

American Race Relations in the Age of Obama

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ABSTRACT: The election of Barack Obama to the presidency in November 2008 marks a historic breakthrough in American race relations. Even as a black man becomes the most powerful person on earth, however, African Americans by some measures (especially black man at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy) are doing worse today than before the victories of the civil rights movement. With special attention to the disproportionate representation of African Americans in the criminal justice system, this essay will illuminate this paradoxical disjuncture and speculate on its significance for teaching and research about culture, society and history in the United States.

At the close of the Bush era—and perhaps at the twilight of the conservative counter-revolution in American politics—race relations in the United States stand at a perplexing juncture. On the one hand, the election of Barack Obama to the presidency symbolizes the shattering of segregationist barriers. On the other, there is evidence that social stratification along racial lines is in some ways hardening. This essay will unpack and examine this contradiction, while also exploring its significance for teaching and research on the United States.

Obama's Apotheosis

Although no thoughtful commentators are claiming that Obama's triumph in the November 2008 election marks the dawn of a post-racial America, its historical significance is difficult to overstate. It was, indeed, a vote heard 'round the world. After eight years of "forever war," unilateralist arrogance, torture, and, now, financial implosion have reduced the United States to a rogue state in world opinion surveys, Barack Obama—with his cosmopolitan cool and policy moderation—has emerged as the iconic antidote to the global discontents of the Bush era (Filkins; Kohut and Stokes).

According to poll after poll, observers in almost every country preferred Obama over John McCain, and his victory, reported the *International Herald Tribune*, unleashed "a flood of hope worldwide." ("Obama Win Preferred"; Bronner; Cowell). Kenya

declared a national holiday, while Brazilians and Indonesians reveled in the streets ("Kenya declares holiday"; Leicester; Witoelar; Cole and Moore). An artist in Barcelona created a portrait of Obama so large it can be seen from space (Goodman). Tabloids in London replaced pin-up girls with Obama pics and celebrated "One Giant Leap for Mankind." ("Obama's election triumph"). Desmond Tutu compared Obama to Mandela, rejoicing that "people everywhere who have been victims of discrimination at the hands of white Westerners have a new pride in who they are" (Tutu B1).

Within the United States, the reaction was equally effervescent, at least in Democratic precincts. At my election party in Honolulu, everyone wept, except my daughter and her four-year-old friends. In New York City, late-night subway cars erupted in song (Cox). In a disarming echo of 1968, Washington DC, which burned after the assassination of Martin Luther King, practically rioted with joy ("Joyous Obama Supporters"; Wilkins A17). As usual, President-Elect Obama captured the moment most eloquently. Before tens of thousands of huddled supporters in Chicago's Grant Park, he intoned, "If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer" ("Obama's Victory Speech").

History Overcome

The candidates made nods to the history being overcome that night. In a gracious concession speech before a booing crowd, McCain noted that when Teddy Roosevelt invited Booker T. Washington to the White House in 1901, it was denounced by prominent white southerners as a "damnable outrage." Journalists pointed out that the White House had been built partly by slaves and that every president before 1850 staffed the executive mansion with enslaved servants ("McCain's Concession Speech"; Harris; Holland).

In order to fully appreciate the redemptive significance of a black president, however, one has to wallow in the ugly muck of U.S. history a bit longer than polite punditry allows. For it is no exaggeration to say that racial division and discrimination not only run through American history but define it (Roediger).

At the nation's founding, chattel slavery stood as the paradigmatic exception to the revolution's devotion to liberty, as the young republic's "original sin" (Fredrickson; Davis). Because we still tend to teach slavery as a prelude to the Civil War, we sometimes forget its centrality: that by the start of the nineteenth century, three times as many Africans had sailed (involuntarily) to the New World as Europeans; that by 1860, more U.S. capital was invested in human flesh than in banks, railroads, or textile mills (Hochschild 3; Davis "Free at Last"). As my colleague Jim Horton says, "Slavery was no side show in American history—it was the main event" (Horton).

