

Neoliberalism in Blackface: Barack Obama and Deracialization, 2007-2012

by

Hermon George, Jr., Ph.D.
Professor of Africana Studies
University of Northern Colorado
Greeley, Colorado

Abstract

This essay offers a critical study of Barack Obama's first campaign for, and election to, the US presidency which occurred in an era defined by economic collapse and neoliberalism, the current regime of capital accumulation, whose tenets include privatization, deregulation, laissez fair capitalism, cutting social welfare spending (austerity), and colorblind racism. Obama's overall campaign strategy, and his campaign's racial strategy, specifically his use of a "[race-neutral] tactical playbook", a variant of deracialization, are reviewed. Obama's resultant policy positions on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the financial crisis, the housing crisis, and health care reform are examined as concerns his candidacy and first term. Also evaluated are four additional crises—the mass incarceration debacle, the scourge of colorblind racism, the Katrina and post-Katrina neoliberal model for "Negro removal" and privatization, and the subprime mortgage disaster—specific to Black America, and exacerbated by neoliberalism. The penultimate section of the narrative considers right-wing and left-wing criticisms of Obama, the former dismissed as products of "the Obama hate machine" while the latter are separated as between apologists and consistent radical democrats. The study concludes that Obama's deracialization strategy must be rejected as a failure, and a "new radical black intelligentsia" encouraged to construct "a radical black democratic agenda" as required to confront the current "struggle that must be."

Introduction

...when you look at how we should approach Social Security,
I believe...that cutting...benefits is not the right answer.
Candidate Obama, 2007

We offered an additional \$650 billion in cuts to entitlement
programs—Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security.
President Obama, 2011 (1)

As the quotes above reveal, Barack Obama as president has demonstrated a disconcerting willingness to subscribe to the anti-democratic and austerity-driven tenets of the new post-Fordist regime of capital accumulation. Known variously as “the Washington Consensus”, “Thatcherism”, “Reaganomics”, “globalization”, or “TINA-ism”, it may also be referred to as neoliberalism. (2)

Writing in 2005, before the Great Recession, David Harvey offered the following definition of neoliberalism,

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. The state has to guarantee, for example, the quality and integrity of money. It must also set up those military, defence [sic], police, and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights, and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets. Furthermore, if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary.

But beyond these tasks the state should not venture. State interventions in markets (once created) must be kept to a bare minimum because, according to the theory, the state cannot possibly possess enough information to second-guess market signals (prices) and because powerful interest groups will inevitably distort and bias state interventions (particularly in democracies) for their own benefit. (3)

The candidacy, campaign, and first term presidency of Barack Obama have been shaped by neoliberalism, the latest regime of capitalist accumulation. (4) Major policies of neoliberalism include privatization, deregulation, laissez faire capitalism, cutting social welfare spending, and colorblind racism. Accompanying this regime has been a politics of austerity, the effects of which have been most visible, among other places, in parts of Black America. This essay will examine the rise and installation of “the Obama phenomenon”, its betrayal of Black America especially as it relates to four (4) crises exacerbated by neoliberalism, present a critical review of differing judgments of Obama, and close with an argument on the need for a Black radical democratic agenda as a necessary response to Obama-ism.

With the election of Barack Obama in 2008, the politics of deracialization achieved its most stunning success. But, the first term (c2008-2012) of the first African-American elected President of the United States occurred amid a backdrop of economic collapse. (5) Let us now rehearse the events which led to Mr. Obama’s election.

The Election of Barack Hussein Obama

On February 10, 2007, in Springfield, Illinois, the 45 year-old junior U.S. Democratic Senator from Illinois declared his candidacy for the Presidency of the United States. (6) Barack Hussein Obama had served in the Illinois State Legislature as a State Senator from 1996 to 2004, losing his first bid for national office, 61% to 30%, in a contest for U.S. Representative (1st District) in 2000 to the incumbent, Rep. Bobby Rush (D-Ill), a former member of the Black Panther Party. Later, he would run for the U.S. Senate in 2004, defeating black Republican carpetbagger Alan Keyes, 70% to 27%, the largest margin of victory in state history. (7)

Choosing the symbolism of the Historic Old State Capitol building where, in 1858, U.S. Senate candidate Abraham Lincoln declared his opposition to slavery and his desire for a united country, Obama hoped to invoke a potent icon of change for a nation facing turbulent times. Obama’s path through the primary and caucus season, replete with successful strategies and shortcomings, would lead to victory in November, 2008. That victory, on November 4, 2008, had been secured by the youth (18-30) vote, and voters of color, since white voters went for John McCain, 55% to 43%. (8)

The Campaign’s Overall Strategy

According to a campaign insider, the Obama campaign decided early on to pursue a front loaded strategy in which early primary contests would be critically important. (9) From January 3 to 26, 2008, the campaign pulled off an unexpected upset in Iowa (January 3), and split the first four contests of the campaign with rival Hillary Clinton during this period. Obama won South Carolina on January 26.

Campaign manager David Plouffe makes clear that winning in Iowa or New Hampshire was crucial to recruiting African-American voters, who in the early going had favored Mrs. Clinton. In addition, in order to defeat Clinton, a largely new section of voters would have to be approached, energized, enlisted, and convinced to vote for Obama (Plouffe called this “expanding the brand”). These Obama voters would be volunteers from cities and communities across the nation, tasked with three crucial duties: helping to fund the campaign; organizing their local communities in get-out-the-vote efforts for the campaign; and, delivering the Obama campaign’s message person-to-person as reliance on “traditional media sources” continued to decline. (10)

As described by Plouffe, the Obama campaign’s message had four core elements: “change versus a broken status quo”; “people versus the special interests”; “a politics that would lift people and the country up”; and “a president who would not forget the middle class”. (11) The Obama campaign would be about “Hope and Change.”

But, inevitably, in a country with a florid and still powerful system of racial hierarchy and white supremacy, the Obama campaign would also be about race. In this regard, Obama’s “[race-neutral] tactical playbook” and two important speeches would determine the manner in which the candidate and the campaign would approach this explosive issue. (12)

The Campaign’s Racial Strategy

In the immediate prior election cycle, in 2006, before Obama’s first campaign for the nation’s highest office, Black candidates for statewide and national office had not fared well. Of the five Black men who ran for either Governor or the U.S. Senate (Lynn Swann, Republican/Governor/PA; Michael Steele, Republican/U.S. Senate/MD; Kenneth Blackwell, Republican/Governor/OH; Harold Ford, Democrat/U.S. Senate/TN), only one (Deval Patrick, Democrat/Governor/MA) had been successful. (13) This did not bode well.

Confronted with this circumstance, Harris has argued that Obama and his team adopted a “[race-neutral] tactical playbook” during the campaign as a way of defusing and re-directing a potentially lethal threat to a Black candidate for elective office in a racially divided, predominantly white nation. (14) Harris reports that the rules contained in this playbook include the following: never directly attack a white political opponent (so as to avoid the appearance of being “an angry black man”); emphasize the candidate’s rags-to-riches biography and not his policy positions; exhibit a calm demeanor as a general rule of personal conduct; point to the candidate’s individual character and accomplishments avoiding any prolonged association with a mass Black identity; subtly position the candidate as a being light-skinned person; reinterpret Black issues as universal issues and, seek out third party authentication whereby members of the white elite vouch for, and endorse, the candidate. (15)

