

Editorial: Racial Politics and the Right

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David Fasenfest

Wayne State University, USA

As the country was engaged in a primary campaign that pitted Barack Obama against Hillary Clinton, many saw it as a battle between the candidate of a progressive, post-racial America and the representative of the traditional political forces that had defined the Democratic Party for decades. The fact that this country was at a political watershed was self-evident because the two leading candidates for their party's nomination were a person of color and a woman, two constituencies that had been (and continue to be) the mainstay of Democratic Party electoral support yet had never appeared at the top of the ticket (or, with the exception of Geraldine Ferraro, anywhere on the ticket) for national office. This was indeed a major change in the political and social landscape of the country.

Supporters of Obama proclaimed this new American reality of a post-racial society (Newby, 2010; for a critique of this position see Gimenez, 2010) where skin color was no longer the primary signifier of one's place in our society. And yet, the country was not so far from the 2000 tarring of the McCain primary campaign, where the fact of the race of his adopted daughter was raised to turn primary voters to support George Bush, or from the tactic used by supporters of George H. W. Bush, when the specter of a Black Willie Horton was raised as a scare tactic to rally voters in support of Bush's candidacy. Perhaps those who proclaimed this new political reality felt that voters had moved past such dynamics, and that the American socio-political reality had changed. Perhaps it was no longer true, as Perry points out reflecting on earlier race scholars, that the white race, such as it exists at all, is '...a socio-historic and political (not biological) ruling class social control formation created and maintained by racial privileges that are ruinous to both the direct victims of white supremacy and to the class interests of working people' (Perry, 2010: 113). Or perhaps we were in that full blown environment of Bonilla-Silva's (2002) color blind racist linguistics, unable to recognize the hidden racism still present within our political discourse, a racism that quietly crept into the language of Sarah Palin's Vice-Presidential campaign, and has reared its head in full glory with the advent of the Tea Party Movement and cries to 'take our country back' that permeates all oppositional political events. What is left unsaid is, back from whom or what – apparently from the Muslim, non-US born, usurper of color who managed by some trickery to capture the Presidency.

Racial politics have always been in play in local elections as under-represented groups vie for political power and the ability to elect someone into high public office. This is never more apparent than the electoral campaigns in cities across the US. Mayor David Dinkins represented a Black community that lived through generations of Italian, Irish, WASP, and Jewish mayors in New York City, Harold Washington managed to rise to power in Chicago after the epic rule of the

first Mayor Daley, and Detroit elected a fiery former Tuskegee Airman, Coleman Young, after years of Italian and Irish political rule. Each in their own way represented a significant change in the political landscape of major American cities, but aside from Detroit (with 83% African-American population), each was the first and last African-American mayor to hold office in their city. But the Barack Obama candidacy was something new, something different (see Remnick, 2008 for an analysis of the nuances of racial politics leading to President Obama's election), and he was one of the new faces of post-racial politicians like Mayor Cory Booker in Newark, heralded by many as Newark's savior who would transcend racial politics (an earlier mayor, Kenneth Gibson, was elected with the strong support of the radical community, including the strong Black Nationalist Amiri Baraka, but ended up not fulfilling the aspirations of the African-American community). But, like President Obama in during first term, Mayor Booker's time in office was not without disappointment to many (see Boyer, 2008 for a general reflection); both have faced charges from many quarters that they do not do enough for Black Americans. At the same time, their defenders ask – perhaps with some cause – whether there really is room to accomplish more as each has been forced to contend with the realities of governing rather than campaigning.

That was then, this is now, as we are in full swing in another Presidential campaign. We read about the rise of white hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan (Olivarius-McAllister, 2012; Potok 2011), motivated in large part because an African-American sits in the White House. A Federal judge emails a racist joke about the President. Cartoons about President Obama, with unflattering representations of the most racist variety, circulate on the Internet. Donald Trump makes a run for the Republican Party's candidate for President whose platform is almost exclusively insisting Barack Obama was not born in the United States. When taken as a whole, all demonstrate that racism is alive and well in this country, for other presidents have been unpopular but none have been treated to this level of insult. Racism is everywhere to the point that some do not see or understand it. For example, radio personalities feel comfortable making racist comments (Don Imus is forced off the air for a short while after referring to Rutgers University women basketball players as nappy headed hoes) and only suffer momentarily. Racism drives, but is not the sole motivation, for the current effort to curtail the vote of the mainly non-White urban poor by insisting on voter IDs (affecting as well the elderly and other Democrat Party voters). It is hard to identify this racism as solely a manifestation of one political agenda (easily tapped by anyone), but it clearly dominates the rhetoric (explicit and implicit) of the most ardent Right Wing activists, led by Tea Party stalwarts demonstrating openly with their weapons in hand, who see government largesse going to the undeserved – even as they refuse to identify their own feeding at the government trough as partaking of government support (emblematic of this movement's contradictions are the signs exhorting the government to keep its hands off Medicare, one of the biggest government programs). The result is a complex mix of reactionary populism, anti-government rhetoric, and anger at the impact of the recent Great Recession, all focused into a sharp point by directing anger at President Obama, an anger at least fueled if not informed by a basic racist core (Alterman, 2012) present in Right Wing politics.

There is a long tradition of seeking to comprehend the nature and form of racism in the pages of this journal, whether trying to figure out what it means (Doane, 2006; Paolucci, 2006), its role in profiling other non-whites (Correa, 2011; Romero, 2006), and how race informs politics (Costa Vargas, 2006; Taylor, 2010), or assess its impact on society in general (Cassano, 2009; Wilson, 2008). We are a long way from understanding racism, though we make strides in uncovering how it is manifest in and the way it transforms our social and political discourse.

The 2010 mid-term election may well be the moment when this reactionary politics entered center stage in the personification of the Tea Party. The politicians elected that year, with Tea Party support, have been the backbone of the anti-Obama rhetoric and obstruction in the House of

Representatives. It remains to be seen whether the voters in this country will double down their reactionary and racist bet by expanding the number of Republican office holders, or demonstrate buyer's remorse and elect a more centrist slate of politicians. The recent extreme shift in the Republican Party, now mainly a party of white older men in the South and Evangelical religious fundamentalists everywhere, has put into sharp relief the traditionally blurred lines of party affiliation and politics of the two-party system in the US.

As this issue goes to press we are in the midst of a significant primary campaign in the Republican Party, with the leading contenders vying with each other over how far to the Right they can plant their flags. The general election will pit the forces of reaction and conservative retrenchment, seeking to solidify corporatist gains in opposition to the interests of all working people regardless of color, against a reformist President who now appears as a progressive because the center of the political spectrum in this country has shifted far to the Right. A lot depends on how race impacts on and informs the voter's sense of what matters, and whether the average American can get past a history of racist rhetoric fueling this opposition to vote for Barack Obama. This issue of the journal explores the roots of the Tea Party as the manifestation and personification of this right-wing and often racist opposition, and offers us some insight on whether they will be a momentary flash of mob-politics or represent a fundamental shift in the American political psyche.

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