Emancipation seemed, at last, to fulfill the American promise. During Reconstruction, there were special schools set up for freed people, integrated street cars, fleeting experiments in wealth redistribution, and former slaves elected to the U.S. Senate—an exclusive club that, more than a century later, has only one black member. But a relentless campaign of homegrown terrorism in the 1870s, led by the Ku Klux Klan, laid waste to America's first civil rights regime (Foner; Budiansky). As W. E. B. Du Bois lamented, "The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back toward slavery" (Du Bois Black Reconstruction in America 30)

For four score years thereafter, the descendants of slaves in America (as well as black immigrants) were subjugated not just socially but legally: often humiliated in their daily interactions with whites; denied access to private and public institutions; confined to dense, impoverished neighborhoods; and denied opportunities for educational and economic advancement (Packard; Chafe et al.).

This protracted epoch of Jim Crow segregation persisted into Obama's childhood. In 1960, his

parents' interracial union was still illegal in half the states (Obama 10; *Loving v. Virginia*; Cott). Even after the Voting Rights Act of 1965—the product of another watershed election, LBJ's landslide over Barry Goldwater—civil rights activists were still sacrificing their lives for the basic right to vote (Belknap, chap.10).

Some of the worst violence took place in my mother's home state of Mississippi (McMillen). My grandmother Lucretia recalls that her father, a Methodist minister, participated in ethnic cleansing. He helped "drive the blacks out of Amite County," she says. She herself was later driven out of the state's capital, Jackson, because my grandfather wrote a letter to the editor in favor of integration. Never did she imagine, growing up in "the darkest corner" of the South, that she would one day, in her nineties, push her walker into an integrated polling station in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi—a town that had been destroyed three years earlier by Hurricane Katrina, a news event that cast American race relations in a decidedly different light—and pull the lever for a black man...and that he would win (Fly).

Race in the Campaign

Although for at least 200 of America's 232-year history, African Americans were denied the most basic human rights, the lanky senator from Illinois emphasized race only reluctantly in the campaign. When confronted with video of his pastor's pulpit bombast, he delivered perhaps the most sophisticated address on race by a major U.S. politician since the days of Lyndon Johnson ("Barack Obama's Speech on Race"). But otherwise he treaded cautiously.

To legitimate his national prospects, he bet his primary bid on Iowa, a virtually all-white state (Remnick). To distance himself from traditional civil rights leaders, he lectured black audiences about personal responsibility and chided black fathers for neglecting their children ("Obama's Focus Is Responsibility"; "Obama's Father's Day Speech"). To counter stereotypes, he wore only starched white shirts and stolid ties—more like a banker than a rapper; his wife Michelle fondly recalled watching the "Brady Bunch" and the "Dick Van Dyke Show," nostalgic emblems of white suburbia ("Convention Speech: Craig Robinson"; Gibbs). In speeches, he rarely dwelled on black grievances, and when he did, he wrapped them up in the hardships of women, veterans, and poor whites (Obama's remarks at the Democratic National Convention). He universalized.

To burnish but not brandish the historical significance of his campaign, Obama developed his own brand of race coding, normally the nefarious provenance of white conservatives. He drew upon the cadences and transcendent rhetoric of the black

church, but flattened the melody, tightened the syllables, and, as the campaign progressed, employed fewer messianic metaphors. At the conclusion of every crescendo, he called not for deliverance but national unity.

In his Chicago victory speech, for example, he implicitly celebrated his ascension as the culmination of the civil rights movement: "Is there anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible?" The question hung in the nighttime air, referencing a century of black freedom struggle, but after a pregnant pause, Obama provided a safe, unifying answer. The voters in all their diversity, he said, "sent a message to the world that we have never been a collection of Red States and Blue States: we are, and always will be, the United States of America" ("Obama's Victory Speech"). The potentially divisive colors of race thus faded into the aestheticized colors of CNN's wall map; the possibility of black power eclipsed by a paean to patriotism.