In addition, Obama deployed other themes and tactics in handling this issue, especially in two decisive speeches. The first speech, delivered at the Democratic National Convention in Boston, July 27, 2004, mentioned his immigrant father (as a bow to America's supposedly inspiring history of immigration), invoked the lesson of hard work (as leading to just rewards: "Through hard work and perseverance my father got a scholarship to study in a magical place...America"), appealed to American exceptionalism ("the American Dream": "My parents shared ...an abiding faith in the possibilities of this nation."), rejected the view that government entitlements are a panacea for America's social ills ("The people I meet in small towns and big cities, they [sic] don't expect government to solve all their problems."), offered a moral sermon to the Black poor (on their need to be better citizens and better parents: "Go into any inner city neighborhood...They know that parents have to parent, that children can't achieve unless we raise their expectations and turn off the television sets...."), advocated an enlightened imperialism (America has "a solemn obligation...to never ever go to war without enough troops to win..."), and the most quoted line from the speech, professed to see only "the United States of America," not a "red America, a blue America", or a liberal or conservative America, Black or white America, or a Latino or Asian America. (16) Despite its obvious lack of substance and troubled ethics, the speech was overwhelmingly positively received, catapulting Obama to national prominence. (17)

Four years later, addressing the most serious threat to his then-ascendant campaign, Obama delivered a speech entitled "A More Perfect Union", on March 18, 2008 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. (18) Seeking to quell the media storm of criticism that had erupted over FOX News' and others' sensationalized account of his relationship with Reverend Jeremiah Wright and Wright's recent presumed anti-American and anti-white comments, Obama began his speech by proclaiming the American constitution as embodying incrementalism and American exceptionalism (though stained with "the original sin of slavery", the nation's constitution "already" contained the answer to slavery, and "a union that could be and should be perfected over time."). He recited his rags-to-riches biography ("I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas.... I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible."), and noted those who had criticized him as being "either 'too black' or 'not black enough.'"

Then turning to Rev. Wright's latest comments in which Wright had lambasted American domestic and foreign policy, Obama pronounced Wright's comments "not only wrong but divisive." But, refusing to disown either Wright or his own racially prejudiced white maternal grandmother, Obama proceeded to construct a false equivalence between Rev. Wright's outrage at past and continuing racism and his grandmother's fear of people of color. Pretending to be willing to engage the issue of race ("But race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now."), nevertheless Obama declared that it is Rev. Wright's generation of Black men and women whose anger is now "counterproductive", and who see America as "static" and refuse to acknowledge the "progress" which has been made.

Constructing another false equivalence, Obama contended that Black anger at discrimination and racism finds a counterpart in “a similar anger” in white America, directed at government entitlement programs, busing, affirmative action (“...when they hear that an African American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed...”), and fear of Black urban crime. Ignoring the tremendous loss of wealth suffered by African-Americans in the Great Recession (c.2007-2009) and other clear signs of a deteriorating racial situation (e.g., the mass incarceration crisis), Obama bemoaned “the racial stalemate we’ve been stuck in for years.” Only two ways out of this “stalemate” present themselves, according Obama: either the nation can engage in race as “spectacle,” or “we can come together” for serious discussion of crumbling schools, outsourced jobs, the health care crisis, the foreclosure debacle, and the problems of returning military veterans—problems which affect all Americans. Obama closed the speech with a homily about a young white volunteer for the campaign who, growing up in poverty with a mother who had lost her job and her health insurance, decided to support Obama as a way of securing health care “for millions of other children in the country who want and need to help their parents too.” But, the morale of the story is that, continuing to privilege white perspective and needs as is readily apparent throughout the entire speech, Obama revealed that this white volunteer’s choice to support the campaign was ratified by a nameless elderly Black male volunteer who cited *her* involvement as his own reason for being in the campaign—not any of the issues facing African-Americans. (19)

With these two speeches, candidate Obama forthrightly identified himself as an adherent of the neoliberal doctrine of colorblind racism, according to whose dictates racism/white supremacy is no longer a regnant cause of America’s social ills, and Black people in particular have no one to blame but themselves for any lingering effects of the nation’s unfortunate past. (20) Positioned now as a “racial moderate” and a corporate-friendly Democrat, Obama was ready to face the challenge of a presidential campaign.

The Primary and the General Election

The primary season for the contest to nominate Barack Obama as the Democratic candidate for the U.S. Presidency may be conceived as eight (8) separate episodes: February 10, 2007 to January 2, 2008: announcement of candidacy and building momentum (1); January 3, 2008: taking on Hillary Clinton and the Clinton machine in Iowa and scoring an upset victory; January 4 to February 4, 2008: winning South Carolina (January 26) and building momentum (2); February 5 to March 5, 2008: closing it out and securing victory without concession, in which Obama takes the delegate lead for good on February 13, 2008, racks up 10 straight victories in primary and caucus contests between February 9 and February 19, and wins 13 of the 24 contests held on March 5, 2008, “Super Tuesday”; March 5-18, 2008: in which Obama responds to the Jeremiah Wright controversy; March 18-June 3, 2008: the bitter end, in which

Obama takes the lead in the super delegate count (May 10) despite Clinton winning Pennsylvania (April 22); June 3-7, 2008: the Clinton denouement, in which Hillary Clinton finally concedes the nomination to Obama, June 7; August 23-28, 2008: running mate selection and the coronation, in which Obama names U.S. Senator Joseph Biden (D-Del) as his running mate for Vice President (August 23), and gratefully accepts the nomination of his party (August 27). (21) In this primary contest, Obama had bested Clinton in votes, 17.3 million to her 16.8 million, had won 27 states to her 16, and finished with 3,188.5 delegates to Clinton's 1,010.5 (2,024 needed to win the nomination). (22)

During the first three periods noted above, one researcher reported the following surge in Obama's support (see Table 1):

Table 1

Obama's Support Grows from December 2007 to February 2008 (Showing % Supporting Obama)					
Group	Change		Group	Change	
White voters	20%	49%	Moderates	27%	57%
White women	19%	40%	Liberals	27%	53%
18-44	30%	60%	College Grads	27%	65%

Source: Adapted from Martin Kilson, "Election Analysis: Obama Campaign Heads Toward Democratic Nomination," *The Black Commentator*, March 13, 2008 Issue 268, Table II; http://blackcommentator.com/268/268_edbd_kilson_analysis...

However, another researcher observed that Obama seemed to do better in those states with large Black populations (such as Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia), or with small Black populations (like Vermont, Maine, South Dakota), but seemed to lose states with Black populations between 6% and 17% of the state's total population. Sirotta called this phenomenon "the race chasm", and its appearance signaled the fact that winning the white vote would be an arduous endeavor for Obama. (23)

In the general election, Obama's opponent was U.S. Senator John McCain (R-AZ), who had won his party's nomination by March 4, 2008, and had named former Governor Sarah Palin (R-AK) as his Vice Presidential running mate on August 29, 2008. On September 15, 2008, the investment banking firm Lehman Brothers collapsed, after another investment bank, Bear Stearns, had failed in August 2008, sending shock waves throughout the American and world economies.

