

What Obama's Victory Means About Race and Class

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THERE WAS EUPHORIA in every Black community household November 4. High fives and tears of joy. No one could believe it. It didn't matter Obama's politics. A Black man had won! The election of the first Black president of the United States has a dual meaning: social and political.

Not just African Americans cheered: The crowd at Chicago's Grant Park was multiethnic — whites, Blacks, Latinos and Asians, all together. Obama's victory was overwhelming (two to one in the Electoral College) and more than seven million votes over his Republican challenger.

On January 20, the day Obama is sworn in as president, some two or three million or more people are expected in Washington, D.C. Every Black person would like to be present. Fae Robinson from State College, Pennsylvania, who attended the famous 1963 March on Washington where Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream" speech, put it on the night of Obama's victory: "I told everybody, 'I'm going.' I don't have to have a ticket. I just want to be somewhere close. I have to be there. Just to be there is going to be overwhelming."

The social meaning is obvious. When Barack and Michelle Obama and their two girls walk into the White House on January 20, it will mark an event that few if any Black American of the civil rights era thought possible.

Guests at the White House

The White House was built by Black men and women (most were slaves). They were invisible to the founding fathers, even those who professed opposition to slavery.

Frederick Douglass, the 19th Century Black Abolitionist, visited President Abraham Lincoln three times at the White House. Yet he was never invited in to sleep as a guest. After Lincoln's second inauguration and an open house to the public, Douglass was turned away at the door because of a standing order that Blacks were not allowed to enter for the celebration.

In the 1930s when first lady Eleanor Roosevelt invited Black guests to the White House, which she did often, the press sharply criticized her. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the great liberal, however, never invited an African American to stay the night.

Presidents Kennedy and Johnson at the height of the civil rights battles never dared invite Martin

Luther King Jr., or other civil rights figures, to sleep as guests at the White House. These "friends of civil rights" clearly didn't want to cross their Dixiecrats in the South and bigots in the North.

Amazingly it was President Richard Nixon in 1973 who invited the first African-American guests, Sammy Davis Jr. and his wife, to sleep in the White House. (Davis turned down the Lincoln room out of respect of the "Great Emancipator.")

So it is not surprising that most Americans, including socialists, prior to the victory of the civil rights movement, did not believe it possible that a Black man could ever be elected president. It was a common view before the overthrow of Jim Crow that the end of legal segregation would take a violent confrontation with if not the overthrow of the government.

The dirty pact between the slaveholders and manufacturing capitalists at the founding of the United States (to delay an immediate breakup of the new country) created a defective Republic. Slavery was not mentioned in the U.S. Constitution. Black people were not part of "we the people" much less citizens in the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution.

Karl Marx wrote later that the seeds of the Great Civil War were planted at the founding of the United States. Marxists supported the capitalist North in that war with arms in hand to defeat the slaveholders, although some socialists of the day believed that a war between opposing property owners was not "our" war.

Similar debates occurred during the fight for equality after the rise of Jim Crow segregation. Since full equality was not possible under capitalism, should the focus be on "working-class unity" and not taking on racist views of white workers? Socialists understood that the fight for equality even led by liberals was a battle that they had to be in and actively support.

When Blacks finally won the vote and could be elected to public office, supporters of independent politics, including socialists, supported many of those campaigns even though we knew their election to office would not end racism. The issue was the democratic right to hold any public office, which both major parties had prevented up to the adoption of the 1964-5 Civil and Voting Rights Acts.

Context and Symbolic Significance

In view of that history, the November 4 election of an African-American father (a bi-racial Black man) as president marks the highest electoral point of the post-civil rights revolution. This is the historical context of Obama's election victory. For the Black community it is not about Democrat versus Republican, lesser evilism or anything else. (Even the first Black female Republican Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice choked up the day after Obama's win).

For most African Americans, including myself, Obama's election is first and foremost an unprecedented victory — a blow against 400 years of Black slavery, legal segregation and institutional racism. I watched the returns on November 4 with similar emotions that other Blacks expressed in rural towns and major cities. I knew history was being made and cheered Obama's win being announced as the California polls closed.

Did this mean I think Obama is the answer to racism and Black self-determination? No. Blacks are realists about what his victory represents.

I know, as many others know, that Obama's party represents everything I oppose. I agree with Malcolm X (assassinated in 1965) who said that the road to full Black equality is impossible under the monopoly of the twin parties of capitalism. Malcolm, however, understood the power of the mass

civil rights movement and preached the need for Black unity, self-reliance, alliances and Black power.

Obama's victory, more than symbolic, represents a change in attitudes. But the symbolism in and of itself is powerful, because of the country's racist history. It is that symbolism that every African American understands, including many of those on the right. It is also that symbolism that inspires the oppressed in every imperialist country — from London. Paris, Frankfurt to Sydney and Tokyo.