From the start, Obama—who grew up in liminal, multicultural Hawai'i, as Barry not Barack, and who struggled as an adult to fit his multi-hued, multi-continental background into conventional racial binaries—knew that if he became the black candidate for president instead of an inspirational candidate who happened to be black, he would lose (Obama; Remnick).

His opponents, likewise, recognized that if they could exoticize and darken Obama's image and ghettoize his appeal, they might profit in white votes: Hence Bill Clinton's invocation of Jesse Jackson in South Carolina ("Clinton Camp"). Hence the specter of the black rapist in Hillary's 3 am phone call ad (Patterson). Hence the whiff of miscegenation in McCain's Paris Hilton-Obama celebrity comparison ("Sex Celebs").

Ever since Richard Nixon perfected the "southern strategy"—which allowed Republicans to seize the previously "solid South" and fracture the Democrats' New Deal-Great Society coalition; which contorted the party of Lincoln into the party of states' rights—conservative politicians have won elections by nursing prejudices and rousing fears, not by hollering racial epithets as Dixie demagogues once did but by focusing on blue-collar disempowerment, wasteful welfare spending, and especially urban crime (Perlstein; Carter; Beckett). A decisive moment in Bush the Father's presidential campaign was an advertisement that condemned Michael Dukakis for releasing on furlough a black rapist of white women, Willie Horton (Mayer chap. 9).

McCain himself had been skewered similarly in his first presidential bid, when Bush supporters spread rumors that he had fathered a black child out

of wedlock (in fact, he and his wife had adopted a dark-skinned child from Bangladesh) (Davis). As a consequence, McCain, more than previous national GOP candidates, disavowed the politics of fear and smear. But as he sank in the polls, buried under Bush's rubble and undermined by his own maverick impetuosity, he picked up Tricky Dick's playbook and ran with it.

His vice presidential pick, Sarah Palin accused Obama of "palling around with terrorists" (Palin Hits Obama). His campaign mascot, "Joe the Plumber," was supposed to symbolize the demographic Hillary Clinton had called "hard-working Americans, white Americans" (Smalley). Through surrogates, viral emails, and paid advertisements, McCain's campaign and its open-source allies depicted Barack Hussein Obama as, in turn, un-American, anti-American, Muslim, terrorist sympathizing, criminal coddling, as a socialist, as a Nazi, as a child molester and the anti-Christ (Silverstein; Kristof; Vedantam A10; "Giuliani Gets Tough"; Meckler and Davis; "Pennsylvania GOP disavows"; Kolawole; Watson). The GOP's all-white campaign rallies increasingly conjured the ghost of George Wallace, as congressperson John Lewis pointed out, and in the closing days candidate McCain asked ominously, "Who is the real Barack Obama"? (Lewis; Rich "Terrorist"; Dowd)

That none of this worked is nothing short of astonishing: testament to Bush's toxic incumbency; to McCain's lurching, incoherent campaign; to Obama's no-drama discipline; but also to the newcomer's faith, recalling Dr. King's, in what he calls "the decency and generosity of the American people" ("Barack Obama's Speech on Race").

Before the election, there was much hand-wringing about the so-called "Bradley effect," in which white voters supposedly overstated their support for black candidates to hide their bigotry from pollsters (Zernike; "Poll"). But on election day, according to exit polls, a higher percentage of whites voted for Obama than had for John Kerry or Al Gore. Jews, Catholics, Hispanics, and especially African Americans, meanwhile, flocked to Obama in record numbers. Asian Americans coalesced around a Democrat as never before, as did young people generally ("Exit Polls"; Zernike and Sussman). Only the white South stayed solidly with McCain, though in a way that signaled the region's retreat from dominance to marginality (Nossiter; Rich "Moose").

All of this suggests that Obama put together not just a winning coalition but a renewable one. By 2050, according to census estimates, the United States will cease to be a majority-white country ("An Older and More Diverse Nation"). This means not just that the term "minority" will lose its present meaning in American racial discourse but that the

national electorate will start to look a lot like Obama's gigantic database of donors.

