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LIFT THE LOAD OF POVERTY

Fighting for Black Equality in the Age of Obama

By James Jennings

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The Myth of a Post-Racial America

During the summer of 2013, the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Trayvon Martin's killer was acquitted by a Florida jury, and Detroit became the largest city in the United States ever to declare bankruptcy. While the election and re-election of the nation's first Black president certainly signals a positive change in American society, it does not mean that race and racism are a thing of the past. To the contrary, all social indicators, including unemployment, household wealth, and the segregation of schools, show that the United States continues to be a racially divided country—"separate and unequal" as ever.

The Supreme Court's 5-4 decision to render the Voting Rights Act's "pre-clearance" requirements inoperable comes amid increasing efforts to keep people of color, poor and working-class people, as well as young people away from the polls. Without the protections of the Voting Rights Act, conservatives can be expected to continue their efforts to keep their most reliable opponents away from the voting booth, effectively shifting the electorate to the right.

The tragic death of Trayvon Martin demonstrates that racially motivated attacks are not yet a thing of the past, but the failure to hold his killer accountable also illustrates the racism and moral bankruptcy of the U.S. criminal justice system. Racial bias pervades every layer of this system. People of color—Black men in particular—are more likely to be stopped by police, more likely to be prosecuted, more likely to be convicted, and more likely to be sent to prison. The end result is an unprecedented system of mass incarceration, but even without the overflowing prisons, a felony conviction is a permanent stigma that can prevent people from finding a job; voting; or accessing educational aid, public housing, and other state and federal benefits.

Detroit's bankruptcy marks the suspension of democracy in a large majority-Black city. It is one endpoint of the patterns of abandonment and gentrification that have been reshaping American cities for decades. The decline of manufacturing in the United States and white flight hit Detroit particularly hard. The factories that once provided decent jobs to many people with limited formal education are gone. Combined with the departure of the middle class, Detroit has been left without the tax base necessary to meet its obligations and serve its residents. Detroit may be an extreme case, but wider economic trends have been little better. For Black America, the Great Recession has been a depression, and the recovery has not yet begun.

In this report, James Jennings, Professor of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning at Tufts University, examines the current state of the struggle for Black equality. Despite overwhelming support from Black voters and other voters of color, President Obama has largely remained silent on issues of racial equality. There remain numerous obstacles to addressing persistent racial inequality, but there are also spaces of hope where new alliances are forming that can address both the racial and class dimensions of this inequality. Jennings calls on us to nurture these struggles in order to bring together those at the bottom of the economic pyramid in a collective struggle for their shared interests, including quality education and healthcare, a healthy environment, decent housing, and living-wage jobs. The fight for racial justice continues.

*Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg
Co-Directors of New York Office, July 2013*

Lift the Load of Poverty

Fighting for Black Equality in the Age of Obama

By James Jennings

Following the election and re-election of the first Black President of the United States, many pundits and scholars have argued that the country has entered into a post-racial stage. That is to say that the color of people and the fact that millions of Americans are Black is not as significant as it was in earlier periods. This discourse has troubling implications for continuing struggles for Black equality. Barack Obama's electoral victories are cited as evidence that racism is a thing of the past, even if a few instances of racial animosity remain. In other words, a few incidents of racial violence here and there or national surveys reporting continuing expressions of racist attitudes are but aberrations confirming a new normalcy of racial reconciliation.

Conveniently for powerful corporate interests, the post-racial narrative is silent regarding the accumulation and management of wealth and its growing concentration among the super-rich. This story renders an entrenched racial hierarchy invisible and insignificant and ignores the widening divide between the haves, near-have-nots, and have-nots. It ignores the white skin privileges that reflect whiteness as "normal." It fails to explain how whiteness is not enough of an economic buffer for this country's poor and working-class white people, and it forgets the history of struggles against inequality and how they have expanded social justice throughout the world.

With both liberal and conservative politicians insisting that race is no longer significant, it is ironic that in some circles even the call for racial

equality is considered divisive. More than a few social scientists have even called for keeping "the divisive ideal of racial justice" out of the public discourse, lest this diminish white support for liberal causes.¹ Conservative commentators—joined by some liberals—take umbrage at the suggestion that racism even exists in this society. They even go further and present any talk of racism as irresponsible and associated with self-serving trouble-makers. Conservative radio and television hosts, including Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Bill O'Reilly, Ann Coulter, and others, many appearing regularly on Fox News, regularly repeat this mantra. All this in spite of the fact that under the cover of claimed post-racialism, right-wing elements have orchestrated massive attacks on likely liberal and progressive voters by restricting voter registration, suppressing voter turnout, and otherwise making it more difficult for them to vote, keeping as many working-class people outside of the electoral arena as possible.²

Conservatives—again, accompanied by liberal acquiescence—have used the last two presidential elections to numb calls for racial democracy and equality. This has emboldened forces attempting to roll back democracy and equality, especially for Black people. William Boone of Clark-Atlanta University, an activist who has

1 On the liberal side, see Paul M. Sniderman and Edward G. Carmines (1997). *Reaching beyond race*. Harvard University Press; on the conservative side, Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom (1997). *America in black and white: One nation, indivisible*. Simon and Schuster: New York.