The question is: what follows?

Blacks will give Obama a long honeymoon. They have high hopes that he will bring real change, but there are few illusions. Blacks continue to suffer twice the unemployment rates as whites. Blacks have the worse housing and schools. More young Black men are in prison than in college. There is institutional discrimination on every level of society.

But even if Obama in the White House doesn't do much for the Black community directly, it means something to have a Black family running the place.

Beyond Race?

What does Obama's election tell us about race and a "post-racial" America?

Race does matter but it is not what it was even 20 years ago.

I grew up in Detroit in the 1960s in a segregated environment. By the 1980s with years of white flight, Detroit became a basically Black city. The suburbs are where most white auto workers live. The term "Reagan Democrats" applied to these workers, who didn't like the changes brought by the civil rights movement. They felt that Blacks had gained privileges they did not have.

Before the election the media focused on these white workers identified as "bigoted" and unable to vote for a Black man to be president. The Republicans believed it and ran blatantly racist ads in areas like Macomb County, which is near Detroit. It had worked for over 20 years.

It didn't work this time. Stanley Greenberg, a Democratic pollster, wrote in the New York Times, "Before the Democratic convention, nearly 40 percent of Macomb County voters were 'comfortable' with the idea of Mr. Obama as president, far below the number who were comfortable with a nameless Democrat. But on Election Day, nearly 60 percent said they were 'comfortable' with Mr. Obama. About the same number said Mr. Obama 'shares your values' and 'has what it takes to be president.'"

From 1972-1988, the Democratic presidential candidates running in Oakland County (also next door to Detroit), lost the election by 20 points. In 2008 Obama won the county by 57% to 42%.

The economy clearly trumped race and racism. But more than that, race baiting failed because many of these workers have children who supported a Black man and told their parents so. Even in southern states Obama lost, he did better than most expected. He won North Carolina, Virginia (home of the old Confederacy) and Florida.

Reverse Bradley Effect

Not to recognize the evolution of attitudes since the 1960s is to deny reality. While gains in

affirmative action have been pushed back and many positive programs that helped Blacks and other minorities no longer exist, the number of minorities in elected office is the highest ever. The number of Black executives and size of the Black middle class is unprecedented.

The “Bradley effect” (whites and others saying they would vote for a Black in public then deciding not to) was a negligible factor in the election. In fact I now believe a reverse Bradley effect occurred when many demonstrably voted for Obama to make a point against bigotry.

While some may dismiss these societal changes in racial attitudes as simply a reflection of economic insecurity, in previous hard economic times playing the race card worked. The same has occurred when anti-immigrant demagoguery was used to confuse many working people and led them to vote against their own self-interests. Republicans won many elections in the past by convincing white workers that their loss of jobs and opportunities was because of “special rights” supposedly granted to Blacks.

The change of attitudes on race are particularly seen among the younger generations — those born after the victory of the civil rights movement. In general they (all races) are less racist than their parents’ and grandparents’ generations.

Yet it is wrong to think Obama’s election means the country has gone “beyond race.” We aren’t in a post-racial “color blind” country. Racism and bigotry, and institutional racism, still exist. What Obama’s win does is encourage all minorities in whatever fields they pursue to believe more is possible.

There is a psychological change in the population that can’t be fully quantified. But it is genuine. Unless there is a legal (and likely violent) reversal of these gains — and I’m not talking only about programs like affirmative action, but advances in social and political consciousness — the heightened self-confidence over time will expand throughout the Black and minority populations. It is widely reported that non-white ethnic minorities as a whole will become a majority of the population by 2050.

Until the victory of the civil rights revolution and the gains won afterwards, it was common to believe in “two Americas” — Black and white. While that is still broadly true, it is more accurate to say that the class disparities — the divide between capital and labor — will become more pronounced as the minorities in the middle and upper classes gain more prominence and power.

Race will still play a unique role within both capital and labor. What’s new is that the rising minority upper class will be more integrated into the corporate, political and government/state structures. The class dynamics, in this evolving social context, will become sharper within these oppressed communities.

It is not that any Black man or woman (or of any ethnic group) can do what Obama did as a standard bearer for a major party. The first time, however, is why the success of the rising Black privileged class is seen as a positive model to the Black community. But that example can’t resolve issues of discrimination in jobs, housing and education equality.

On the one hand, the great excitement of the “first-time” election of a Black president — this unique moment — changes all discussions of race. On the other, it means that the democratic socialist vision of how to permanently end racism and confront the broad crisis of capitalism can get a broader hearing.

The debates and discussions about race and class going forward will surely be more complex and profound than any we’ve seen to date.

P.S.

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