into a new movement, so much so that it prompted Hillary Clinton to mention the Black Lives Matter phenomenon during one of the presidential debates (Mak 2014; Mulvaney 2014; Colvin 2014). The characteristic of these actions was undoubtedly their transversality: from the start, the platform became the "place" in which different associations and social and political collectives recognised themselves[5], composed mainly of blacks and latino peoples, and with a sharp increase in white participation compared to the past. #BlackLivesMatter has always been an "umbrella phrase", intentionally broad to include struggles not only against the justice and prison system, but also racism in education, health, and other socio-economic spheres. This characteristic fits perfectly with current scientific trends and debates that point to framing processes as a central element in understanding the characteristics and dynamics of social movements and collective action, and that also aim to clarify the connection between framing processes and other important variables for movements, such as ideology (Snow and Benford 2000). In current mobilisations (especially counter-demonstrations and social forums) there is a particular tendency towards deliberative and consensual processes, which favour the creation of a "master-frames" (Andretta 2005) capable of culturally integrating the different meanings of protest. Suggesting to our case study, the common causality has been socially constructed through the "frame condensation" (Tarrow 2002) i.e., the agglutination of the set of causes and problems into a one "mega target". The movement combines the traditional demands of the black community with those of other oppressed groups (LGBT community and feminist groups above all), in fact while maintaining social justice as its primary objective, it incorporates various civil rights struggles. In ideological terms, this strategy can be defined as intersectional, because it recognises the multidimensionality of the condition of black people oppression, it takes up the struggles of the Black Power era, which are bound to the systemic nature of segregation and marginalisation but places them in a broader dimension.

[3] In reference to this fact, Pierce (2014, n.d.) wrote "dictators leave bodies in the street. Local satraps leave bodies in the street. Warlords leave bodies in the street. These are the places where bodies are left in the street, as a lesson, to underline something, or because no one cares if they're there".

[4] Bill Clinton's Programme 1033, adopted in 1997, favoured an increasing hierarchical and operational militarisation of the police departments. The demonstrations that took place in the aftermath of Brown's killing exposed the systematic police action against black communities, which were transformed into the main sources of entry. In Ferguson, traffic violations accounted for 21% of the department's resources, and inability to pay or failure to appear in court resulted in immediate arrest: in 2014, 95% of fines and car impoundments involved black drivers. The police must be productive in terms of the number of arrests and fines, because rewards, promotions and incentives are linked to this, and, of course, the rapid achievement of high levels of productivity is enabled by actions directed against the low-income segment of the population, which is largely made up of blacks. According to data from Amnesty International, from 2013 to 2019, police in the United States killed 7650 people, the vast majority of whom were black and latino, and the number of officers indicted for these killings was less than 1%. These are explained using qualified immunity by police unions, important lobbies in connection with political, economic, and institutional governance (Amnesty International USA 2014; 2020).

[5] Among the most active, BYP 100, Dream Defenders, Hands Up United, Ferguson Action, Millennials United.