Damaging his campaign, John McCain suspended his political canvassing and returned to Washington, D.C., urging Obama to do the same in order to lobby for a Congressional bailout of the financial industry which the Bush 43 Administration was preparing. McCain also appeared to threaten to cancel the first of three (3) presidential debates scheduled to begin on September 26. Relenting, McCain took part in the first debate, and was judged to have lost it. Nothing in the subsequent debates (one vice presidential, October 2; and two more presidential, October 9 and 16) did anything to change this basic disposition of the race. (24)

The Black Vote

On Election Day, November 4, 2008, Barack Obama won the popular vote, 69,498,216 (53%) to McCain's 59,948,240 (46%), and the electoral vote, 365 to 173. (25) The Black vote, 90% of which Obama had won in the primary season, went for Obama 95% to 4% for McCain. Between November 2007 and January 2008, most Black voters had been supporters of Hillary Clinton, who had declared her candidacy on January 20, 2007. This included many Black elected officials, such as U.S. Representatives Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX), Alcee Hastings (D-FL), Charles Rangel (D-NY), Yvette Clarke (D-NY), Gregory Meeks (D-NY), Edolphus Towns (D-NY), Laura Richardson (D-CA), Diane Watson (D-CA), Corrine Brown (D-FL), David Scott (D-GA), Emanuel Cleaver (D-MO), and John Lewis (D-GA). After Obama won the Iowa caucus (January 3, 2008) and South Carolina's primary (with about 80% of the Black vote, with Black voters comprising 53% of all Democratic voters in the state), prominent civil rights icon John Lewis switched sides, from Clinton to Obama, on February 28, 2008. (26) Initially divided between Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and John Edwards supporters, the Congressional Black Caucus did not officially endorse any candidate, though prominent members like Rep. Charles Rangel (D-NY) joined Lewis in ultimately supporting Obama. (27)

Money and Politics in the Campaign

In the 2008 Presidential general election campaign, Barack Obama became the first major party candidate to refuse public funds since the inception of public campaign financing in 1976. (28) Obama raised a total of \$745 million, compared to McCain's \$368 million, marking the first time in U.S. history that candidates for the Presidency raised more than one billion dollars. (29)

As for the source of Obama's campaign cash, significantly, the top contributor to his campaign was the investment bank, Goldman Sachs. In fact, of the top twenty (20) contributors to his campaign, five (Goldman Sachs, JPMorgan Chase & Co, Citigroup, Inc, UBS AG, and Morgan Stanley) were from the financial sector. (30)

The influence of the big banks on Obama's first term would be seen in his appointments of Timothy Geithner (Secretary of the Treasury, former employee of the International Monetary Fund and deregulationist, protégé of Lawrence Summers), and Lawrence Summers (Director, WH National Economic Council, former employee of hedge fund D.E. Shaw and Co., and a chief architect, with Robert Rubin, of the deregulation of the financial sector during the Bush 43 Administration), to prominent positions in the administration. (31)

Selected Policy Positions of Candidate and President Obama, 2007-2012

The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan

The junior U.S. Senator from Illinois first achieved national attention for his opposition to the war in Iraq. As a state senator in Illinois, he declared his reservations about the course which the Bush 43 Administration was taking. In October, 2002, six months before the invasion of Iraq began, Obama spoke out against any such move. In a speech delivered in Chicago, he said, "...I do not oppose all wars...What I am opposed to is a dumb war...What I am opposed to is the cynical attempt by Richard Perle [Chair, Defense Policy Board, c.2001-2003] and Paul Wolfowitz [U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense, c.2001-2005] and other armchair warriors in this administration to shove their ideological agendas down our throats...." (32)

However, candidate Obama was more than willing to double down on the war in Afghanistan. During the campaign, from July 2007 to October 2008, Obama called for additional U.S. troops and resources to be committed to fighting al Qaeda, re-directing U.S. forces from Iraq in order to do so. At the time, he promised to bring to the White House "...a comprehensive strategy that prioritizes Afghanistan and the fight against al Qaeda...." (33) As President, Obama authorized (December 1, 2009) 30,000 more American troops for Afghanistan at an additional cost of one million dollars per troop per year above what was already being spent. He also escalated a drone war in Pakistan begun under Bush 43, ordering in his first nine and one half months as president more strikes than Bush had ordered in his last three years in office, strikes whose "hit rate" (i.e., killing targeted "insurgents") was 2%. (34)

The last US troops were withdrawn from Iraq in December 2011. But, by June 2010, over \$1 trillion dollars had been spent by the US on wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. At least 100,000 Iraqi civilians, nearly 15,000 Afghan civilians, and more than 6,700 US troops have been killed in America's two imperialist oil and resources wars. (35) Such are the Obama foreign policy initiatives engendered by neoliberalism's attempt to impose a "new international order". (36)

The Financial Crisis

During the campaign, candidate Obama gave speeches in which he seemed to suggest that major reforms were called for in order to meet the challenge of the Great Recession (began in December 2007 and ending in June 2009, as determined by the National Bureau of Economic Research/NBER) At NASDAQ in New York City, on September 17, 2007, Obama sought to evoke the spirit of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the latter's 1932 call for a "renewed trust" in the market and "a re-appraisal of values." After paying obeisance to the power of America's business class ("I believe that America's free market has been the engine of America's great progress. It's created a prosperity that is the envy of the world. It's led to a standard of living unmatched in history."), nevertheless he called for "the market's invisible hand" to be guided by "a higher principle": "...the idea that we are all in this together." Though the speech went on to call for greater regulation to address the coming crisis ("... from time to time, we have put in place certain rules of the road to make competition fair, and open, and honest."), shared sacrifice (from "Wall Street" and "Main Street"), and listed unelaborated reforms (e.g., "simplify" the tax code; "providing...a world class education" to Americans; "modernize and strengthen America's safety net for working Americans."), it also made clear why no large-scale jobs program would be forthcoming from an Obama administration: "It is true as well that we cannot simply look backwards for solutions...or hope that *the New Deal programs* borne of a different era are...adequate to meet the challenges of the future [emphasis added]." (37)

Seven months later, on March 27, 2008, also in New York City, this time at Cooper Union, candidate Obama would proffer some of the same themes, only this time conflating his earlier "higher principle" with the supposed alignment of "the well-being of American business, its capital markets and its [sic] American people..." promising to deliver "a 21st century regulatory framework" for business and "a bold opportunity agenda for the American people". Mentioning few specific reforms (e.g., the proposed creation of a \$10 billion foreclosure prevention fund), the speech was interrupted by applause twenty-four times. (38) However, neither speech called for criminal prosecution against those on Wall Street responsible for the Great Recession, a transaction fee on speculative trades, a moratorium on housing foreclosures, a salary cap on CEO and executive pay, nor a renewed enforcement of antitrust laws to break up financial institutions deemed "too big to fail". (39) From Obama's perspective, fighting for any of these latter policy positions would have been "tilting at windmills." (40)

As President, Obama has adhered to the ideas expressed in these speeches. He has committed at least \$10 trillion dollars of federal bailout money to the economic malefactors on Wall Street responsible for the fiasco, eviscerated workers' pensions and health care plans through the terms of the auto bailout, and reneged on his campaign promises to push for the passage of the Employee Free Choice Act and renegotiate the North America Free Trade Act so as to include stronger labor and environmental protections. (41)

The Housing Crisis

During the campaign, in response to the housing crisis, candidate Obama proposed “tougher penalties” for mortgage fraud coupled with a federal definition of same, a “new FHA (Federal Housing Administration) housing security program” in order that lenders more readily buy or refinance existing mortgages, a “\$10 billion foreclosure prevention fund” designed “to help low- and middle- income families”, and “a 10% mortgage interest tax credit” for homeowners who do not itemize deductions on their tax returns. (42) What is striking about these proposals is their timidity in the midst of the greatest economic crisis faced by Americans since the Great Depression. By comparison, two of Obama’s Democratic rivals for the party’s nomination offered much bolder programs. Senator John Edwards (D-NC) proposed a mandatory moratorium on foreclosures, at least a seven (7) year freeze on interest rates, and federal subsidies to help struggling homeowners stay in their homes. Even Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-NY), whose plan was weaker than that of Edwards, offered a voluntary foreclosure moratorium, a shorter interest rate freeze, and \$30 billion in promised federal aid to help besieged homeowners and communities. (43)

One of President Obama’s responses to the housing crisis was the Home Affordable Modification Program (HAMP), enacted in February 2009 as part of Stimulus #2 (i.e., the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, signed into law February 17, 2009; Stimulus #1, the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act, which established a \$700 billion Troubled Asset Relief Program [TARP], was signed into law by Bush 43 on October 3, 2008). (44) In a speech announcing HAMP, Obama offered a plan to reduce the mortgage interest rates and payments of 3-4 million homeowners, especially those holding subprime mortgage loans, and whose loans had been financed through Fannie Mae (the Federal National Mortgage Association) or Freddie Mac (the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation). The centerpiece of the plan was the proposed establishment of “clear guidelines” by which lenders and borrowers/home buyers agree on the rates that borrowers can afford in order to lower mortgage payments. (45) But, in fact, by September 2012, HAMP was judged to be a failure, projected (by December of that year) to reach only 1.2 million of the distressed homeowners originally spoken of by the president. The heart of the matter seems to have been that investors and loan “servicers”, usually owned by the big banks, could not agree on mutually profitable rules since investors often lose money in foreclosures while “servicers” make money through the collection of their fees and expenses usually mandated through the courts to be paid first in any foreclosure proceeding. (46) As with war-making and financial regulation, Obama’s deference to neoliberalism’s fetishism of the market has failed to curb the housing crisis.