The potential, therefore, is that Obama's victory is not just significant but paradigm shifting, that the United States is on the verge of a major political realignment akin to those that began in 1932, for the Left, and 1968, for the Right. Just as historians bookend the New Deal consensus with FDR and LBJ, the conservative counterrevolution could be bookended by Nixon and Bush. "Change has come to America," the President-Elect exulted on November 4 ("Obama's Victory Speech"). It could be regime change.

Legacy of the Counterrevolution

Obama may well turn out to be a transformational president, but as he pointed out in his first post-election press conference, no one should "underestimate the enormity of the task that lies ahead" ("President Elect Obama"). His administration will have to contend not only with two intractable wars and a molten financial crisis but the legacy of a conservative counterrevolution that has fundamentally reshaped American governance—and with long-lasting social effects (Frank). What was, in the postwar period, a country dominated by the middle class has become, increasingly, the mirror image of the Third World, a society of haves and have nots (Krugman). Over the past generation, average real wages in the United States have declined and basic measures of inequality have widened (Lardner and Smith; Berliner). Thanks largely to deunionization, regressive tax policies, and a substantial shift in health and pension risk from corporations and governments to individuals, middle and working-class families in the United States have become less financially secure, especially now that consumer credit, heretofore the principal means of overcoming stagnation, has dried up (Johnston; Hacker; Reich; Krugman).

Those at the top of America's increasingly steep economic hierarchy, by contrast, have made out like barons. Between 1972 and 2001, the top tenth of one percent of American households saw their incomes rise by 181 percent (Tabb). Over the same period, the ratio of CEO to average worker salaries has grown from 27 to nearly 300 (Mishel, Bernstein and Shierholz). In 2007, Fortune 500 execs took home on average \$14.2 million ("2007 Trends in CEO pay").

At the end of the twentieth century, therefore, just as at the end of the nineteenth, we have seen the rise of a new Gilded Age, complete with plutocratic politics and jarring juxtapositions between opulence and misery, between tricked-out private 767s and ubiquitous homeless encampments.

This hegemony of unfettered corporate capitalism, known as neoliberalism outside the United States, has not arrested African-American development in the post-civil rights era. During the conservative counterrevolution, African Americans managed to make significant strides in household income, educational attainment, and, until this year, home ownership.

The rate of progress, especially when compared to whites, however, has been painfully slow. At the present rate of convergence, for example, it will take 581 years for blacks to catch up to whites in per capita income; equal home ownership will take more than a millennium (Muhammad et al.; Daniels). Even as the country celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the landmark school desegregation case, *Brown v. Board of Education* in 2004, it was clear that the country remained significantly separate and unequal.

Race and the Prison Boom

In one prominent arena, the United States has actually moved backwards from the elusive promise of racial equality: criminal justice. What sociologists are calling "mass imprisonment," in fact, has emerged as a new pillar of American exceptionalism (Whitman; Abramsky).

Imprisonment in America is distinguished by scale, severity, and discriminatory impact. Until the early 1970s, the United States incarcerated its citizens at roughly the same rate as other industrial democracies, about 100 per 100,000 or 0.1 percent (Mauer 17). In the aftermath of the civil rights movement, however—as crime became a political proxy for race and as merciless sentencing policies came into vogue—per capita incarceration climbed by 600 percent (Pastore and Maguire Table 6.13.2007). Today, approximately 1 out of every 100 adults is locked up in the United States, a proportion unrivaled even by the harshest dictatorships (Warren).

In absolute terms, the U.S. has built the largest incarceration apparatus in the world. At last count, more than 2.3 million Americans were living behind bars (West and Sabol; Sabol and Minton). That's more than the populations of Boston, Washington, and San Francisco combined; 500,000 more than the prisoner count in China, an authoritarian state with four times the citizen base ("Top 50 Cities"; Walmsley). Even as Obama affirms that "America's beacon still burns bright," therefore, his country is denying liberty to its people on a scale never before seen in the history of modern democracy ("Obama's Victory Speech").