In this aspect, there is an important difference from the old guard, because the civil rights organisations and movements of the past focused on legal strategies to solve police violence, while contemporary activism connects this vision with other black and non-black claims, basing these arguments on the fact that the crisis facing black communities (and minorities in general) legitimises a broader analysis and action. The differences in the ways and practices of conflictual action express the different characterisations present in the Black Lives Matter movement. Specifically, there is a sector more linked to the classic vision of white supremacism present in a *de facto* militarised police force, and therefore linked to modes of non-violent action typical of the experience of the 1960s. Another area that combines socio-economic racism and mass arrests, and yet another that weaves institutional racism with new forms of racism that leverage job and existential insecurity, military control of urban space, gentrification and environmental racism, issues which have been exacerbated by Covid-19 and which undoubtedly represent one of the new frontiers of the social question. The last two areas embrace different conventional possibilities of action and criticise the abstract arguments in terms of universal human rights converted into parts of the racist narrative. Evidently, and as was already the case with movements like Occupy, the variable relating to the absence of internal uniformity, of formal structures and leadership, represents, in the opinion of the most critical, the weak element for the continuation of the path of social and conflictual consolidation. These internal characteristics are reflected in organisational terms. Black Lives Matter presents interesting differences from past movements, structuring itself as a network with over 30 local branches, decentralised and unstructured, characterised by the practice of "community organizing" (Shragge 2013), i.e. the composition, relationships between activists, decision-making methods and ways of practising protest and conflict vary from city to city, sometimes even between different groups in the same city. A "grassroots movement" (Van Til, Hegyesi, Eschweiler 2008) with demands that start from the bottom, horizontal, strongly rooted in the territory through a strategy totally based on the web platform (BlackLivesMatter.com) and social media (Facebook and Twitter that spread the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter). The activists justify their position by appealing to the role played by the people, the only spokesmen for the struggle, and they also insist that this is not an anti-organisation position, because what is needed is the prior building of communities through democratic and spontaneous participation, facilitated precisely by horizontal and collegial practices. However, internal differentiation remains, as some sectors are keen to set up a subsequent organisation so that people can continue to support the action (Berlatsky 2015; Katch 2015).

The rejection by the new generations of activists of the creation of vertical control of the establishment – typical of the movements of the past – was supported by the organisational immediacy offered by the "reticular logic" (Della Porta 2019). This success, however, leaves open the question of the importance of coordination in moving from direct action to impact on governance processes. The dimensions assumed by the protest after the killing of George Floyd in May 2020 in Minneapolis have severely tested the resistance of the political-institutional structure of the US political system, kneeling under an unprecedented social and identity crisis, and have prompted questions about the future of Black Lives Matter after this extraordinary impetus for political-cultural change. According to sociological theory, prolonged action over time is an important component for the longevity of movements, but after the propagation of effervescence there is the dilemma of consolidation (Alberoni 1968, Melucci 1989, Touraine 1991). In the wake of the strong protests that characterised the second half of the 2020s, and the level of internationalisation achieved, Black Lives Matter has more formalised its active involvement in politics with the creation of a political action committee (PAC), a highly unusual move for grassroots organizing group with no central leadership. The committee, confirming the importance of the element of territoriality, aims to influence second order elections by supporting lists, focusing on the positions of mayor, county sheriff and district attorney, to exercise greater influence from the inside of the institutional system by electing candidates who share Black Lives Matter values. In addition to the PAC, political efforts have centred on the centrality of the call for social justice in the presidential election, and to this purpose the Movement for Black Lives, a coalition of more than 50 organising groups nationwide, created the online platform The Frontline, an initiative to encourage political and electoral participation by young people, through the organisation of virtual debates – entitled When Black People Are Free, We Are All Free – focused on shaping a progressive agenda, based on the creation of a new vision of public safety, climate justice and environmental protection, and solid social support policies. The challenge ahead is not an easy one, #BLM has simultaneously demonstrated a capacity for rapid adaptation to change and strong expansion, and there is no doubt that the growing drive towards the future is materialising the transition from a simple hashtag to a singular movement.

3. #BLACKLIVESMATTER: BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA AND NEW SOCIAL NARRATIVES

Martin Luther King's Testament of Hope can still be used to describe the relevance of black protest against social stigmatisation, economic marginalisation and structural violence[6]. The presence of racial clusters with fairly clear edges between urban areas conceals a much more complex reality with redefined – real or symbolic – boundaries. The urban space is shaped as a low-intensity war scenario, where the police monopoly of force is combined with the objective of productivity. In this perspective, "law and order" action pushes towards low-income neighbourhoods (mostly populated by blacks and latinos), which become targets, also by a racial profiling software (Predictive Policing). As in all models of social behaviour, what makes the difference is the choice of data to create standard individual and collective profiles of likely criminals, to define places and times where crimes may be committed, to catalogue people and groups who may commit crimes in the future. These models perfectly capture how institutional racism is brought down on selected segments of the population, and how the maintenance of socio-spatial segregation is an important tool to this end.

