A Response to Ben Pitcher's “Obama and the Politics of Blackness: Antiracism in the ‘post-black’ Conjuncture”

James Jennings

Available online: 08 Dec 2010

To cite this article: James Jennings (2010): A Response to Ben Pitcher's “Obama and the Politics of Blackness: Antiracism in the ‘post-black’ Conjuncture”, Souls, 12:4, 340-346

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2010.526057
Post-Racial Politics and Its Discontents

A Response to Ben Pitcher’s “Obama and the Politics of Blackness: Antiracism in the ‘post-black’ Conjuncture”

James Jennings

After summarizing major demographic and political developments engulfing the nation, this article uses two classic works by authors Gunnar Myrdal (1944) and Oliver C. Cox (1948) to propose a framework for assessing race and racism in U.S. society under the nation’s first Black president. The article rejects discourse and debate about President Obama’s degree of racial representativeness as useful in assessing the state of race and race relations in U.S. society. Assessment of race and racism can be guided by the proposition that race and racism is primarily an issue of social attitudes; or another proposition partially connected to this one, that U.S. society is in the throes of a post-racial period. The author argues—as offered by Martin Luther King, Jr.—that identification and examination of continuing structural inequality in the area of housing, jobs, education, health, and other areas must be the basis for assessing the state of race and racism, even under the administration of a Black president.

Keywords: bigotry, demography, racial hierarchy, racism, structural inequality

There are at least three fundamental developments that should be included in assessments of the current and future status of race
and race relations in U.S. society. One is the rapidly changing demographic profile of U.S. society, where there are increasing numbers and proportions of people of color with different nationalities and ethnicities throughout the country. This means that many places where racial issues may have been bounded by the relationships between African Americans and whites are today witness to greater mixture between a range of cultures and ethnicities that are not European-descended or African American. This has created what Michael Banton referred to as the “race relations problematic.” The increasing growth of racial and ethnic diversity tends to make assessment of race and racism more complicated than in earlier periods in urban history.

A second and continuing development is the existence of a racial hierarchy where the quality of living conditions and a range of social and economic characteristics continue to reflect significant differences between whites and Blacks and other people of color. Whether in the area of wealth accumulation, poverty, public health, quality of schools, employment, or incarceration, generally speaking, whites continually do better than Blacks regardless of level of schooling or age. This is a situation that is historical and originally built on a system of institutionalized slavery of Black people. But it is also contemporary and reflected persistently in U.S. society.

Of course, another and significant development is the election of the first Black president of the United States in 2008. The latter event has understandably ignited old and new debates about what some have described as a “post-racial” period in the United States. But any assessment regarding this issue should not treat President Barack Obama’s election in social and economic isolation from the other societal developments I mentioned.

So within this broader context, and without fantasizing about racial harmony to paraphrase Martin Luther King Jr., what does the election of a Black man in the White House mean for race relations or race within this broader context? Does this kind of important development indicate that institutionalized racism is invalid as a concept for explaining social and economic inequalities? And does a Black president have some responsibility to “act Black” in the sense of responding to particular needs of the nation’s Black population?

These are some of the questions touched upon directly and indirectly by Ben Pitcher’s “Obama and the Politics of Blackness: Antiracism in the ‘Post-Black’ Conjuncture.” Many books, articles, essays, and opinion pieces now raise similar questions and discussions about the election of the first Black president. Regardless of the wide range of opinions and insights reported in such writings, certainly the election of President Obama has to be considered a political
and racial watershed moment in U.S. society. In spite of this racial achievement, ironically, it also highlights the intractability of the challenge of race and racial hierarchy, and thereby the illogic of proposals regarding the United States as, today, a “post-racial” society. But while racism is a concept much broader and complicated than simply bigotry and prejudice, this is not to concede that the latter has been eliminated in U.S. society. As Manning Marable reminds us, “The most underreported story connected with Barack Obama’s presidential victory has been the disturbing spike in racial hate crimes across the U.S.”

Analysis of race, or the presence or absence of racism and its effects cannot be based on the election of a Black man, even to the highest electoral post in the nation. Again, this is not to minimize the vast significance of this event in U.S. history. As I wrote in an earlier piece, we should not forget that contemporary political institutions were originally built and continually sustained on race, class, and gender inequalities. Since the founding of the nation, many U.S. presidents contributed to the maintenance of racial divisions and racism for political gains. Reflecting white-supremacist views or rationalizing them, U.S. presidents were often highly hostile to Black people and other people of color. Presidents such as Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover, to name a few, refused to condemn organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and their campaigns of racial terrorism. President Franklin Roosevelt referred to Blacks as “semi-beasts” and frequently as “darkies” and “niggers,” as did Presidents Truman and Nixon.

The presidency of William Clinton also contributed to racial divisions by the use of a certain kind of racial imagery as a political tool for supporting a context of constricting economic and educational opportunities for Blacks and other people of color and for poor people. Additionally, the political exploitation associated with the building of a vast criminal justice system under the Clinton administration that has been socially and economically devastating to working-class Black America has contributed to racial divisions. Race, in particular, played a major role in the establishment and practices of political institutions, economic policies, and social relations of the nation since its founding. So, within this context, it is most significant that a Black man has been elected to the presidency of this country.

In explaining the meaning of the election of President Obama regarding race and within this context, I still find that two classic works are particularly relevant to framing an assessment of race relations and racism today, and probably into the near future: Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma* (1944) and Oliver Cox’s less recognized but quite important *Caste, Class, and Race* (1948).
Both works still provide frameworks for analyzing the meaning of the election of President Obama in terms of the progress, or lack thereof, regarding movement toward a postracial stage of society in the United States.