Health Care Reform

During the primary season of the 2008 presidential election cycle, in answer to an NAACP candidate questionnaire, candidate Obama said the following about universal health care (the phrase used on the questionnaire):

I will sign a *universal health bill* [emphasis added] into law by the end of my first term in office. My plan will ensure that all Americans have health care coverage through their employers, private health plans, the federal government, or the states. My plan builds on and improves our current insurance system ...For those without health insurance I will establish a new public insurance program and provide subsidies to afford care for those who need them...My plan requires all employers to contribute towards health coverage for their employees or towards the cost of the public plan. (47)

Significantly, the candidate's response said nothing about *universal health coverage* provided through a single payer system run by the federal government. As critics have documented, Obama's thinking on health care reform has moved steadily rightward since his days as an Illinois state legislator who openly declared his support for "universal health care for all Americans." (48)

Once into the general election, candidate Obama's proposal for "health care reform" largely centered on the creation of an "individual mandate" to buy health care insurance. This idea, born in the rightwing Heritage Foundation in 1989, had been adopted in Massachusetts by its Republican governor, Willard "Mitt" Romney, in 2006. (49)

Now in office, President Obama signed into law the "Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act" (PPACA), often popularly called "Obamacare", on March 23, 2010. This gargantuan law, almost 2,000 pages in length, affecting 14% of U.S. GDP, and not scheduled to be completely phased in until after a ten (10) year roll-out, was most noteworthy for what it did *not* do. It did not contain a public option nor establish a single payer system; it did not contain a mandatory expansion of Medicaid coverage; it did not allow for drug re-importation; it did not allow the government to negotiate for bulk price rates of drugs; and, it did not repeal the anti-trust exemption of Big Pharma and the giant health insurances companies. (50) In fact, judging by Republican resistance to the new law, a sizeable portion of the U.S. Black population (nearly 40%) may not see a voluntary expansion of Medicaid coverage because they live in states with Republican governors pledged to oppose this feature of Obamacare (see Table 2):

Table 2

States Refusing Medicaid Expansion through PPACA
As of May 2013

State	Governor	Black Population, c.2010		Black Population without Health Insurance, c.2011*	
		Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Alabama	R. Bentley	1,251,311	26.2%	206,270	73%
Georgia	N. Deal	2,950,435	30.5	587,538	65
Idaho	C.L. Otter	9,810	0.6	--	--
Iowa+	T. Branstad	89,148	2.9	11,313	62
Louisiana	B. Jindal	1,452,396	32.0	302,972	67
Maine	P. LePage	15,707	1.2	--	--
Michigan	P. Bryant	1,412,742	14.2	220,544	73
N. Carolina	P. McCrory	2,048,628	21.5%	360,857	62%
Oklahoma	M. Fallin	277,644	7.4	57,831	65
Pennsylvania	T. Corbett	1,377,689	10.8	176,027	64
S. Carolina	N. Haley	1,290,684	27.9	245,314	72
S. Dakota	D. Daugaard	10,207	1.3	--	--
Texas	R. Perry	2,979,598	11.8	570,043	59
Wisconsin	S. Walker	359,148	6.3	48,770	74

Sources: "Expanding Medicaid Is Best Option for States," *Rand Corporation*, June 3, 2013, <http://www.rand.org/news/press/2013/06/03.html> ; "Impact of Medicaid Expansion for Low-income Blacks Across States," *Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured*, April 2013 <http://www.kff.org/kcmu> ; Sonya Rastogi et al., "The Black Population: 2010," *U.S. Bureau of the Census* Issued September 2011, Table 5, p. 8 <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-06.pdf> ; "Where each state stands on ACA's Medicaid expansion," *The Advisory Board Company* May 24, 2013 <http://www.advisory.com/Daily-Briefing/2012/11/09/MedicalMap> .

Legend: * = Number represents those without health insurance; percent represents those without health insurance whose income is less than or equal to 138% of the Federal Poverty Level (\$15, 856 for individuals in 2013)

-- = Insufficient sample size

+ = Gov. Branstad agreed to a compromise May 22, 2013 to allow the Medicaid expansion to proceed in his state.

Since 19% of African-Americans nationwide do not have health insurance (compared to 13% of Euro-Americans, 17% of Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 31% of Latino-Americans), and the uninsured rates among them in the fourteen states mentioned range from 59% to 74%, the uncertain fate of Medicaid expansion is no small concern as to what ultimate effect the new health insurance law will have on the well-being of African-Americans. (51) As with the other policy issues reviewed above, Obama's approach to America's health care crisis reveals his ideological fealty to neoliberalism, especially its preference for ill-conceived market solutions to social needs.

Four Crises in Black America in an Era of Neoliberalism

In 1990, almost twenty years before the Great Recession, the president of the National Urban League called for an "urban Marshall Plan" to rebuild America's impoverished cities and educate and employ their residents. He noted that the \$300 billion military budget could be cut in half, with the fall of the Berlin Wall (and the disintegration of the Soviet Union soon to follow), freeing up a \$150 billion "peace dividend". He proposed that \$50 billion of this savings be invested in America's poorest citizens and their neighborhoods, especially since people of color (often themselves the residents of these areas) would comprise almost half of the U.S. work force in the coming decade (c.1990-2000). (52)

Now, in 2013, as the effects of the Great Recession linger, the damage done to Black America by this economic collapse is palpable. In this historical juncture, four interconnected crises plague African-Americans in the new millennium:

- the mass incarceration debacle;
- the scourge of colorblind racism;
- the Katrina and post-Katrina neoliberal model for "Negro removal" and privatization;
- and
- the subprime mortgage disaster.

Each of these crises has been exacerbated by the Great Recession.

The Mass Incarceration Debacle

The declaration of "The War on Drugs" by the Reagan Administration in the late 1980s had the predictable effect of dramatically increasing the number of Black people behind bars. Between 1979 and 1990, while Black violent crime rates did not appreciably change, the number of Black persons confined in state and federal prisons grew as a percentage of those incarcerated populations, from 39% to 53%. (53)

Moreover, though hotly debated, the racist differential in the American criminal justice system is largely attributable to four (4) practices driven by racism/white supremacy:

1. over-reporting of Black crime;
2. over-policing of Black neighborhoods;
3. longer sentences for the same offenses; and
4. higher conviction rates for the same offenses. (54)

Illustrating these destructive norms, Quigley catalogued fourteen facts which indisputably reveal the race and class bias of the American criminal justice system. These include that (#1) Black people are arrested for illicit drug use at three times their percentage in the population though they are no more likely to use, and (#3) at twice to eleven times the drug arrest rate for Euro-Americans; (#4) once arrested, African-Americans are more likely to remain in prison awaiting trial than are white arrestees; (#12) African-American juveniles are only 16% of the U.S. youth population but 28% of juvenile arrests, 37% of youth in juvenile jails, and 58% of youth sent to adult prison; and (#13) with only 5% of the world's population, the U.S. warehouses 25% of the world's prisoners, and Black males are the largest percentage of U.S. inmates. (55)