2 For an overview, see James P. Hare, "Steal the Vote: Voter Suppression in the Twenty-first Century," October 2012, www.rosalux-nyc.org.

been involved in struggles for fair housing in Atlanta, Georgia, notes that although Obama's elections,

signal a positive radical change in the country's racial progress, the reality is that this perception

serves to perpetuate established paradigms that determine what questions are raised regarding the status of the struggle for racial equality. [...] His election in some instances stifles discussions and actions on issues confronting the black community.³

Obama's "Post-Racial" Politics

President Obama continues to enjoy overwhelming support in the Black community, but Cornel West is not a lonely activist in showing anger regarding what he sees as Obama's complicity with this approach to Black inequality and his lack of leadership in confronting racial inequality. A number of Black intellectuals and activists have accused Obama of implicitly accepting the proposal that race talk should be avoided. Peniel Joseph, an historian and author of several books on the U.S. Black Power Movement, has criticized the President's preferred method for addressing racial inequality, that is: *don't talk about it*. According to Joseph, this is reflected in the President's second inaugural address. Joseph observed that while receiving overwhelming support from African American voters, Obama has emerged as the major "muter" regarding racial and class inequalities, remaining quiet about potential strategies to respond to African Americans' persistent lower living conditions in the areas of poverty, health, housing, and employment. He noted the irony of this situation given that the President received astoundingly high Black voter support in terms of both vote share and turnout.⁴

By the same token, the 2008 presidential election marked the culmination of a trend in Black politics that started in the late 1980s. The "old guard" of Black elected officials from the civil rights generation had come from Black majority districts. They would thus define their politics, to a large degree, as being representatives of and

spokespeople for the Black community. Beginning in the late 1980s, some of a younger generation of African American politicians running in white majority districts (or cities) downplayed their racial identity and affiliation with institutions in the Black community. They favored a "de-racialized" approach to politics and refused to act as spokespersons of the Black community—a shift that came to be labeled "post-Black politics," and later "post-racial politics."⁵ These new Black politicians have been "just as likely to see themselves as ambassadors to the black community as they are to see themselves as spokesmen for it."⁶ Barack Obama is the most prominent but—as Newark mayor Cory Booker, Philadelphia mayor Michael Nutter, and many others prove—by no means the only example of a "post-racial" politician.

To be sure, some measure of Obama's 2012 re-election support probably has to do with racially tinged campaigns and rhetoric on the part of the Republican Party and its Tea Party wing. The Tea Party faction scared even moderate Republicans into thinking that they could ignore African Americans and their voting power. The Black community retaliated emphatically to a

3 Email correspondence with William Boone, April 8, 2013.

4 Peniel Joseph, "President Barack Obama re-elected," *Basic Black*, Boston: WGBH, 2012, www.wgbh.org/basic-black/index.cfm.

5 Manning Marable, *Beyond Black and White: Transforming African-American Politics*, Verso: London and New York, 1995, pp. 205ff.

6 Matt Bai, "Is Obama the End of Black Politics?" *New York Times Magazine*, August 6, 2008.

point where its turnout (66%) surpassed that of white turnout (64.1%) for the first time in the nation's history.⁷ In spite of this caveat, it is still justified to ask what African Americans have gained from their key vote guaranteeing victories for President Obama.

One Black conservative radio host, Raynard Jackson, notes that given overwhelming Black voter support, the President gets away with not responding to or even discussing Black needs, simply because he is Black. Jackson quips that in the face of catastrophic unemployment rates and violence in some Black communities, why is there,

One standard for a Black president and another one for a white one? Should we not be marching on the White House regardless of color, if Black unemployment is double digits? Should we not be marching on the White House when more than 500 Blacks have been killed in Chicago (and many of them young children) and a sitting president barely mentions it publically?⁸

The Neoliberal Continuum

Obama has not focused at all on Black inequality, at least not directly. Instead, he has embraced neoliberalism as the framework for responding to racial inequality.⁹ His neoliberalism includes calls for more pro-corporate international trade accords, greater freedom for capital mobility, downsizing the social welfare state, class supremacy via Wall Street's economic policies, and cutting the deficit rather than investing in jobs programs, which would benefit low-income and working-class people. He justifies this framework by asserting that it

will benefit everyone, including Blacks. Peace activist and former Mayor of Berkeley, California, Gus Newport describes Obama as continuing the centrist policies pursued by former President Bill Clinton, especially with regards to social welfare policy related to race.¹⁰

The administration has sought to justify its tepid approach to social justice by arguing that the Republican Party's control of the House of Representatives limits the President's options. Under this proposed scenario, Obama is advocating reduced Social Security benefits and has proposed budgets with diminished support for the local and community-level initiatives that provide health, housing, and employment assistance for vulnerable populations. The White House is blaming the Republican Party for its failure to prioritize or fight for racial equality, jobs, and the basic bread and butter issues that are important to millions of Americans, but the Republicans should not bear all the blame for this situation. Essentially, President Obama pursues neoliberal policies while adhering to the rhetoric of social justice. This is why the Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz described the President's second inaugural speech as "soaring language to reaffirm America's commitment to the dream of equality of opportunity" but added that the "gap between aspiration and reality could hardly be wider."¹¹

Bill Fletcher, the former President of TransAfrica Forum and author of several books on labor, opines that there is nothing surprising here. Fletcher has written extensively regarding Obama's favoritism towards Wall Street. Even the President's call for higher corporate taxes is in line with Wall Street's view of the nature of economic problems and required solutions. This might be expected given that many of the President's senior economic policy appointments come directly from Wall Street

7 U. S. Census Bureau, "The Diversifying Electorate—Voting Rates by Race and Hispanic Origin in 2012 (and Other Recent Elections)," Population Characteristics, Current Population Survey, May 2013.

8 Raynard Jackson, on the blog *BlackPressUSA*, January 21, 2013.

9 See James Jennings, Three Visions for the Future: The Real Election is for America's Soul, October 2012, www.rosalux-nyc.org.

10 Interview with Eugene "Gus" Newport, April 16, 2013.

11 *The New York Times*, February 16, 2013.

and powerful corporations. Fletcher has noted that while Obama presents himself as a mediator between corporate power and the middle-class and even the dispossessed, his positions in fact follow Wall Street's glorification of the free market and corporate wealth.¹²

It is logical for those defending corporate power and wealth to resist attention to continuing racial inequality. Calls for racial justice could emerge as an oppositional force challenging the government's role in the concentration of wealth and could trigger progressive coalitions targeting militaristic foreign policies aimed at building global and corporate power. This kind of development would not be new. Coalitions based on the racial and class agendas of

working-class people emerged in earlier periods to challenge power and wealth. W.E.B. Du Bois' classic *Black Reconstruction* (1935) details a class-based cross-racial coalition among former slaves and poor whites, which emerged in the South during the post-Civil War Reconstruction period. The Southern Bourbon class composed of former slavers and plantation owners, however, was deeply threatened by this growing coalition and sought to stop it with violence and racial fear mongering. In another instance, decades later, it was an assassination that stopped Martin Luther King, Jr., from mobilizing a national coalition among people of color and poor whites and that was supposed to culminate in a massive poor people's march on Washington, DC, in 1968.

