

# Not ‘Change We Can Believe In’: Barack Obama as a Neoliberal

## Section Preface

After two-hundred and nineteen years, and forty-three previous presidents and commanders-in –chief who were all white males, in 2008 the United States elected its highest public office a person of African-American descent. This was a world-historic, watershed event, but this stunning success hid a deeper, less savory significance. The crisis of capitalism triggered by the Great Recession, c. 2007-2009, would saddle the in-coming occupant of the White House with a herculean task. Much like the first wave of big city, Northern, Black mayors who confronted an urban landscape ravaged by deindustrialization, shrinking budgets, white flight, underfunded school systems, and tense police-community relations in the 1960s and 1970s, nearly fifty years later the first Black president would confront two on-going wars, a stagnant economy, rising levels of inequality, and a sinking standard of living for the majority of Americans.

The two essays in this section take up the question of Barack Obama’s ascent to, and exercise of, the office of the U.S. president. In “The Role of Wealth and Neoliberalism in Barack Obama’s Selection, Election, and Presidency,” Dr. Lionel D. Lyles asserts that Obama was actually *selected* and *auditioned* by the American plutocracy before he could finance an expensive campaign for the nation’s highest elective office. Central to this selection was the assurance of Obama’s loyalty to the economic agenda of the American elite, neoliberalism. Prof. Lyles demonstrates that Obama has appointed representatives of the wealthy to his (first term) cabinet, adopted a “hands-off, non-interference” policy as concerns the American financial system after bailing it out with trillions of taxpayer dollars, stood by while a major American city (Detroit) dies, and adopted and continued many of George W. Bush’s policies (e.g., anti-terrorism plans). My own essay, “Neoliberalism in Blackface: Barack Obama and Deracialization, 2007-2012,” confirms these observations while recounting Obama’s strategic choices during the primary season and general election in order to gain electoral victory. Central to Obama’s victory was his adoption of “a [race-neutral] playbook,” a variant of deracialization. However, when this element of neoliberalism is added to its other policies (e.g., privatization, deregulation), Black America’s situation is measurably worsened (e.g., the mass incarceration debacle).

While right-wing critics (e.g., FOX News) may be easily dismissed as tendentious prevaricators, Obama's left-wing critics may be separated into apologists and consistent radical democrats. In the end, I argue that—in opposition to apologists for Mr. Obama—only a “radical Black democratic agenda” can meet the current challenge of “the struggle that must be.”

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