Provocatively, Professor Michelle Alexander has described this system as “the new jim crow.” (56) Singling out the shift in power in the courtroom from judges to prosecutors occasioned by the War on Drugs, Alexander notes that the unbridled exercise of prosecutorial discretion serves as a hammer to force defendants into plea bargains, and decries the “civic death” which “the prison label” (i.e., ex-felon) forces on entire generations of Black people, especially Black men. (57)

Further detailing the precise procedures by which this system of racial controls operates, Alexander documents that it attacks the 14th Amendment by allowing pretext stops and consent searches; replaces “probable cause” with “reasonable suspicion”; adopts a “reasonable person” standard in the face of police intimidation via “bus sweeps” and similar dragnet tactics; legitimizes *any* reason for a minor traffic stop; dragoons tens of thousands of people in police nets searching for drugs; bribes local police agencies to adopt these policies by offering contingent federal monies; organizes SWAT teams using DOD equipment and data; allows local police agencies to keep seized drug dealers’ property and money; encourages local “fishing expeditions” for drug loot; underfunds and overworks public defenders’ offices; denies competent counsel and/or trial to most drug defendants by reason of overcrowded dockets and underfunded, overworked public defenders’ offices; enforces mandatory minimums in sentencing thus shifting courtroom power from judges to prosecutors; and labels people for life as “felons” (“the prison label”). (58)

Significantly, Professor Alexander argues that the protective coloration of this disastrous system is colorblind racism, which eschews open racial hostility. The result is a situation in which, in one of her most quoted passages, “[m]ore African Americans are under correctional control today—in prison or jail, on probation or parole—than were enslaved in 1850....” (59)

This continually growing mass of Black prisoners is more and more commonly warehoused by a for-profit, private, prison-building industry. This economic sector reflects one of neoliberalism’s core values: privatization. (60)

The Scourge of Colorblind Racism

In the neoliberal era, US political leaders and opinion-makers, guided by influential academics, have retreated from engagement with racial inequality as a systemic, structural matter in favor of “naturalistic” depictions of racial hierarchy and racial subordination and fervid inspections of the presumed moral failings of the poor, chief among these alleged to be their failure to accept “personal responsibility” for their unfortunate social condition. Works by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Nathan Glazer, and William Julius Wilson may be singled out as particularly prominent in this regard. (61)

With the demise of de jure segregation in America as a direct result of the civil rights movement, white supremacy/racism seemed to be in retreat. But, rescued by the Reagan Administration, a new regime of racist practice and policy began to take hold. Known by various names (e.g., “aversive racism”, “the new racism”, “friendship orthodoxy”), one of the most persuasive analyses of this phenomenon has been authored by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva.

In his ironically titled book, *Racism without Racists: Colorblind Racism and Racial Inequality in Contemporary America*, Bonilla-Silva identifies the basic ideological frames, rhetorical styles, and stories of colorblind racism. The four basic frames are: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and the minimization of racism. Complementing these basic frames are five rhetorical styles which most often express colorblind racism: avoidance of direct language about racial matters; the use of “verbal parachutes” to escape difficult subjects (e.g., AA/EO); psychological projection; the use of diminutives (e.g., “My uncle is a little bit racist against Asian people.”); and, as a last resort when facing an extremely sensitive racial topic (e.g., interracial marriage), the retreat into total verbal incoherence.

These rhetorical styles are combined with typical stories. Stories are of two types: story lines and testimonies. Four story lines predominate: “The past is past”; “I didn’t own any slaves”; “The Jews, Irish, and Italians made it, why not Black people?” and “I didn’t get the job (or promotion/scholarship/college admission) because of a person of color.” Story lines often lack personal details, which can be supplied through testimonies of positive or negative interaction with Black people. (62)

The frames, styles, and stories of colorblind racism fit together loosely and flexibly, allowing white speakers great range in conveying emotional tone and in approaching a wide variety of situations. The damage caused by colorblind racism is most visible in a series of U.S. Supreme Court decisions which denied criminal defendants the right to challenge racial discrimination in their convictions. These decisions provide a protective coloration to an unjust system. (63)

The Katrina and Post-Katrina Neoliberal Model for “Negro Removal” and Privatization

Longstanding patterns of racist residential segregation have persisted in American life. Since the 1960s, American cities have suffered from job flight, persistent anti-Black workplace discrimination, and “intractable racial segregation in housing.” (64) To these developments must be added a consideration of the American city as the locus for “the absorption of capital and labor surpluses”, the process of capital accumulation, and in the neoliberal era, the scene of “urban predatory practices [such as subprime mortgage lending]” central to the dynamics of modern “monopoly-finance capital”. (65) Consistent with this deregulated neoliberal capitalist economy is the transfer of wealth from the poor and working classes to the rich elites. As Harvey observes, while Black low-income borrowers lost billions to predatory lending practices, “...bonuses on Wall Street were soaring on unheard of profit rates from pure financial manipulation. The inference is that by various hidden channels massive transfers of wealth from the poor to the rich were occurring...” Harvey calls this latter process “accumulation by dispossession.” (66)

A meteorological disaster struck the city of New Orleans, Louisiana from August 25 to September 15, 2005. It was matched in ferocity by the neoliberal disaster which has turned the city into an unwilling economic model for privatizing public education and gentrifying the city, a 21st century version of the 1960s urban policy known as “Negro Removal.” (67)

The city has shrunk from the 24th largest in the country in 1990, to 31st in 2000, to out of the top 50 by 2010. The Black population of New Orleans has gone from 67% in 2000 to 59% in 2010, while its Euro-American population, though also 24,000 fewer, now represents a larger proportion of the city.

The public schools of New Orleans have become a ripe bauble for the privatizers of public education. In 2004-5, there were more than 123 public schools in the city. After Katrina, the School Board instituted a charter school initiative which has resulted in the number of public schools in the city being reduced to 88. Of those eighty-eight, only 22 are traditionally run public schools while the remaining 66 are charters. Seventy-eight percent (78%) of the city’s students are in charter schools, and 90% of all public schools students are Black. (68)

It should be clear that privatization offers no surefire solution to the problems of American public school education. At least two national studies comparing charter school and public school performance conclude that charter schools do not consistently outperform public schools, have exclusionary admissions policies designed to weed out low-performing or special needs students, negatively affect public school budgets, and show no special skill in closing the racial achievement gap. (69)

The Subprime Mortgage Disaster

As alluded to earlier in this essay, the losses to Black subprime mortgage holders have been substantial, pushing the overall loss of Black wealth back to levels not seen since the 1950s. Though some recovery of household wealth has begun to occur, Black households continue to lag. (70)

According to United for a Fair Economy (UFE), the financial losses suffered by Black subprime mortgage holders during the Great Recession rose to between \$71 and \$92 billion, with total loss of wealth for African-Americans and Latino-Americans during this period (c.2007-2009) ranging between \$162 and \$213 billion, “the greatest loss of wealth for people of color in modern U.S. history.” (71) The nation’s largest banks deliberately targeted low-income Black and Latino families with fraudulently marketed subprime loans. Tactics expressly used included exorbitant pre-payment penalties, balloon/exploding payment ARMs (adjustable rate mortgages), exclusion of required taxes and insurance, steering as a sales tactic, interest-only loans, and so-called L.I.A.R. (lack of income or ability to repay) and N.I.N.J.A. (no income, no job, or assets) loans. (72)

Though little has been done to recover monies and fees falsely secured, and to stop foreclosures, it is important to state that the legal liability of the biggest banks (at one point c.2008, seven giant firms dominated the U.S. mortgage market—Citigroup, Countywide Financial, GMAC, HSBC, JPMorgan Chase, Washington Mutual, and Wells Fargo) for these schemes should never have been in doubt. By 2012, at least three (Bank of America [which had absorbed Countrywide Financial in June 2008], JPMorgan Chase, and Wells Fargo) of these financial behemoths “too-big-to-fail” were being sued in state and federal courts. Allegations include running a “tape-and-scissors” operation to falsify loan documents to the creation of an internal pipeline, known as “the ‘Hustle’”, to expedite the closing of loans by eliminating company safeguards and previously mandatory internal checklists. (73)