Continuing Racial Inequality

Treating race as if it no longer matters continually bumps into a reality: persistent and growing racial inequality in the United States. By considering just two facts, it becomes clear how myopic it is to view Obama's electoral victories as the arrival of a post-racial society: extensive racial inequality along material dimensions and political resistance to strategies for addressing inequality, even on the part of many impoverished and working-class white people, who are also hurt by continuing racial inequality.

Class, Poverty, and Unemployment

Pervasive racial inequality and growing concentrations of wealth have been documented extensively. United for a Fair Economy's (UFE) annual *State of the Dream* report shows per-

sistent racial and ethnic gaps in areas such as unemployment, public education, imprisonment, continual racial profiling and monitoring, and health and housing conditions. UFE's most recent report emphasizes that racial gaps in these areas are actually growing, not shrinking. These findings are consistent with a plethora of reports and studies examining racial equality in this country.¹³

Poverty is a significant economic experience for many Americans. According to federal figures, 13.1% of all American families were officially poor in 2011. Half the 3,500 counties in the nation report poverty rates between 16 and 33 percent. But poverty is a modal social and economic experience for millions of Blacks. In 2011, the poverty rate for Black people was reported at 27.6%. For Latinos, it was 25.3%. For whites, it was 9.8%. For decades, the propor-

¹² Bill Fletcher, Jr., "What happened? Obama, demobilization, and the challenge of the 2012 elections." *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, 14 (1-2), 2012.

¹³ United for a Fair Economy, *State of the Dream 2013: A Long Way From Home*, faireconomy.org/dream.

tion of Black individuals and families and poverty has hovered around one third of the total. The poverty ratio between Blacks and whites is three to one—just as it was in 1959, 1979, and 1999.

This persistent racialized social order can be found in other arenas affecting Black life. For decades, the unemployment rate for Blacks has been about twice the rate for whites, and this has not changed at all during the Obama administration. Even when adjusted for factors of gender, education, and age, African Americans face much higher unemployment rates than whites. During the Great Recession, these rates rose much faster for African Americans than for whites, and during the recovery, white unemployment rates have started to fall even as they have continued to rise for many Black groups.¹⁴

Similar statistics can be seen in the case of underemployment. Based on a review of federal Bureau of Labor Statistics data, Reginald Clark has shown that since 2009 the underemployment rate has dropped significantly for Latinos (from 15% to 12%), whites (from 10% to 8%), and Asian Americans (from 8% to 6%). Only African Americans have seen increasing underemployment rates (from 16% to 20%). He concludes that Black treatment under President Obama's policies is consistent with a racial hierarchy in which this group consistently comes in last in any improvement in living conditions.¹⁵

Martin Luther King, Jr., believed poverty to be a major charge for African American freedom struggles. But for him, poverty was not a behavioral problem. People are not poor due to their unwillingness to work, or because the govern-

ment dole has made them lazy or incompetent to advance themselves economically, or—as implied in Obama's speeches to Black audiences—because Black men simply don't take responsibility for their children and their communities.

Obama has repeatedly reiterated this notion, and he has reinforced it by focusing not on structural inequality or racism but rather on the need for Black people to lift themselves up by their bootstraps. This is the same approach proposed by Booker T. Washington more than a century ago and not at all what King suggested. King faced issues of ownership, management, and distribution of wealth head on. He asked, "Who owns the oil? Who owns the iron ore? Who owns the water?" And he answered, "The capitalists." Therefore, he suggested, "the Movement must address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of American society."¹⁶ A few months later, he argued that,

The dispossessed of this nation—the poor, both white and Negro—live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize a revolution against the injustice, not against the lives of the persons who are their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing to take means which have been called for, and which are at hand, to lift the load of poverty. There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life.¹⁷

Here, King places poverty within historical class and racial inequalities and within a system that sustains these inequalities. For King, the antidote to poverty is nonviolent political struggle against racial and class hierarchy.

King's analysis and prescription is at odds with those who see inequality as a problem of pa-

14 Christian E. Weller and Jaryn Fields, *The Black and White Labor Gap in America*, Center for American Progress, July 25, 2011.

15 Reginald Clark, "The Expansion of Black American Misery under Barack Obama's Watch," *Black Agenda Report: News, commentary & analysis from the black left*, February 19, 2013.

16 Martin Luther King, "Where do we go from here?" Speech at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Atlanta, GA, August 16, 1967.

17 Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Trumpet of Consciousness*, Beacon Press: Boston, 1968.

thology—in the 1960s as well as today. Under the neoliberal Clinton-Bush-Obama administrations, it is the victims—poor people and economically distressed sectors—that bear the blame for their own conditions. According to this point of view, in this apparently post-racial period, the social and economic problems—including poverty, joblessness, and poor health—besetting African Americans along with, to a lesser degree, other people of color have more to do with group behavior than with racial inequality. For both Republicans and Democrats, it seems, the problem with Black America is the lack of personal responsibility.

Rhonda Williams, director of the Social Justice Institute at Case Western University, criticizes President Obama for being wedded “to notions of personal responsibility to explain major social problems, particularly when talking to Black people.”¹⁸ Tiffany Willoughby, a Black scholar and activist working as a teacher in Oakland, California, is concerned that the nation’s first Black president’s acquiescence regarding the pathologization of Black families has been disastrous, especially by preventing progressive educational policies in urban schools. She proposes that the analysis of pathology rather than structural inequality or racism means that school policies will continue to be based on free market approaches, accompanied by the building of prisons for thousands of young people who do not fit into the former.¹⁹ Thus, we are at this point in the fight for equality in the age of Obama: a key choice facing many Black and Latino youth today are poor public schools or prisons.