The voice of these social segments exploded in the strong demands for justice and welfare for all that make up "We, the people", an explosion triggered by Floyd's death by asphyxiation during a "normal" police check.

The video, broadcast live on social media, instantly set the US ablaze, and the global virality of the hashtags #SayHisName and #IcantBreathe quickly brought the past into the present[7], producing a new sensibility and changing perceptions in the face of anger that became protest, and gave hope for change. #Black Lives Matter is emerging collective identity, it is memory, it is action characterised by a relevant and growing transnationality and interconnectivity, which has confirmed the power of digital ecosystems. Indeed, in a world where racism is still such a widespread problem, prejudice and segregation can only be represented by those who experience it, or who directly witness it, and in this sense, the unfiltered freedom of social media has been the most effective source for shaping identity and collective action, and for representing current forms of racism and injustice. Social media has changed the narrative, filling in the gaps in the traditional narration, offering key insights and different perspectives that are fundamental to mobilising global support, and in this case bringing an increasing segment of the white community closer to the black cause. In this sense, Mundt, Ross and Burnett's research (2018) illustrates the key role that social media has played in mobilisation and re-signification, and its impact in expanding the movement.

Similarly, is interesting the quantitative analysis by Choudhury, Jhaver and Weber (2016) referring to the period 2014-2015. The analysis on 28 million tweets recorded an increasing participation of conversations related to #BLM, thus encouraging the authors to define Twitter as a sensor of the community's perception on socially delicate issues such as racial discrimination. The results of this study also point out that social media were able to predict the size of protests that were being organised across the country, and to observe not only the growth of participation over time, but also significant internal geographical differences. Based on these differences, the strongest participation and linguistic characterisations are observed especially in states with historically high rates of black victimisation due to police violence, where narratives are steeped in words of death and loss. Likewise, research by Ince, Rojas and Davis (2018) shows that framing the movement is generally associated with other types of hashtags related to expressions of solidarity, opposition to police violence, and movement actions (e.g., #StopViolence; #RacialEquality; #FightForYourRights). Furthermore, the analysis of 66,159 tweets records a prominence on social media since 2014 of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter; in fact, according to Suffolk University statistics, after the acquittal of the policeman who killed Brown, the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter exceeds 1.7 references in Twitter[8]. Overall, between mid-July 2013 and March 2016, #BlackLivesMatter was mentioned about 11.8 million times[9]. The connectivity offered by online platforms

[6] "These are brilliant years of emergency, although they are painful, they cannot be ignored. In these complicated circumstances, the Black Revolution is much more than a struggle for black rights. It consists of forcing the US to confront all its related mistakes – racism, poverty, militarism, and materialism. Exposing the deeply rooted evils in the global structure of our society. Revealing systemic errors and suggesting that the radical reconstruction of our society is the real issue to be addressed" (King 1986: 316).

[7] We would highlight that the #IcantBreathe campaign was started in 2014, following Garner's asphyxiation, while the hashtag #SayHerName was created in 2015 after the death of Sandra Bland, a black woman arrested following a traffic stop (i.e. briefly detained based on reasonable suspicion) and found hanged in her cell. A death listed as suicide, but which opened several different hypotheses, and triggered protests led by the hashtag #SayHerName, which since that time has become a social movement to raise awareness of police violence against black women, violence often forgotten by the mainstream media. The hashtag is especially active on Twitter, which has shown an interesting combination of using the hashtag associated with the name of a black woman killed by the police (Tassie, Brown 2015; Brown *et al.* 2017).