Critical Responses to Candidate and President Obama, 2007-2012

Right-Wing Critiques of Obama

The section of the American commentariat represented by FOX News has been especially fertile ground for hysterical and near-hysterical attacks on candidate and President Barack Obama. For example, before the election (October 13, 2007), Sean Hannity claimed that Republicans had not attacked candidate Obama's race though Hannity would ask disingenuously, "Do the Obamas have a race problem of their own?" Ann Coulter, in February 2008, on FOX News's *Your World* referred to Obama as "B. Hussein Obama," clearly identifying the candidate as the fearsome, anxiety-producing, Racial Other. The day after the November 4, 2008 election, Bill O'Reilly mused that Obama won despite his "dubious associations" and "very liberal voting record." In 2011, on his FOX Business show, *Follow the Money* (April 27, 2011), Eric Bolling stoked birtherism by claiming that President Obama's birth certificate lacked an appropriate border, the correct one having to be photoshopped onto a suspected forgery. And, attempting to rewrite history, on *The Rush Limbaugh Show* (July 3, 2012), Limbaugh claimed that Obama had caused the collapse of the U.S. economy by his election, when Bureau of Labor Statistics data reveal that job losses began in February 2008, seven months *before* Obama's electoral victory. (74)

Though the right's attacks may often be dismissed as transparently tendentious and deliberately misleading, the real purpose and inner workings of "the right-wing noise machine" have been helpfully dissected by David Brock. He reports that

It is now possible to watch a lie move from a disreputable right-wing Web site onto the afternoon talk radio shows, to several cable chat shows throughout the evening, and into the next morning's *Washington Post* – all in twenty-four hours. This media food chain moves phony information and GOP talking points—manufactured by and for conservatives, often bought and paid for by conservative political interests, and disseminated through an unabashedly biased right-wing media apparatus that follows no rules or professional norms—into every family dining room, every workplace, and every Internet chat room in America. (75)

Thus he operates the right's "new media 'echo chamber' ". (76)

In sum, the right's criticisms of President Obama tend to revolve around caricatures of him as the Racial Other/Outsider (e.g., birtherism; former Gov. John Sununu's (R-NH), a McCain surrogate during the 2008 campaign, comment that he wished that Obama would "learn to be an American"). (77) Supporting right-wing memes as variants of this master stereotype are:

Obama, the Socialist;
Obama, the Apologist for America;
Obama, the Unqualified and Incompetent; and
Obama, the Purveyor of Black Resentment (a la Rev. Jeremiah Wright).

Obama has been called a “racist”, a “Marxist”, a “neo-Marxist fascist dictator”, a “magic Negro”, a “Muslim”, a “terrorist”, a “Nazi”, a “foreigner”, a “jackass”, and a “socialist”. In general, the “Obama hate machine” worked, and works, hard to portray candidate and President Obama “as exotic, different, foreign, untrustworthy—even un-American and dangerous...,” much of this commentary funded by wealthy conservatives (e.g., Charles and David Koch). (78)

Left-Wing Critiques of Obama

Left-wing, or liberal, critics of Obama generally may be divided into two camps: apologists and consistent radical democrats. (79) We shall consider each group separately.

Unlike the right, left-leaning critics of Obama sometimes present apologia for the President’s policies. Such is the case of Zillah Eisenstein. While professing to offer support for “new feminisms” around the globe, and endorsing alternatives to war, she nonetheless unself-consciously entitles one of her chapters, “God Bless America and Her Troops.” (80) There is no serious analysis of Obama’s policy positions in Eisenstein’s commentary.

Another insubstantial, friendly commentary on Obama is by Jabari Asim, in *What Obama Means For Our Culture, Our Politics, Our Future*. (81) The book contains no consideration of Obama’s foreign policy, his health care reform proposals, or the issue of job creation, settling instead for a disquisition on the future president’s love of basketball as a metaphor for the Black experience in America, and musings on the “transformational” nature of his candidacy. (82)

More engaged, harsher treatments of Obama are offered by Paul Street and Tariq Ali. (83) Both authors render strong left, consistently radical democratic reviews of Obama’s policies.

Street argues that “[Obama’s brand]...is designed to make us feel good about our government while corporate overlords loot the treasury, our elected officials continue to have their palms greased by armies of corporate lobbyists, our corporate media diverts us with gossip and trivia, and our imperial wars expand in the Middle East.” (84) Tariq Ali, for his part, describes a pattern to be repeated by candidate and President Obama

Whether seriously considering escalating an unwinnable war, bailing out Wall Street, getting the insurance company lobbyists to write the new ‘health care’ bill or suggest nominations to his cabinet and the Supreme Court, the mechanism is always the same. A better option is put on the table for show, but not taken seriously. A worse option is rapidly binned. And a supposed compromise emerges. This creates the impression among party loyalists that the prez is doing his best...but that the better alternative simply isn’t feasible. This is followed by the spin doctors coming down hard to defend some shoddy compromise or other. (85)

Ali makes clear that this is his criticism of Obama’s corporate-friendly health care reform, and Street concurs. (86)

Finally, in perhaps one of the most trenchant radical democratic left critiques of Obama, leveled before he was elected president, Adolph Reed, Jr., offered the following judgment:

He’s a vacuous opportunist. I’ve never been an Obama supporter. I’ve known him since the very beginning of his political career, which was his campaign for the seat in my state senate district in Chicago. He struck me then as a vacuous opportunist, a good performer with an ear for how to make white liberals like him. I argued at the time that his fundamental political center of gravity, beneath the empty rhetoric of hope and change and new directions, was neoliberal.

His political repertoire has always included the repugnant stratagem of using connection with black audiences in exactly the same way Bill Clinton did— i.e., getting props both for emoting with the black crowd and talking through them to affirm a victim-blaming ‘tough love’ message that focuses on alleged behavioral pathologies in poor black communities. Because he’s able to claim racial insider standing, he actually goes beyond Clinton and rehearses the scurrilous and ridiculous sort of narrative Bill Cosby has made infamous. (87)

“Post-Racialism” and Deracialization in the Age of Obama

As could be expected, the successful campaign and election to the highest public office in the American republic of a man of biracial heritage who identifies himself as Black was the occasion for much fevered and celebratory comment. Among the most inane of these was the notion that Obama’s election somehow represented the arrival of a “post-racial” America. One of the chief practitioners of this dishonest rhetorical ploy was Matt Bai, who mused in *The New York Times*, three months before the election, that Obama’s ascendance represented a generational shift in Black politics from a civil rights-oriented cadre of Black leaders to a younger cohort of Black elected officials (BEOs) who are guided by a de-emphasis of racial matters. (88)

The former see themselves as “spokespersons” for the Black community while the latter consider themselves to be “ambassadors” to said community, their purview not being limited to race. Or, in the words of Mr. Cory Booker (D), Black mayor of Newark, New Jersey, who Bai quotes: “I don’t want to be pigeonholed...I don’t want people to expect me to speak about *those* issues...I don’t want to be the person that’s turned to when CNN talks about black leaders....” For Bai, Obama’s seemingly impending election meant possibly “the end of black politics” because Obama could not be president of the United States and simultaneously “the most powerful voice in black America at the same time....” Better that Obama should seek to emulate the political path of BEOs like Mr. Booker, or Michael Nutter, the Black mayor of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, or Deval Patrick (D), the Black governor of Massachusetts. (89)