Negative imageries associated with Black women emerge as a political and ideological tool to ground and justify punitive policies and administrative practices maintaining racial and eco-

nomical inequality. This is explained in a classic essay by Julia S. Jordan-Zachery, director of the Black Studies Program at Providence College. In “Black Womanhood and Social Welfare Policy: The Influence of Her Image” Jordan-Zachery makes a direct link between punitive social policies impacting poor and working-class people and the use of pathological images of Black women to justify such policies.²⁰ She writes that “Reliance on the negative, degenerate construction of black women allows policy makers to equate poverty within the black community with ‘immoral’ black women.” In fact, such pathologizing is actually included and frames the *Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act*, or “welfare reform” signed by President Clinton in August 1996. The legislation withdrew social benefits from the working class and imposed stringent and low-paying work requirements primarily on poor women and their families. Other studies show how the pathologizing of Black women is strongly associated with high rates of imprisonment in the Black community.²¹

Blaming the victim allowed the Republican Party to take the lead on the discourse about poverty and inequality in the last presidential election. Republican candidates pointed toward the social or attitudinal inferiority of Black people as culprit. They used this line to place a stamp of inferiority on individuals and groups suffering from poverty, especially Blacks. Obama and the Democratic Party have surrendered to Republican claims by taking the lack of hard work or dependency on government largesse as reference points for any discussion about Black poverty and economic inequality.

18 Email correspondence with Rhonda Williams, April 13, 2013.

19 Interview with Tiffany Willoughby, March 29, 2013.

20 *Sage Race Relations Abstracts*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (2001).

21 See “Part II: Women, Violence, and Incarceration,” *Disfranchising Lives: The Racism, Criminal Justice, and Law Reader*, Manning Marable, Keesha Middlemass, and Ian Steinberg (eds.), Palgrave MacMillan: Hampshire, UK, 2007; also, the report published by The Rebecca Project for Human Rights, “Mother’s Behind Bars”, National Women’s Law Center, Washington DC, 2010.

As noted earlier, this dynamic is reflected in Obama's continual reminder to Black audiences to lift themselves up by their bootstraps and to reflect self-responsibility, as was the case in his recent speech (May 2013) to the Black graduates of Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. Interestingly, we have yet to hear similar exhortations to predominately white audiences, as was the case in addressing the problem of high student loans to a predominantly white college students at the White House, just a few weeks later. Neither the Democratic Party nor Obama's apologists, including many Black elected officials and religious leaders, have responded substantively to the overwhelming class problem of poverty in the Black community or in the United States.

The Criminal Justice System

Racial inequality in this nation is also reflected through the sobering fact that legions of Blacks and Latinos—including an increasing number of women—are incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, or under the monitoring of the criminal justice system on a severely disproportionate level. The decades-long War on Drugs—supported and sustained by both Republican and Democratic administrations—has condemned thousands of poor people to serve lengthy sentences behind bars. In 1970, there were 5,600 women in prison. By 2002, this number had jumped to 167,000, of which two-thirds were Black or Latina. In 2007 Blacks comprised 14% of regular drug users in the United States, but 37% of those arrested for drug offenses and 56% of prisoners serving time in state prisons for drug offenses.²² In 2011, the International Centre for Prison Studies, based at the University of Essex in England, reported that for every 100,000 people in the U.S., 743 are in prison, the highest rate in the world. The nation of Rwanda

stood at second place with 595 per 100,000, and the ratio for Germany was 85 per 100,000.²³ Even as the nation's drug laws become liberalized, "one set of Americans has the privilege to laugh off drug use and hide it behind hedges and picket fences while another set is plucked off street corners to be fingerprinted, booked, and have their employment and education opportunities tainted or ruined" according to *Boston Globe* columnist Derrick Z. Jackson. He writes that, based on possession rates, the smoking of marijuana is treated in a vastly different manner in white versus Black communities. And, he adds, "it does not matter if a state has a conservative or liberal reputation."²⁴

The criminal justice system is based on cruelty. Prisons and jails have become holding pens and revolving doors for massive numbers of people with health problems and mental illnesses. These places of confinement have few resources to help people with drug addiction or other mental health issues. Overcrowding has led numerous state prison systems to be charged with cruelty and human rights violations. In a number of cases, Black women have been shackled while giving birth. Nor have children been protected from the criminal justice system's cruelty. Black children have been confined for years due to crimes committed at twelve, thirteen, or fourteen years old. Only in 2012 did the Supreme Court declare that it was unconstitutional to treat such young prisoners as adults. This, after the case of a thirteen year old Black boy, Joe Sullivan, who served twenty years in a Florida prison for being charged and found guilty as an accomplice to a murder.²⁵

There have been growing calls to eliminate the laws and practices enacted as part of the pu-

²² Marc Mauer and Ryan S. King, *A 25 year Quagmire: The War on Drugs and Its Impact on American Society*, U.S. Sentencing Project, 2007.

²³ Roy Walmsley, *World Prison Population List (9th edition)*, Essex: International Centre for Prison Studies, 2011; prisonstudies.org.

²⁴ "US is a segregated joint on marijuana" *The Boston Globe*, June 29, 2013.

²⁵ *Graham v. Florida*, 2010; also see Equal Justice Initiative, *Children in Adult Prisons*; www.eji.org.

nitive and racist War on Drugs, but the war on Black and Brown people continues. The police are used as a tool to control and monitor the movement of Black and Latino youth. New York City's infamous "stop and frisk" policies, for instance, specifically target Black and Brown people. In 2013, the New York Police Department reported more than a half-million such stops in a city with slightly more than eight million residents. Almost 90% of individuals stopped and questioned were innocent, and 87% of those stopped were Black or Latino.²⁶ Ajamu Brown, a Black environmental justice activist in Brooklyn, offered a sentiment that is not atypical for

many Blacks: it is all too easy for young Black males like him to feel like "persona non grata" in places like New York City and, generally, in American mainstream society.²⁷

The Obama administration has not responded to this kind of racism. Instead, it has reduced federal funding for juvenile justice programs to help youth even as budgets for policing, implementing punitive policies, and building and maintaining prisons have increased. This pattern of continuing racial inequality affects most, if not all, areas of Black life in contemporary America.