To an extraordinary extent, America's imprisonment boom has been concentrated among young men of color, especially African Americans

(Nellis, Greene and Mauer). Although blacks and latinos make up less than a fourth of the U.S. population, they fill approximately 60 percent of the prison beds ("Race and Hispanic Origin in 2005"; West and Sabol). One expects such disproportionately to be slowly fading away as Jim Crow withers, but the opposite is true. A half century ago, before the victories of the civil rights movement, African Americans were incarcerated at roughly four times the rate of whites. Today, they go to jail and prison at eight times the rate of whites, a development unexplainable by changing crime patterns (Langan; Gibson and Jung; West and Sabol; Sabol and Minton).

When you slice the demographics by gender, class, and education, the disparities grow even starker. A solid majority of young black men who fail to graduate from secondary school can now expect to go to prison in their lifetimes (Western 27). Already a third of young black men in urban areas are under some sort of criminal justice supervision, such that arrest, conviction, and incarceration have become normal if involuntary state-sponsored rites of passage (Mauer and Huling). So pervasive has imprisonment become in poor urban neighborhoods that key gains of the civil rights and even the Reconstruction generations are fading away, including mass voting rights, equal economic opportunity, educational access, and family cohesion (Western; Roberts; Mauer and Chesney-Lind). By these measures, in contradiction to Obama's meteoric ascent, black America is not overcoming but is being overcome.

Conclusions

So what meaning might we glean from this paradoxical pivot in U.S. race relations, in which the country seems to be moving in two directions at once, in which America has cast off the shackles of history to make a black man the most powerful person on earth while at the same time depriving more black men of their freedom than at any time since Emancipation?

It's too early to say definitively. But for scholars and teachers who specialize in American culture and society, I do think we can identify some basic points of departure.

In many ways, the election reinforces trends already underway in the academy. Obama's hybridity, as well as the waning racial identification of young people, suggests that the transition from

separate race studies to comparative ethnic studies is worth advancing.

As importantly, the disjuncture between the symbolism of post-racial triumph and the worsening reality of social stratification urges us to pay more attention to class as a category of analysis than has been fashionable in recent years, including the workings of class within racial and ethnic groups (Michaels).

Gender matters too. In the case of social equality, for instance, we have seen the race gap narrow for women and statistically close for women with four-year college degrees, even as disparities widen among men clustered along the bottom rungs of the economy ("Holding a Four-Year College Degree"). Such evidence suggests that a feminized version of the "talented tenth" could become more socially significant than the singular achievements of standout individuals (Du Bois "Talented Tenth"; Patterson).

In politics more generally, there is indeed the possibility that this election could be pivotal—especially if, perhaps only if, systemic divisions and gaping historical wounds are seriously addressed. In his oratory, Obama embraces the possibility of far-reaching change. "This is our moment," he proclaims, "to put our people back to work and open doors of opportunity for our kids; to restore prosperity and promote the cause of peace; to reclaim the American Dream and reaffirm that fundamental truth—that out of many, we are one" ("Obama's Victory Speech").

A tall order—several of them. But if the new president, at the front of a new bottom-up coalition, is able to enact much of his agenda from the wreckage of the Bush administration; if the politics of the possible can eclipse the politics of accommodation; if the promises of the New Deal can be, at last, fused to the promises of civil rights, then we could see a new chapter in American history open before us—certainly a new chapter in the history of U.S. race relations (Jones).

In 1903, Du Bois predicted in the *Souls of Black Folk* that the problem of the twentieth century would be the problem of the color line (Du Bois The Souls of Black Folk 1). The prophesy held true, but it needn't extend through another century. Whether or not it does may well depend on developments over the next eight, four, even two years; on whether or not the spectacular breakthrough of an extraordinary presidential candidate can be translated into genuine social transformation. I, for one, hope we can.

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