[8] *More Than Just A Hashtag: The Influence of Social Media on the Societal Change of the Black Lives Matter Movement*, in https://sites.suffolk.edu/

[9] *The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter emerges: Social activism on Twitter*, in Pew Research Center www.pewresearch.org.

has been an important benefit in weaving activism and empowerment into the #BLM, and in our opinion the analyses cited above offer interesting perspectives on the movement's particularities. Undoubtedly, the strategies that have characterised the action of the #BLMs, especially during this last year, have intensified the practices that, since the Arab Spring, continuing through Occupy and the *caliente otoño latinoamericano* (Picarella 2020), have manifested unconformity through the new virtual spaces and used social networks as a privileged mechanism for the organisation and coordination of action. A few months before the presidential elections, Floyd's death has inflamed the social networks ablaze, turning them into a massive sounding board[10] and the glue of global protest. The Internet was sparked by the video of the killing, which went viral within minutes, with over 1 billion views. In the month following the death, #BLM was mentioned over 80 million times on Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, and various blogs. Specifically, between 31 May and 6 June 2020, the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was the main topic of worldwide discussion on Twitter, with peaks of over 800,000 comments per day. In the week following the murder, the hashtag was used almost 50 million times on Twitter alone, on Instagram messages of support for #BlackLivesMatter exceeded 21 million, and in Google searches related to Floyd's murder remained among the top 20 trending topics[11]. Expertise from movements that had participated in democracy mobilisations in the previous year was also crucial to the broadening of the protest and its radicalisation over time. Researchers at the Digital Forensic Research Lab[12] recorded activists' use of the Waze app to monitor traffic and facilitate faster travel. Similarly, the Citizen app was used to report the real-time location of the police and coordinate the flow of all protesters. Activists in Los Angeles started #BLUEFALL to create a digital archive of police brutality cases documented during the protests: on the evening of 4 June alone, this hashtag had 1 million mentions on Twitter. Between 28 May and 4 June, 16,900 tweets relating to information on the organisation of protests were recorded, an item that marks a further evolution compared to the past. In order to maximise the coordination of operations, activists created digital platforms with simple information sheets on the cause, events and donations. The result was surprising. Between 28 May and 4 June 2020, almost 150 million Facebook posts contained links to protestinfo.carrd.co and blacklivesmatter.carrd.co.

Support for the cause also involved the arts, sports, big brands, and tech giants. Amazon, Netflix, Prime Video, NBC, Universal tweeted messages of solidarity with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter and with a black background to replace the cover images on Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Linkedin, Square. Likewise Instagram, which also invites users to tell and share stories with #shareblackstories. Google and Intel, sharing messages of solidarity, also donate millions of dollars to fight social injustice; messages of support for the black cause also come from Nike, which invites everyone to be part of the change, from Columbia Record which organises #BlackOutTuesday, an appeal not to publish new content in order to make the music industry aware of the importance of black culture (#TheShowMustBePaused).The appeal was joined by the streaming services Apple Music, Amazon Music, YouTube Music and Spotify, which added 8 minutes and 46 seconds of silence (the duration is equal to the time police officer Derek Chauvin crushed George Floyd's neck with his knee). "I can't breathe" thus becomes a collective and globalised cry of pain, printed on the T-shirts and posts of sportsmen and artists, a demand for justice projected through the force of the gesture of fists raised and kneeling. The observation of the latest wave of protests prompts reflection on some interesting aspects. Firstly, there has been unquestionable support from the technology giants, but the movement clearly needs to problematise the results, because criticism was pointedly directed for example against the Google Search algorithm and Google's PageRank search protocols, accused of reinforcing structural oppression and the dominant and stereotypical narrative, especially for searches focused on Trayvon Martin and #BlackLivesMatter (Umoja Noble 2018).

Secondly, #BLM confirms the theoretical view that defines the media space as a broad umbrella that encloses within it different frames capable of generating collective identity and cause (Thorson *et al.* 2016), definitively highlighting the ability of social media to close the gap left open by traditional and official media, often unable to offer meaningful solutions beyond the mere provision of details. The digital society, and the evolution of the concept of interactivity that follows the netcast communication models, have the important capacity to record reality and relaunch it with a spillover effect, whose results (Bosi 2011) have been significant in terms of the spillover impact of protest – social media – protest.