Political Resistance to Racial Equality

A three-part narrative—supported by corporate power and many academics—underlies political resistance to efforts to attain racial equality. First, the adoption of a series of civil rights laws over the years is cited as *prima facie* evidence of a post-racial society. Secondly, there are constant efforts to roll back these laws, presumably because they are no longer needed. Finally, civil rights laws are placed within a narrow historical framework and confined by the symbolism of desegregating lunch counters, water fountains, and movie theaters. According to this narrative, the mere existence of civil rights laws means that racism does not exist, and that the nation's leadership, backed by the general public, is readily responsive to actions or issues that might threaten this post-racial ideal. And because we live in such a society, such laws are now unnecessary. This circular and illogical narrative is quite popular in public discourse and in some political circles.

²⁶ New York City Civil Liberties Union, "NYPD to Lodge 5 Millionth Street Stop Under Mayor Bloomberg Today" March 14, 2013; www.nyclu.org/news.

The Historic Progress of Civil Rights

The ahistorical view of desegregation fights ignores what were the implications of such struggles in terms of challenges to corporate wealth in the national and international arenas. The desegregation of lunch counters by Black students and allies in places like Greensboro, North Carolina, represented, in substance and symbol, one face of a vast social movement to expand social and economic democracy in this nation—and it fed similar struggles across the Globe. In the United States, the evolution of legislation and judicial rulings emerging from the Civil Rights Movement has improved quality of life and economic justice for all Americans—even if some Americans do not realize how much this is the case.

Earlier civil rights laws, including the 1957, 1960, and 1964 Civil Rights Acts and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, represent the basis of considerable expansion of social and economic rights not just

²⁷ Email interview with Ajamu Brown, May 5, 2013.

for African Americans, but for all Americans. These laws opened the floodgate to a national expansion of social and economic democracy for everyone just a few years after their adoption. In 1972, educational amendments to the 1964 Civil Rights Act banned sexual discrimination in any educational institution receiving federal funding. Judicial decisions further expanded the impact of these laws: in 1974, accommodations for non-English speaking students were mandated to overcome language barriers; a year later, language assistance became required for voters with limited proficiency in English; in 1977, height requirements for police officers were abolished as discriminatory against women; a year later, employment discrimination based on pregnancy was outlawed; and in 1986, sexual harassment was prohibited. In the internationally famous 1979 decision *Bean v. Southwestern Waste Management, Inc.* Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act emerged as an important legal basis for challenging the corporate siting of toxic materials and the dumping of waste in poor communities and communities of color. In 1988, these laws provided the legal means to prohibit housing discrimination against people with disabilities or families with children.

As this history demonstrates, the Civil Rights Movement was not simply an attempt to racially desegregate society or its lunch counters. It represented an effort to expand the nation's welfare state in pursuit of economic democracy and social justice. As the historians and others who documented this era—including Eric Foner, Herbert Aptheker, Grace Lee and James Boggs, and Henry Hampton—have noted, victories for Black civil rights meant victories for the civil rights of all Americans.

The Attack on Civil Rights

Right-wing ideologues and politicians in this country have sought to weaken or rollback these laws precisely because they effectively

place limits on wealth by guaranteeing the social and economic rights of all people. Ultimately, these laws raise redistributive issues regarding the ownership, accumulation, management, and distribution of wealth. Critical parts of the legal framework for protecting civil rights have been barraged by legal attacks, now backed by recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions. Since 2011 legislators in 41 states have introduced at least 180 bills seeking to limit ballot access in one way or another. These efforts are most intense in places with higher concentrations of people of color and are buttressed by the notion the United States is now post-racial.

The U.S. Supreme Court has been active in attempts to limit the reach and impact of the Civil Rights Movement. The constitutionality of racial integration in public schools, for instance, has been considerably weakened as a result of 2007's *Parents Involved v. Seattle*. Here, the Supreme Court severely limited the scope of programs to promote racial diversity as a compelling state interest. Within a social and economic context of racial inequality, this decision could easily lead toward the re-segregation of public schools throughout the nation.

In another example of chipping away at the reach of civil rights legislation, in June 2013 the U.S. Supreme Court overturned a critical section of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In *Shelby County v. Holder* a 5-4 majority ruled that Section 4 is unconstitutional. Section 4, referred to as the "coverage formula," defines which states and political subdivisions have a history of discriminatory practices that limit voting. This section supports Section 5, which demands that these governments seek approval from the Justice Department or through a federal court in Washington, DC—rather than state or local courts—before changing electoral practices. Without Section 4's coverage formula, Section 5 has no practical applicability, even though the Justices did not overturn it.

The ruling is a culmination of continual attempts to weaken or limit this enforcement mechanism. The first constitutional challenge was lodged by South Carolina in 1966, arguing that it violated state rights. Mississippi and Virginia followed suit in 1968. In the early 1980s, with Ronald Regan's blessing and encouragement, Justice Department Attorney William Bradford Reynolds openly resisted renewal of the Voting Rights Act and Section 5. Today's decidedly more conservative Supreme Court is led, interestingly, by Chief Justice John Roberts, who as part of Reynolds' team of lawyers played a major role in devising legal attacks on civil rights legislation.

In *Shelby County v. Holder*, the Chief Justice invoked the Tenth Amendment, also known as the "states' rights" amendment, as justification for declaring Section 4 unconstitutional. This was coupled with what legal scholar Tanya Hernandez described as a "watered-down vision of equality." In fact, she associated the majority decision to a "limited, Jim Crow-era definition of discrimination—concerned only with the formality of legal segregation." She notes that this is "an extraordinarily limited view of what counts as discrimination."²⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr. would have responded similarly.