Shelby Steele, Salim Muwakkil, and Martin Kilson offered their own variations on the “post-racial” theme in their takes on Obama, from varying political perspectives. Steele, a Black conservative, the day after Obama was elected in 2008, celebrated Obama’s victory in “a largely white nation” as a demonstration of the power of Obama’s “racial idealism”. (90) This “racial idealism” was Obama’s only real contribution, since on policy issues Steele judged him to be a warmed-over Keynesian and a Great Society throwback. But, neglecting to mention that the majority of white voters *rejected* Mr. Obama on Election Day, Steele nonetheless proceeded to label Obama a “bargainer” who appeals to white folk to not hold his race against him in return for his promise not to presume that they are racists. Such idealism, Steele admitted, is not likely to end racial disparities. (91) Kilson, a self-identified Black “pragmatic leftist”, expressed the hope, three days after Mr. Obama’s election, that an Obama presidency would energize “liberal voter-blocs” and “civic-activist social movement forces” in order to push Obama, as a “liberal reformer”, toward “the progressive side of the American political spectrum” and toward “liberal-reform public policies.” (92) And, Salim Muwakkil, writing for a social-democratic publication nine months after the 2008 election, declared that those who see in Obama’s election the emergence of “a ‘post-racial’ America” have been encouraged to do so by the president’s own “race-averse” posture concerning racial matters, both during the campaign and beyond his inauguration. (93) Muwakkil ends his ruminations questionably suggesting that Obama is faced with “a dilemma”: “...downplay black Americans’ needs or ... lose his political balance.” But, this formulation clearly calls into question the utility and efficacy of putting a Black face into the highest, most politically powerful, office in the land in the first place. (94)

Bai, Steele, Muwakkil, and Kilson’s commentaries, of course, amount to variations of an apologia for deracialization, a political posture adopted by a certain class of BEOs after the demise of the civil rights and Black Power movements. (95) Obama’s “[race-neutral] tactical playbook” is a political strategy cut from the same cloth. But, the obvious drawback of this strategy is that, using it, the pressing substantive needs of African-Americans are not likely to be advocated, openly fought for, made into policy, and won.

Perceptively, Ta-Nehisi Coates demonstrated this drawback in a widely circulated piece written toward the end of President Obama's first term. (96) As a self-confessed Black "liberal", Coates soberly professes to find a troubling "double standard" at the heart of racial integration for Black people: they, like Obama, must be "twice as good" and "half as black" in order to succeed on terms set by white America. Chief among these terms is the forbidding of any expression of Black rage, and even with these terms being met, Black America's acceptance is always conditional. (97) Being "twice as good" means that Black people "...--enslaved, tortured, raped, discriminated against, and subjected to the most lethal homegrown terrorist movement in American history—feel no anger toward their tormentors." It is the attempts to contain, deny, repress, and delegitimize Black anger—seen in President Obama's hasty, ill-conceived, and morally indefensible firing of Shirley Sherrod from her Department of Agriculture position in July 2012 for alleged anti-white rantings—which explain "the fear of a Black president" alluded to in the title of Coates's essay. As has been pointed earlier here, Obama's entire racial strategy for the election was premised upon a "[race-neutral] tactical playbook" which delegitimized Black anger. But, as Coates maintains, the first Black president who assiduously tries to avoid race is unalterably marked and constrained by it. (98)

Perhaps, it is this fear of Black anger that prevented Obama from pursuing criminal charges against the highest levels of leadership on Wall Street in the wake of the Great Recession. As Frank Rich observed, by not holding Wall Street accountable for its financial malfeasance and fraud which caused the economic crisis, Obama allowed the big banks and the investor class to set their agenda in opposition to his, at the outset of his tenure in office. (99) And, the agenda of the big banks and the investor class is austerity, and more of the same policies (e.g., being deficit-obsessed) which created the mess in the first place. (100)

Judging the Deracialized President

Judgments about Obama's effectiveness as a Black president addressing the needs of Black America specifically have produced a lively debate, some of it seen in the Bai and Coates articles summarized above. Also instructive is the debate between Frederick C. Harris and Ari Melber.

Writing in *The New York Times*, before the 2012 election, Columbia University political science professor Frederick C. Harris described "the price" to Black America of a Black president: silence on the continuing immiseration of many in Black communities across the country. Harris noted that Obama has invoked "the politics of respectability" much as Booker T. Washington did in an earlier age when addressing Black audiences, and has not been challenged by Black political and religious leaders, generally, to be more specific in tackling the ills that plague African-Americans. Instead, Harris wrote, "the Obama presidency has ... marked the decline...of a political vision centered on challenging racial inequality..." as Black elites accept a politics of coalition based on "universal, race-neutral policies" as advocated by Bayard Rustin and not the "independent voting bloc" strategy favored by Malcolm X. (101)

Responding to the criticisms by Harris of Obama, journalist Ari Melber professed to answer in the affirmative the question posed in his essay's title: "Is Obama good for black people?" (102) After relating that Black political figures like Condoleezza Rice, Clarence Thomas, Artur Davis, and Allen West are not spared harsh criticism by Black constituents, Melber proposes to judge Obama in three areas: civil rights, wealth inequality, and symbolism. Melber states that Obama's defense of affirmative action in the Fisher case at UT Austin, and his cutting of taxes for the bottom quintile of Americans, among other things, outweighs Obama's admitted de-emphasis of race. The latter is a "symbolic" issue, not as important as the "explicit" and "general" issues represented by the former, in Melber's assessment of "a black agenda." (103)

Melber's defense, however, is too narrowly drawn (he ignores Obama's imperialist "humanitarian interventionism" so vividly on display in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Egypt, Somalia, Yemen, and Syria) and misreads the magnitude of the interrelated crises facing Black America. Historian Thomas J. Sugrue, for example, asserts that the continued existence of "... the deep and persistent gap between blacks and whites by nearly every socioeconomic measure ..." gives the lie to any notion of a "post-racial America" being ushered in by Obama's election. (104) Sugrue goes on to recall that it was deregulation policies enacted by Presidents Reagan, Bush (41 and 43), and Clinton, and seconded by President Obama, that have allowed predatory lenders easier access to poor communities. (105) Bruce A. Dixon reminds us that the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), for fear of weakening the president politically, has not pushed Obama hard on unemployment, Black mass incarceration, imperialist wars and the disgraceful drone program, corporate school reform, and the spreading privatization of public resources and spaces. The result has been, according to Dixon, that the CBC "has become indistinguishable from its big business funders, and almost from their white colleagues." (106) And, Melber's narrow defense of Obama misses the corporate neoliberal capitalist trajectory of Obama's policy choices, choices which the redoubtable Paul Street avers have resulted in a series of betrayals ("throwing under the bus"), including:

...*the labor movement* (betrayed and abandoned on global trade, labor law reform ...and more); *environmentalists* (abandoned and betrayed on offshore drilling, hydraulic fracturing...and more); *senior citizens* (betrayed by the president's ongoing effort to cut Social Security and Medicare benefits); *immigrants* (betrayed by a president who has actually increased the number of deportations); *civil libertarians* (abandoned and betrayed on Guantanamo, rendition, warrantless wiretaps, secret kill lists,...domestic drones...and more); *the mainstream press* (recently betrayed by the president's arch-authoritarian seizure of Associated Press phone records); *nuclear disarmament advocates* (recently betrayed by Obama's \$547 million request for the B61 nuclear gravity bomb in Europe), and *the antiwar community* (betrayed by Obama's sick global drone war,...the escalating U.S. invasion of Africa, U.S. saber-rattling in relation to Iran, Syria, and East Asia and much more).