Also, in our opinion, especially in the post-Floyd protests and actions it is possible to recognise another element of particular interest and novelty. The reticu-

[10] So much so that it prompted Trump to sign an executive order against social platforms, which are held legally responsible for the content posted by users.

[11] Social Media Analytics Center, University of Connecticut, https://smacc.lab.uconn.edu/.

[12] https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/programs/digital-forensic-research-lab/.

lar model of the protests and actions has favoured a new social narrative, based on the recovery of images as a blunt instrument of narration and (re)signification of the claims. The image/power binomial is an ancient phenomenon, declined in reality through tangible elements, i.e. cultural, artistic, architectural and urban production, but also through "immaterial" components, such as the formulation of symbolic and visual paths, repeated gestures, sensory involvement, the diffusion and appropriation of myths, visual formulas and common traditions, which constitute the collective memory that power aims to define. The narrative power of images can activate emotions that create "a virtual environment of art and meaningfulness that movement activists can leverage to connect with the youth population at large, thus turning culture into a means to transform politics" (Castells 2012, 101). Although for a long time the role of images in social movements was considered marginal – because it is only since the 1990s that the theoretical debate on the power of images in political conflict has become widespread (Mitchell 1994) -, the importance of visual narration to articulate and make visible demands in the public sphere should not be underestimated, as evidenced by the rapid expansion in recent years of scientific literature. Images can signify and narrate a culturally shared universe, associating it with a panel of knowledge, memory, identities, and actions that are interpreted and reframed by social and political actors. In fact, the prevalence of cultural conflicts as the centre of action of the movements allows for their innovative thrust, because these conflicts present unprecedented demands that affect the whole of society, and which the movements bring to the surface and push to be approached (Ceri 2005). Also, especially in the narration of dissent, images, colours, and graphic symbolism play a fundamental role, because they become the markers of complex items and frames and of identification in the political conflict (Goodnow 2006; Doerr & Teune 2012). In this sense, in the post-Floyd explosion of claims, the evocative power of images has contributed to (re)constructing the narrative of a forgotten reality, and has gone further, transforming images into "weapons" of claim, capable of acting on multiple levels of verbal/visual communication, in a perfect union with social networks. A modus operandi that becomes part of the protest and has a strong hold on the social imaginary: for example, the photo of the red hijab that seems to set Floyd's eyes on fire is iconic[13]. Images allow for a reworking of average forms of memory, and are therefore a powerful vector for spreading change, also pushing towards a stronger tendency of legitimisation and probably professionalisation of protest through the mediatic construction of the image (Bennett & Lawrence 1995; DeLuca 1999; Delicath & DeLuca 2003). Consequently, the current opportunities offered by digital reproduction techniques and web-based dissemination undoubtedly prompt reflection on possible new re-compositions and narratives (Fiorentino 2017). Images have had a strong relationship with resistance and social change movements, allowing them to transcend geographical boundaries and break down socio-cultural barriers, because the polysemiotic and multilayered combination of images shows a different communicative potential compared to texts, with which it is combined, being able for example to disseminate and radicalise frames tending towards strong change, such as social injustice (Memou 2013; Olesen 2015). In this perspective, for example, the study by Stephanie Geise, Diana Panke, Axel Heck (2020) on the impact of images on the intention to participate in protests is interesting. Their empirical analysis showed that viewers focused the attention on the protest images before the text. This result underlines that images can be carriers of content that can motivate participation, without forgetting, however, the influence of the duration and effect of the observation by individual levels of political interest. In line with the above theoretical predictions, BLM confirms that messages containing images were much more likely to be retweeted by people who had not previously tweeted about the protest. Specifically, images that generated feelings such as excitement, anger or fear attracted a higher level of attention and diffusion, contribute to online participation (Casas & Webb 2019).