Those who wish to derail laws and policies aimed at rectifying racial inequality frequently reference the post-racial society argument described earlier. Whether Democrat or Republican, liberal or conservative, they frequently invoke the icon, Martin Luther King, Jr. However, as we have seen, his name has been ideologically misused. Nothing could be more disingenuous and further from the truth than invoking King's name as an excuse to downplay the existence of racial inequality or the moral and political obligation to confront inequality. Just as he did in his lifetime, King today would be continuing to use non-violent protest to fight for racial equality and economic democracy.

²⁸ *New York Times*, June 26, 2013.

And he and his message would still be resisted fiercely by those on the Right who banter his name for ideological and political purposes.

The Persistence of Racism

In spite of almost universal homage to King, the United States continues to witness racist attitudes on the part of many white Americans. Thomas B. Edsall argues that consistent, and perhaps growing, anti-Black feeling has been a component of the Republican Party's move to the right.²⁹ But it is not just the Republican Party which presents a problem in this area. Explicit prejudicial and racist attitudes continue to hold a place throughout society, and attitudes towards race have not improved since Obama's election in 2008. An Associated Press poll found that as of 2012, 51% of Americans report explicit anti-Black attitudes, versus the 48% that was reported four years prior.³⁰

There remains a part of the population—though smaller in numbers than in the past—that continues to harbor racist views. When is the last time that a Democratic or Republican electoral victory triggered a call for secession under a banner of "taking the country back?" We would have to go back to the Dixiecrats, a breakaway faction of the Democratic Party in the late 1940s, to hear similar calls. Then, segregationists believed that the federal government was essentially oppressive regarding the rights of white Americans and that liberals calling for racial integration were threatening a social order or "way of life." It was this mindset that fed George Wallace's 1968 run for President as the American Independent Party candidate.

Fast forward to today, we hear the treasurer of the Hardin County, Texas, Republicans, Peter

²⁹ Thomas B. Edsall, "The Persistence of Racial Resentment," *The New York Times*, February 13, 2013.

³⁰ See *USA Today*, October 27, 2012.

Morrison, refer to Americans he considers liberals as “maggots.”³¹ Another Tea Party Republican, Allen West, who happens to be African American, called for “liberals to get the hell out of the U.S.”³² These are not just isolated anec-

dotes in an otherwise benevolent, post-racial society. Statistics reported by the FBI in 2009 indicate that the number of race and hate crimes spiked upwards immediately before and after the election of President Obama in 2008.³³

Spaces for Fighting for Black Equality

Some spaces exist which are—or which have the potential to be—bases for struggles for racial equality: the Black church, Black intellectuals, Black artists and entertainers, Black electoral politics, and Black labor. These sites either have served or can potentially serve today as spaces for mobilization toward racial equality and for addressing issues like poverty, unemployment, lack of access to quality education and health care, substandard housing, environmental injustices, criminalization of race, corporate exploitation, and social and economic discrimination.

The Black Church

The African American church has represented a key space for Black political debate and mobilization. It has been a singularly important sector in the struggle for civil and human rights in many parts of the country. At the same time, Black religious leaders have been criticized for endorsing the policies and politics of dominant wealth interests in return for access to resources. Regardless of this bifurcation, the Black church remains a critical arena for organizing and mobilizing on behalf of progressive agendas.

Bill Fletcher and Jamala Rogers, two founders of the Black Radical Congress (BRC), recently noted that one of the lessons of the BRC is that

strategies to organize and mobilize against racial inequality must involve outreach to faith-based groups. The BRC involved thousands of members at its height, but it only survived for a few years. “One of the great failings of the BRC as a project was its inability to unite, on scale, with faith-based initiatives,” they write. “Many secular Leftists think of faith-based leftists only as an afterthought.”³⁴

The progressive face of Black churches and faith organizations can be seen in a long history of anti-war mobilization and activities. A long-time voice reflecting this is Vincent Harding, one of King’s trusted confidantes. He recently issued an open letter to President Obama condemning not just his endorsement of violence in the international arena, but also the celebrations sometimes associated with killing people.³⁵ Another example resonant with this history is the condemnation of Obama’s drone policy as murderous and evil by the National Black Church Initiative, a coalition of 34,000 churches and approximately 16 million African Americans. Its condemnation reads as follows:

The black church is not only appalled that this comes out of the administration of the only black

31 *Huffington Post*, November 9, 2012.

32 *Huffington Post*, January 28, 2012.

33 *Hate Crimes Statistics* published by the Criminal Justice Information Services Division, Federal Bureau of Investigation, www2.fbi.gov/ucr/hc2009.

34 Bill Fletcher and Jamala Rogers, “Creating a Viable Black Left: Sixteen Lessons Learned in Creating the Black Radical Congress,” *BlackCommentator.com*, April 4, 2013.

35 “An Open Letter to President Obama”, www.yesmagazine.org, June 2, 2011.

*president, but we are frightened by the monstrous tendencies that have emerged from this administration. The unleashing of the mechanical drones kill not only their target but everyone that is near who is morally innocent of any crime. [...] President Obama has to be roaringly condemned by the entire Christian church for allowing such a policy to emerge.*³⁶

More recently this same organization saluted the life of the late Hugo Chavez: “He was a great leader of the people and had a big heart for the poor. We reject how the Western governments treated him and salute the fact that he ran his country as he saw fit, for what was best for his people.”³⁷ Examples of the political potential of Black churches as instruments for social justice remind us that the exhortation of Fletcher and Rogers should not be overlooked.

Black Intellectuals

It seems as if Black intellectuals used to be more prominent in supporting—and even leading—mobilizations associated with freedom struggles in the United States and elsewhere. The Institute of the Black World (IBW) in Atlanta, Georgia, is a premier example of this. In the early 1970s, it represented a network of scholars and activists who rejected cultural deficit or behavioral explanations of depressed Black living conditions and instead focused on structural inequality. This network not only focused on the Black ghettos of America but also sought to build international communication and collaboration with others involved with freedom struggles. The IBW played a critical role in aiding the emergence and growth of the Black Studies Movement then unfolding in institutions of higher education, thereby emphasizing the activist orientation of Black intellectuals and artists. William Strickland, Vincent

Harding, and other IBW activists helped a number of Black politicians—including Maynard Jackson, who became the first Black mayor of Atlanta in 1973—to develop progressive policy agendas and actually win office.