Last but not least...we have *Black America*, betrayed by a first technically black president who has said and done less about racial inequality than any American chief executive in recent memory [emphasis added]. (107)

Out of the Morass of Deracialization and Toward “The Struggle That Must Be”

We should now be prepared to render an historical judgment on the suitability of deracialization/”[the race-neutral] tactical playbook” as a viable, results-producing strategy for Black politics and Black people. From its beginning in the 1970s, the strategy has always played to the concerns and class interests of the Black petit bourgeoisie: respectability, entrepreneurialism, capital accumulation, narrow individualism, and conspicuous consumerism. Fighting openly and aggressively for Black interests and racial equality has never been a consistent part of its policy agenda. (108) Lately, some leaders in the Black Church have echoed these themes loudly, as seen in the advocacy of “the prosperity gospel” by well-known Black churchmen like T.D. Jakes, Creflo Dollar, Frederick Price, and Eddie Long, as the social gospel tradition of the Black Church has appeared to atrophy. (109) Moreover, in the 1980s, Obama’s chief campaign adviser, David Axelrod, was one of the early pioneers of the deracialization strategy, honed by him as he assisted in the political campaigns of various successful Black candidates for municipal and state office. (110)

In the current historical moment, according to Professor Antonio Monteiro, the Obama presidency “...represents a rupture with [W.E.B.] DuBois and the progressive wing of black intellectuals...,” the logical and historical culmination of the neoliberal deracialization strategy. (111) It is to Booker T. Washington’s racial compromise with white conservatives that one should look in order to grasp the Obama presidency in relation to historic Black intellectuals and politics, not to the racial radicalism of Dr. DuBois. Professor Monteiro even likens Washington’s 1895 Atlanta Compromise speech to Obama’s 2008 Philadelphia race speech, in that both orations announced loudly the orator’s intention to soothe the worries of the white ruling class about any impending fortified struggle for racial and economic equality. Monteiro urges twenty-first century Black intellectuals to reject the model of race neoliberalism proffered by Barack Obama and his presidency, to abandon their performance of symbolic Blackness (note the president’s often remarked upon, and visible affection for, basketball and the music of Al Green), so as to take up the task of “developing a 21st century radical African American intelligentsia...who are not afraid to reject neo-liberalism, who will speak the truth about the Obama Administration and race and US Empire....” In sum, Monteiro insists, “Black folk need a new radical intelligentsia in the DuBoisian tradition.” (112)

Central to elaborating this “new radical intelligentsia” is the construction of a radical, democratic agenda. The work of Dr. Ronald W. Walters is a helpful guide in this process. (113) Several of Dr. Walters’ insights provide useful starting points as we contemplate this endeavor. In specific, Professor Walters declares that 1) since the Reagan Presidency the right has won the ideological terrain of struggle over racism/white supremacy, in part, by making invisible Black victimization. After noting the manner in which “the Black voice” has been suppressed, Walters argues that such censorship abets the process of minimizing or delegitimizing any need for addressing Black subordination. The invisibility of Black victims renders “victimhood” a “personal choice.” But, victimhood is the result of historical acts, and is not mostly or significantly remediable through “personal responsibility”, the mantra of the right and the Obama Administration on matters of racial inequality. (114) 2) One of the central duties of radical democratic Black intellectuals in this country is to tabulate, report, illustrate, and publicize the continuing destruction of Black life and community by racial oppression. Demarcating African-Americans’ history of racial oppression into the slave, post-slave discrimination, and “modern Black Codes” periods, Walters contends that advocates for racial justice have always relied upon “the drama of mobilization” and “public presentation” to garner support for measures of restitution. In this drama and presentation, it is the view of their oppression given by oppressed people themselves which must be certified by, even forced upon, the oppressors and the larger society. (115) 3) In the national discourse which must be joined regarding achieving racial equality and reconciliation, justice is more important than truth because the former requires redistribution from oppressors, while the latter does not. The “civil rights model” (the term is mine) of seeking racial justice focused upon achieving equality, but ignored the connection between socioeconomic resources and civic power. It is clear that this model has failed, according to Walters. (116) And 4), no genuine, cogent presentation of a radical democratic agenda for racial equality in the United States can be presented that does not contain the demand for reparations, as the price of the racial reconciliation needed to remedy the historic and continuing damage to Black America. “The reparations model” of racial justice aims at self-determination for African-Americans, including “both internal Black rehabilitation and external payment of the debt owed the Black community....” This debt obligates the state and private corporations and financial institutions, not individuals. (117)

However, what is missing from these points adduced by Dr. Walters toward reinvigorating a radical Black democratic perspective on achieving social justice in America is any sense of the inescapable need to reckon with American capitalism. Though he does speak at one point of the impossibility of African-Americans achieving “equality in wealth” without reparations because “wealth-based equality is the key to achieving individual, family, and group self-determination on a par with whites...in an American racist and capitalist society”, at another point in the text he emphasizes the need for a “an enlightened view of capitalism”, especially on the part of white people engaged in any dialogue around racial reconciliation. (118)

Perhaps it would be better to admit that one of the weaknesses of the “racial disparities framework” which Dr. Walters wields is, as Reed and Chowkwanyun put it, that it “sidesteps potentially thorny causal questions about the foundation of racially asymmetrical distribution of costs and benefits in contemporary American capitalism’s logic of systemic reproduction.” (119) Better to postulate, as they do, “a dynamic historical materialist perspective in which race and class are relatively distinct—sometimes more, sometimes less, sometimes incoherently related or even interchangeable—inflections within a unitary system of capitalist social hierarchy....” (120)

Thus, the rejection of deracialization is necessarily a rejection of neoliberalism, the latest ideological schema of capitalism. A Black radical democratic agenda, in conclusion, must operate with a critique of neoliberalism as an attempt to depoliticize economic policy away from the “dangers” of democracy; to attack union power by eliminating bargaining rights and representation; to prevent the rise of “pension fund socialism” through early retirement, shorter work weeks, and the threat of workers’ growing savings capacity; to impose “the Washington Consensus” (i.e., neoliberalism) on the Global South using “‘denationalized’ bourgeoisies” as willing junior partners to U.S. and Western imposition of “new forms of imperial governance”; and, in the face of climate change and impending resource wars, “to demolish the idea that...[natural] resources ‘belong[...]’ to the people of whatever country they happened to be in, and therefore should be exploited by them however and to what extent they wish[...].” (121)

If “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line...,” then the *legacy* of the color line is the problem of the twenty-first century. Obama represents an unfortunate continuation of this legacy. Only the work of dismantling this legacy, and neoliberal capitalism along with it, can hope to productively engage the terrain of struggle which Black America now faces. The sooner this work begins the better.

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108. George, "Community Development and the Politics of Deracialization...", 144-146. Harris makes some particularly trenchant observations about the "race-averse" Obama Administration enforcing silence about Black issues while encouraging outspokenness on the part of gays, Latinos, Jews, and women; see Frederick C. Harris, *The Price of the Ticket* 140, 162-63, 175, 176-77.
109. Harris, *The Price of the Ticket*, 70-99.
110. Harris, *The Price of the Ticket*, 145-46, 151-53.
111. Anthony Monteiro, "From DuBois to Obama: African American Intellectuals in the Public Forum," *Black Agenda Report* August 10, 2010 <http://www.blackagendareport.com/print/du-bois-obama-african-american-intellectuals-p...> .
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113. Ronald W. Walters, *The Price of Racial Reconciliation* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008).
114. Walters, 136-38, 145.
115. Walters, 78, 140, 148.
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119. Adolph Reed, Jr., and Merlin Chowkwanyun, "Race, Class, Crisis: The Discourse of Racial Disparity and its Analytic Discontents," in Leo Panitch, Greg Albo, and Vivek Chibber, eds., *Socialist Register 2012: The Crisis and the Left*, 153.
120. Reed and Chowkwanyun, 169.
121. Hugo Radice, "Confronting the Crisis: A Class Analysis," in Leo Panitch, Greg Albo, and Vivek Chibber eds., *The Socialist Register 2011: The Crisis This Time* (Ponytpool, Wales: The Merlin Press, 2010) 35-37.