The resulting conflict for (re)definition and signification, visualised in the public space, makes it possible to understand the continuity or discontinuity of historical-political processes and socio-cultural behaviour and artistic trends. In the case of #BLM, the strength of the messages conveyed through the images made it possible to take up, to (re)signify, to narrate in a different way behaviours and issues that are often over-interpreted according to anachronistic categories, to re-elaborate and multiply this narrative through a transversal dialectic that had worldwide repercussions. What has been created over the past year, despite the limitations imposed by the lockdowns for Covid-19, has been a narrative bridge where each image has contributed to the support and enrichment of other narratives. #BLM inspired an extensive structural review, which embraced the narrative, its understanding, and the ways of exposition. Floyd's killing opened a window capable of pushing the world's most important museums to reconsider

[13] The photo was posted by Brandon Bell on Instagram.

their exhibition choices based on an inclusive narrative, an unexpected revisit to shake up the institutionalised modernist orthodoxy, giving voice to narratives outside the mainstream, thus allowing the resurgence of the socio-politically engaged expressiveness of the Black Arts Movement (BAM). In the same way, there has been a revival of the short film "Born with It", a narrative of the discrimination experienced by Japanese people of African origin, and also the growing affirmation of the cultural and artistic performances of the small Afro-Czech community, redefined as a moment of encounter and awareness of their own identity. Similarly, we observe the awareness-raising action by Indian Dalits, according to ancient social customs considered inferior and traditionally excluded, and the strong awareness of structural racism in the Latin American and Caribbean area, where the old colonial and slave past has been addressed through the removal of the symbols of oppression, with the aim of opening a new historical and identity narrative. New meanings have therefore emerged, and the new relationships created between images and narrative have broken the historical continuum, opening new avenues, and polarising them in the present. The novelty impulsed by post-Floyd, is insistent in the creation of a collective and multifocal perspective, which portrays in the centre the marginal part and all that has been forgotten, offering images with a strong diachronic impact – the before and after – but also and above all synchronic – political and social context -, allowing a critical narrative rearticulation of participatory, collective and identity processualism.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The extraordinary impetus for cultural and socio-political change led by #Black Live Matter and strongly re-exploded after Floyd's murder, has prompted questions about the future of the movement. The perception is that the movement has entered a new phase, characterised by the shift of conflict to higher levels, with the aim of putting pressure on and permanently affecting the established power. That is, that the praxis of collective action is opening an interesting path of politicisation in social and urban space. The claims of identity and the cry for equality and social justice that have characterised the pressure action of #BLM in recent years have been spheres of affirmation of subjectivities not always in continuity with the past. Contemporary collective action reveals deep fracture lines within the same communities, transversal links and issues, high territorial mobility, and social network protagonism. Images and new digital technologies have created social cohesion and identity, they have activated and prolonged social energy, a radicalisation that aims at the structural transformation of society. Indeed, in our opinion, the reflection on the future of #BLM should not focus so much on the political-electoral level, but above all on the elements underlying this social movement. Leaving out the ideological visions, it could be understood as a class movement, i.e. considering its composition as an active process, which is shaped in the transversality of claims, in imaginaries and material behaviours, in forms of socialisation and communication. From the start, Black Lives Matter has emerged as a powerful grassroots movement, amplified through digital platforms. The constant use of social media, associated with #BlackLivesMatter, can be considered as an interesting example of "hashtag activism" that allowed for the creation and strengthening of identity, enabled the (re)signification and broadening of the causes of the claim, generated a new social narrative of the same, which stimulated the creation of local chapters. This action made it possible that #BLM moved seamlessly between the digital and the tangible, showing a clear chain of progression based on digital platforms, real echo chambers. Social media played a fundamental role in terms of affirming shared identities and values, mobilising, organising/supporting the protest, and spreading and internationalising the cause of social justice. Twitter in particular has been the hub of the black community's narrative, and indeed an analysis of the tweets available in the period 2016-2018, shows a consistent use of the #BlackLiveMatter hashtag on this platform, with very strong peaks especially in the post-Floyd era, an event in which digital activism confirmed its full potential. Specifically, immediately after Floyd was killed by the police, almost 8.8 million tweets contained the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter; in the following weeks, the number of daily tweets containing the hashtag remained consistently above 2 million[14].