Since its founding in 1974 *The Black Scholar* journal, led for a long time by one of its founders, the late Robert Chrisman, has provided an opportunity for Black scholars, activists, and public officials to engage in theoretical and practical critiques regarding the role and impact of race and class on Black life. The impact of this journal is based not only on its independence from academic paradigms which essentially serve to restrict praxis in intellectual inquiry and from methodologies bounded by views of racial pathology, but also on the bridges it provided between intellectuals and activists in domestic and international arenas.

Newer organizations have provided venues for activists to discuss and debate a range of issues facing Black people in the United States and abroad. The Institute of the Black World 21st Century was founded by Ron Daniels, a former executive director of the Rainbow Coalition and 1992 presidential candidate, and *The Black Commentator*, a weekly internet magazine, has been published by Peter Gamble since 2002. Younger organizations of Black left activists, such as *African Americans for Justice in the Middle East and North Africa*, continue this tradition. The latter organization has not been reticent—as is the case with many Black elected officials—in showing the connections between Black inequality in this country and imperialism abroad.

Black Artists and Entertainers

Commodification has rendered Black artists and entertainers virtually irrelevant to struggles for Black equality. In a recent book, *Beyond Black: Celebrity and Race in Obama's America*

36 National Black Church Initiative, “NBCI Condemns Obama Administrations Drone Policy as Murder and Evil”, Press Release, February 19, 2013.

37 National Black Church Initiative, “NBCI Salutes the Late Hugo Chavez”, Press Release, March 22, 2013.

(2012), Ellis Cashmore shines a light on the lack of political visions and narratives expressed by Black celebrities whose marketability is predicated on accepting the notion of a post-racial society. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most do not object to this arrangement and exploitation since the material rewards are enormous. There are periodic and individual exceptions to this, but the overall charge remains. Of course, this does not reflect the situation of giants who in earlier periods used their talents on behalf of social justice: Lorraine Hansberry, Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis, and Paul Robeson are but a few examples. Today Harry Belafonte, Danny Glover, Dick Gregory, and a handful of others are at the forefront of calls for racial equality and economic democracy. In February 2013 Belafonte received the NAACP's Spingarn Medal. Belafonte stated in his acceptance speech that,

What is missing, I think, from the equation in our struggle today is that we must unleash radical thought. [...] America keeps that part of the discourse mute. [...] America has never been moved to perfect our desire for greater democracy without radical thinking and radical voices being at the helm of any such quest.³⁸

This important call is atypical for Black entertainers today. Many of them have come to accept the status quo, which is benefitting them individually while leaving the vast majority of African Americans behind.

Black Electoral Politics

Jesse Jackson's 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns helped to highlight electoral processes for struggles on behalf of equality and social justice. But these significant moments also showed that electoral politics by themselves are an inadequate space for addressing racial inequality. The excitement of the Jackson cam-

paigns was found in the espousal of the ideals associated with Martin Luther King's efforts to develop a massive poor people's movement in this country. The government would have an expansive role in ensuring humane living conditions and opportunities for all people. The excitement dissipated, however, as some elements of the Jackson campaigns became integrated with the Democratic Party establishment and thereby lost their potential as a third political front. In doing so, they also lost the capacity to serve as a space for public discourse and debate about a range of issues, viewed through a prism of racial equality and social justice.

While the electoral arena can bring benefits to individuals in any group, it is unlikely that electoral politics by itself will improve overall Black and Latino living conditions, in spite of the fact that the Progressive Caucus in the House of Representatives has 75 members (out of 435). Many of these members are also part of the 42-member Congressional Black Caucus or the 27-member Congressional Hispanic Caucus. The Congressional Black Caucus has been issuing an annual *Alternative Budget* for several years. For fiscal year 2014, this budget called for protecting the nation's safety net programs like Social Security and Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (food stamps), and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (public assistance). These budgets are almost rhetorical, however; the CBC has not been able to exert the power to ensure that its alternative budget is debated seriously, much less adopted. In fact, Obama virtually ignores this alternative budget.

The electoral arena is a limited tool for consistent and sustained social change, in part, because oftentimes voting is not linked to holding officials accountable to the positions that won them support in the first place. Obama received 92% of the Black vote, approximately 75% of the Latino vote, and 68% of the Asian-American vote. This support was a key factor in the Pres-

³⁸ Harry Belafonte, "We Must Unleash Radical Thought," Transcript on *Democracy Now!*, February 18, 2013.

ident's reelection, but just voting for Obama and returning him to the White House has not been—and will not be—adequate to ensure that campaign promises related to the environment, health, or employment will be kept. Obviously, this feat on the part of Black and Latino voters has not been enough to force national leaders to focus on the needs of people, not Wall Street.

The lack of returns to Black voters—in the form of attention to racial inequality—for their overwhelming support of the President is dramatic. This suggests that there is a need to shift the discourse around electoral power away from simply who wins and who loses to include an awareness of structural inequalities and efforts to restrict the power of “Big Money” in the electoral process. This discourse must also include ideas and proposals for advancing economic democracy. Some Black leaders have muffled this proposition by acting more like cheerleaders for the moneyed interests in control of the Democratic Party. They might present the Republican Party as so vile that there is no choice but to support the corporate interests behind the Democratic Party. Progressive politics, however, has to be built on more than supporting the “lesser of two evils” or “getting a piece of the pie.” Rather, progressives need to build and acquire political power aimed at expanding economic democracy.

This message is also important to youth in many communities. This sector was also key in the Obama victories, and especially the 2008 election. By re-election time, however, youth enthusiasm had waned. Perhaps too many young people believed that electing a hero to the White House would move the country closer to ideals and substance of equality, cleaner air and environmental protections, justice in foreign policy, or greater investments in the nation's children. But as is the case for Blacks, this is but a small piece of building a movement for social change aimed at a more just and equitable America.