Myrdal’s paradigm focused on America’s moral dilemma regarding its racial divisions. That is to say, race was an obstacle to an otherwise democratic and healthy society. If we could just move beyond race and racial prejudice, we would see U.S. society as an absence of inequalities and social and economic opportunity for everyone regardless of race. I would propose that this paradigm has become the dominant reference for explanations of race and racism. Furthermore, this framework essentially rationalizes continuing and growing social and economic class inequalities.

Some questions raised by representatives of the media and part of civic discourse regarding President Obama’s racial representativeness, for example, merely nurture this Myrdalian paradigm. Similarly, one-dimensional questions such as whether Jesse Jackson really likes the president also nurture a paradigm that basically neutralizes focus on power and wealth, and on who has it and how it is used in society. As explained by political scientist Ricky L. Jones, this keeps analysis on the query, “What’s wrong with Barack Obama?... We interrogate the man…. What are his shortcomings? Will he do what we think he should? Will he give us what we need? Is he worthy of the hype and our emotional investment?”7 These kinds of questions and media angles by which to assess the place of race in U.S. society today miss a more fundamental analysis necessary to understand the current stage and development of racial hierarchy.

This dominant paradigm dismisses the significance of race and racism and how it is intertwined in economic processes. The dismissal is accomplished by minimizing racism as a kind of prejudice and separating the concept and history of race from ongoing social and economic inequalities. This idea is captured by David Theo Goldberg in his book on the state of race in the United States and globally: “racism is reduced... to invoking race, not to its debilitating structural effects or the legacy of its ongoing unfair impacts.”8 He uses a phrase borrowed from Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, “racisms without racism,” associated first with making race invisible, “an increasing reluctance to acknowledge its traces, the legacy of its structural conditions, its continuing significance.”9 But, he adds, “As race is rendered irrelevant socially, racism conceptually becomes stigmatized so that only the obviously bigoted—extreme individuals—get to qualify.”10

The problem of racism as thus defined involves only bigots and bigotry. Alas, one can now engage in cultural, economic, political, or
policy practices and decision making that serve to subjugate racial groups of people and avowed racial enlightenment at the same time that bigotry is denounced! The fact that attention on race is frowned upon, and the proposal that only bigots are involved with racism, excuses a social and economic nomenclature that preserves and protects racial hierarchy. This represents the ultimate celebration of Myrdal’s paradigm on the part of observers who wish to dismiss the significance of race and racism.

The Myrdal paradigm can also be dismissive of class, especially in the Black community. It presupposes that the Black community is classless, and therefore in responding to some of these questions there is an implicit assumption that the answers would be the same for everyone in this group. In fact, as noted by Stephen Gregory in an earlier article about class structure in Black communities, there exists a set of different social and economic needs determined, in part, by a group’s class position. There is much class diffusion and transitions in the Black community, to be sure. Thus, simply asking if the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States is good for Blacks, as if this were a class-monolithic community, is an incomplete query.

An alternative paradigm focuses on how the particular distribution of power and wealth are intertwined with race to maintain racial hierarchy. Under this framework, the question of President’s Obama’s degree of “Blackness” is irrelevant; similarly, whether as a Black president he has a special obligation to the Black community is not an analytical one; and the sense of euphoria among Black and other people emerging as the result of the election of a Black man does not represent a sound reference point for analyzing race and race relations in the United States. Here, the paradigm calls for examination of the actual material conditions of people, how such conditions are produced, and these are related to the benefits distributed as a basis of analysis and assessment of race. How is the nation’s racial hierarchy, along with its class and gender dimensions, being challenged? And how is the nation’s political leadership, including the president, faring in responding to such challenges?

Racial hierarchy, a concept differentiated from race and racism, is reflected in the continuing racial gap between Blacks and whites in income, poverty, unemployment, and health. In 1939, the proportion of Blacks in poverty was three times the proportion of whites. In 1959, the Black poverty rate was still three times that of whites. In 1989, the Black poverty rate was still three times the white poverty rate. Even though important changes in race relations in the United States, including the elimination of a multigenerational system of legally sanctioned political apartheid, had been effected, U.S. society
is still characterized by fundamental social and economic divisions along racial lines.\footnote{12}

Indeed, according to the most recent data reported in the American Community Survey and the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the racial gap remains! The white poverty rate in 2008 was reported at 8.6 percent of all persons in this group (only non-Latino whites); but the Black poverty rate was again almost three times higher, at 24.7 percent.\footnote{13} Major and continuing gaps between whites and Blacks in basic living standards, employment and unemployment experiences, imprisonment rates, and health and housing conditions continue to characterize Black life in the United States.

Many people in other groups also suffer from inferior living conditions. But racialized social and economic gaps, based in part on hundreds of years of institutionalized enslavement of Black people, stand out for its pervasiveness and continuity. A report published by the Urban Institute concluded that “regardless of income, race and ethnicity are strongly correlated with wellbeing in the United States. Children born into black, Native American, or Hispanic families are almost three times as likely to be poor as children born into white and Asian families.”\footnote{14}

The key issue in assessing race and race relations in the United States has relatively little to do with the degree of President Obama’s “Blackness.” Interestingly, how Black he is or is not has little to do with the social and economic inequalities associated with Black and Latino life in this country. This all means that whether or not he becomes a force to improve living conditions for low-income and working-class Blacks is not as significant as the degree and quality of the political mobilization that might be triggered and sustained on behalf of progressive social and economic agendas. This is a more important answer to the query, what does President Obama mean for race and race relations in U.S. society?

The answer does not lie, as in Myrdal, with changing racial attitudes on the part of whites or with the progress or lack thereof, of Black assimilation into white society, or with the ultimate electoral victory such as the election of a Black person as president of the nation. Instead, following Cox’s analysis, the answer emerges on the basis of how class and wealth inequalities are challenged by grassroots interests across the nation.

Notes


9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.