The data also shows an interesting impact of social media on users' perceptions, as 23% of respondents in the US in July 2020 (+9 percentage points compared to 2018) admit to having changed their opinion on social and political issues; about this case study, 12% say they have changed their opinion on #BLM, and an equal percentage on the issue of police violence and the need for police department reform, and 11% on race relations and discrimination[15]. Social networks have contributed to a sharp increase in consciousness and pressure on topics marginal to traditional media, boosting interest

[14] *Beyond the hashtag*, Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI), www.cmsimpact.org.

[15] Pew Research Center, October 2020, www.pewresearch.org.

and participation especially among younger segments, attracted by digital activism based on the transversal cause of social change.

In #BlackLivesMatter, online and offline activism are often integrated and interrelated, because participation in online activism has encouraged offline protest, facilitating identity formation and affirmation. Undoubtedly, the collective action that developed under the hashtag #BLM fomented the emergence of a new social narrative of the black cause, of the systemic racism still present in our societies, and more generally of the issue of discrimination, segregation, and marginalisation. This narrative has benefited from the potential of digital ecosystems, but also of the "rediscovery" of images, whose expressive power made it possible to (re)signify words, to (re)interpret, to understand. Due to its ideological construction, it was a social and polyphonic narrative, which made it possible to channel the emotional potential into action, integrating past and present, and shaping a third time, which was the time of the narrative, made eternal by the image. The eternal instant narrated by the image can open the future, through a "suspension" of ordinary time which, in Benjamin's vision (2000), makes possible the emergence of the "revolutionary chance". In this sense, the promoting force of the new social narrative that has coagulated around the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter is observed in the participation of subjectivity and plurality of perspectives in the intention of constructing the public sphere, that is, in the intention of being an alternative to (re)construct the public sphere by recognising this subjectivity.

The identification of the movement with a few cross-cutting causes to the black cause, all in each case founded on the need for social justice, has allowed Black Lives Matter not to lose intensity and not to break down, but to continue to work slowly to move the Overton window, achieving interesting effects on the institutional system. For example, in 2016 the Movement for Black Lives created a platform with the aim of influencing more electoral politics by campaigning for investments in education, health care and economic justice; activists in Ferguson launched Campaign Zero, a project focusing on police union contracts and moving the most popular demand among activists, i.e. a drastic cut in police department budgets and a state of charge for police officers. Along these lines, BYP100 and the Assata's Daughers, groups linked to #BLM, blocked the Democratic primary race of District Attorney Anita Alvarez, famous for having exonerated police officers accused of murder 68 times in her career, and the Dream Defenders stopped Angela Corey, the Attorney General responsible for the acquittal of George Zimmerman, who killed Trayvon Martin. Linked to these demands are requirements to pass the "Breathe Act" to close detention centres for migrants and reinstate social programmes for ex-detainees.

Other demands concern forms of reparation towards indigenous communities and black farmers deprived of their land and the defence and respect of LGTB communities. These battles erupted again after Floyd's killing[16], and the pressure managed to provoke a greater shift to the left of the Democratic Party, which introduced a bill in Congress limiting the use of force and police discretion in the management of public order, and which through several prominent figures (among them, Kamala Harris and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez) declared its support for the movement's claims, opening the way to its strong legitimisation also at a political level. The degree of awareness, breadth and radicalisation of the movement are reinforcing the creation of a double stream of contamination between establishment and militancy, which is crucial for a structured dialogue with civil society.

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[16] The pressure exerted by #BlackliveMatter has undoubtedly influenced for Floyd's family the highest compensation ever awarded for a case related to the murder of a black man by a policeman. In the meantime, the trial against Chauvin, the policeman-killer, has just started. The judge has charged him with a new crime: third-degree murder, which is provided for in the State of Minnesota for those who 'cause the involuntary death of someone, acting with malice'. The third charge is in addition to charges of second-degree murder and unintentional homicide. If the officer is found guilty, the penalty is 20 to 40 years in prison.

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