Black Labor

It should not be overlooked that earlier leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X became more radicalized as they moved closer to embracing the Black working class as a critical component for struggle. The Black and Latino working class continues to bear the brunt of high levels of unemployment and underemployment, of holding the lowest paying and dangerous jobs, and of lacking adequate quality health care, but it certainly has much accessibility to dirty air, bad food, and poor quality public schools, which function like foreign institutions in many communities.

Generally speaking, the Occupy movement missed the opportunity to operationally link the fight against corporate wealth and greed to the daily lives and struggles of low-income and working-class people. The lessons found in the activism of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X were forgotten. In many places the occupations did not connect—either in terms of participants or emphasis on “bread and butter” issues—with working-class sectors in African American, Latino, Asian, or immigrant communities. Specifically raising issues of survival for the Black working class in this country could have possibly served as glue or spark for a much broader and long-lasting social movement.

The Black, Latino, and Asian working class, immigrants, and other communities are involved in daily resistance to economic policies that seek to protect the interests of wealth and to further weaken the social welfare state. Examples include the mobilization of Chicago teachers rejecting the closing of numerous public schools in Black and Latino neighborhoods,³⁹ and strikes by low-income retail workers in St. Louis, Detroit, Milwaukee, New York City, and other places against giant and extremely exploitative com-

³⁹ See Ethan Young, “Teachers on Strike: Lessons from Chicago on How to Fight Back,” December 2012, www.rosalux-nyc.org.

panies like Wal-Mart and McDonalds. Frontline labor struggles have engaged millions of service workers, culinary workers, postal workers, and people working in hazardous industries. Black workers represent an as yet untapped resource for mobilization aimed toward preserving and expanding the social welfare state and resisting corporate-biased austerity policies.

Aligned with immigrants, Black labor can represent a powerful political force for social change in the electoral and non-electoral arenas. This fact has been utilized by the Republican Party to sow political division among these groups because the “party of white people”⁴⁰ fears the potential impact of progressive coalitions across racial and ethnic lines. Issues like bilingual education, legislative redistricting of voter boundaries, access to housing and educational opportunities, access to government benefits, and even gang-driven racial violence at the street level are all areas where conflict between Blacks, Latinos, and Asian communities has reared up. At the same time, these kinds of developments should not make invisible a history of political collaboration that has resulted in the adoption of progressive social and economic policies at local levels.

Conclusion

I conclude with two brief observations. First, Black inequality in the United States cannot be accurately assessed, or responded to effectively, without a focus on both its racial and class dimensions. The elections of President Obama represent critical and significant moments in America’s racial development, but at the same time, this has served to discourage the placing

The possibility of these kinds of progressive coalitions has increased, not just due to numbers or to the fact that many in these groups are among the have-nots and near-have-nots, but also due to the growing ethnic diversity within the Black, Latino, and Asian communities as a result of immigration. Today, the Black community is composed of various ethnic groups, as is the case with Latinos and Asians. There are people—including many who are first- or second-generation immigrants—from Haiti, Nigeria, Brazil, Colombia, Panama, and many other places who define themselves as Black. Within the Latino community, and primarily as a result of immigration, there are growing numbers who define themselves as “Afro-Latinos.” For the last two decades now, 85% or more of all immigrants coming to the United States do so from Latin America, Asia, and—now in increasing numbers—Africa. Black activists and leaders are beginning to realize that the fight to protect the rights of immigrants and to enhance living and working conditions for immigrants only adds potential political strength to the Black community and lays the groundwork for a broad coalition seeking to expand social justice and economic democracy.

of Black inequality within a class context. It explains the comment by Curtis Stokes, one of the founders of the annual *Race and Class* conference at Michigan State University: “avoiding critical appraisals of the Obama presidency have been the order of the day for the overwhelming majority of Blacks.” But excluding class analysis from critique of Obama in order to provide him protection against racism actually strengthens his neoliberal approaches to racial inequality: don’t talk about it, and don’t

⁴⁰ Sam Tanenhaus, “Original Sin: Why the GOP is and will continue to be the party of white people,” *The New Republic*, February 10, 2013.

respond to it, other than urging a greater sense of self-responsibility on the part of Blacks.

The second observation is that there are many ongoing local struggles to improve the lives of poor and working-class people. Participation rights to challenge wealth, quality public schooling for all children, clean air and healthy neighborhoods, stable and decent housing, full employment in safe and living wage jobs, and expansion of opportunities for young people are issues on which local power is being built. It is at the local levels, not the White House, where we find the frontline fights for Black equality. The nation's unfolding demography could provide new energy and resources for these local struggles to fight Black inequality. Many urban areas are now or rapidly becoming places where a majority of residents are Black, Latino, and Asian. Here, these same groups—in alliance with new immigrants and working-class whites—can form the political base to challenge corporate power, to push policies, and to support leaders who speak on behalf of social justice as way of improving living conditions for all people, here and abroad.

Obama's election and re-election to the presidency, as well as new developments and potential resources described above, point to the

need for local and national political orientations focused on the relationship between persistent poverty and the growing concentration of wealth. Though organizationally difficult, strategies should emphasize the mobilization of impoverished and working-class people in anti-poverty campaigns. Candidates for any political office should be assessed by how they approach this particular relationship because it will reveal much about their true policy preferences and commitment to social change.

Along this line, local arenas involving public schools, health clinics with adequate resources, clean parks, living wages for workers, and other bread-and-butter issues can be the basis for building coalitions and involving progressive sectors of organized labor. Furthermore, as the nation moves towards "immigration reform," opportunities for organizing across racial and ethnic lines will be enhanced. Community activists can help to mold a discourse which emphasizes how people at or near the bottom of the economic ladder, including immigrants and people of color, can organize on behalf of common interests, and thereby weaken the powerful and seductive myth that anyone in America can make it, if they just work hard and play by the rules and priorities of corporate wealth—the elections of President Obama, notwithstanding.

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