

# Race, class and the politics of the Obama campaign

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20 March 2008

The widely publicized speech Tuesday by Barack Obama on race relations in the United States was another exercise in walking the political tightrope for the Democratic candidate in his closely contested struggle with Hillary Clinton for the party's presidential nomination.

Obama made the speech after two weeks of attacks on the views of his long-time minister, Rev. Jeremiah Wright, pastor of his home church in Chicago, Trinity United Church of Christ. Some of the more incendiary portions of Wright's sermons have been distributed on You Tube by those seeking to boost either Clinton or the presumptive Republican presidential candidate, John McCain.

Wright, who adheres to an Afro-centric version of theology, has denounced US foreign policy in strident terms, including Washington's decades-long support for the racist apartheid regime in South Africa and Israeli oppression of the Palestinian people. He said that the 9/11 terrorist attacks were a case of "America's chickens coming home to roost," referring to US policies in the Middle East and the deep and broad resentment they have engendered in the region (something that no serious observer could dispute), and even suggested that the AIDS virus was concocted by the US government as a weapon against non-whites (a widely circulated urban legend.)

In the course of his 37-minute speech, Obama was addressing multiple audiences. He sought to reassure the Democratic Party establishment and sections of the US corporate elite by distancing himself from the Wright's views, without spelling them out in detail. The only specific foreign policy issue that he referred to was Wright's criticism of Israel.

Obama condemned as "profoundly distorted ... a view that sees the conflicts in the Middle East as rooted primarily in the actions of stalwart allies like Israel, instead of emanating from the perverse and hateful ideologies of radical Islam." This was an effort by the candidate to assuage hostility from the Zionist lobby, sections of which continue to circulate bogus claims that Obama is a Muslim.

But Obama declined to engage in what the expectant media termed a "Sister Souljah" moment—referring to the example set by Bill Clinton in his 1992 presidential campaign, when he publicly rebuked the rap artist in front of a black audience because of lyrics that advocated violence against whites.

While criticizing Wright's political views, Obama spoke warmly of him as a person and a pastor, and went out of his way to declare

that he would not disavow him. "I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community," he said, clearly sensing that a public break with Wright, one of the most prominent black ministers in the United States, would alienate much of his political base.

Obama sought instead to widen the framework of the discussion from for-or-against Wright by addressing the broader question of racial antagonisms in the United States, and voicing, in very carefully hedged and limited language, the immense social and economic grievances that have accumulated in America.

Here, it should be clear, Obama was speaking not as a representative of the working class—a term he largely avoids in all his speeches—but as a bourgeois politician who seeks to win electoral support from working people, while demonstrating to the ruling elite that he can be relied on to keep the masses in check and prevent any fundamental challenge to the existing social order.

This class position was demonstrated both in what Obama chose to say and what he did not or could not say. The resulting speech was among the most "left" sounding of his campaign addresses, while at the same time offering nothing in the way of policies or program to meet the needs of working people.

Obama explained the radical-sounding political statements of Rev. Wright as the expression of longstanding black anger over racial discrimination and social injustice. But he added, "In fact, a similar anger exists within segments of the white community. Most working- and middle-class white Americans don't feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race.

"Their experience is the immigrant experience—as far as they're concerned, no one's handed them anything, they've built it from scratch. They've worked hard all their lives, many times only to see their jobs shipped overseas or their pension dumped after a lifetime of labor. They are anxious about their futures, and feel their dreams slipping away; in an era of stagnant wages and global competition, opportunity comes to be seen as a zero sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense.

"So when they are told to bus their children to a school across town; 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; when they're told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time."

Obama argued that the Republican Party under Ronald Reagan

had exploited such resentments for electoral purposes. “Just as black anger often proved counterproductive,” he said, “so have these white resentments distracted attention from the real culprits of the middle class squeeze—a corporate culture rife with inside dealing, questionable accounting practices, and short-term greed; a Washington dominated by lobbyists and special interests; economic policies that favor the few over the many.”

This certainly describes an important aspect of US political history, but there is a fundamental distortion. The ability of the Republican Party to exploit (and foment) racial antagonisms was entirely dependent on the collapse of the trade unions and the sharp swing to the right by the Democratic Party, which abandoned any connection with economic policies based on income redistribution and the lessening of social inequality, in favor of an increasing focus on identity politics, based on race, gender and sexual orientation.

This fixation on race and gender has played a major role in fueling increasingly bitter conflicts between the Clinton and Obama campaigns, as they vie to nominate either the first woman or the first African-American to be the presidential candidate of one of the two officially recognized bourgeois parties.

Obama appealed to fellow African-Americans to unite “our particular grievances—for better health care, and better schools, and better jobs—to the larger aspirations of all Americans—the white woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the white man who’s been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family.”

As opposed to the politics of racial polarization, he concluded, “This time we want to talk about the fact that the real problem is not that someone who doesn’t look like you might take your job; it’s that the corporation you work for will ship it overseas for nothing more than a profit.”

To the most right-wing defenders of the profit system, even this timid lifting of the lid on social problems in America was reprehensible. The *Wall Street Journal*, in its editorial on Obama’s speech, denounced the suggestion that “all Americans are victims, racial and otherwise,” and attacked the Illinois senator’s anti-corporate rhetoric. “Mr. Obama’s villains, in other words, are the standard-issue populist straw men of Wall Street and the GOP,” the newspaper wrote.

An ultra-right commentator on the Real Clear Politics web site put it more bluntly: “His main theme is this: we have to set aside racial grievances and agree to a racial truce—so that we can unite across racial lines and work together to achieve socialism.... Obama is arguing for a retreat from the racial collectivism of the New Left back to the Marxist economic collectivism of the Old Left. His theme, in short, is: workers of the world unite.”

This is, of course, hysterical nonsense. The worshipper of Ayn Rand identifies any discussion of the socioeconomic divide in America as the equivalent of a red flag—precisely because those divisions have become so acute that they have an explosive charge.

In terms of policy, however, Senator Obama, for all his claims of heading a popular movement, is a conventional bourgeois politician. For that reason, he was careful never to identify the grievances of the masses as systemic—as the product of an unjust and unequal social order. Instead, in the passage quoted above, he placed the blame on various excesses, greed and the like, rather

than on the nature of the capitalist system itself.

Liberal pundits unreservedly hailed the speech. “Wow,” was the headline chosen by David Corn, formerly Washington bureau chief for the *Nation*, now with *Mother Jones*. The editorial page of the *New York Times* hailed “Mr. Obama’s Profile in Courage.” The *Washington Post*, relatively liberal on domestic issues while vociferously pro-war, celebrated Obama’s “Moment of Truth.”

*Los Angeles Times* columnist Tim Rutten went so far as to compare Obama to Abraham Lincoln, another “lanky Illinois lawyer turned politician [who] gave a speech that changed the way Americans talked about the great racial issues of their day.”

It should be pointed out that in contrast to Lincoln, who declared forthrightly, “A house divided against itself cannot stand,” there is nothing of such principled intransigence in Obama’s address. He touches on social polarization, avoids the question of its fundamental roots in the economic order, and then modestly presents himself as the antidote.

This is, in a sense, the whole basis of the Obama campaign. He offers himself to the American ruling elite as a president who could, because of his political rhetoric and his multi-racial background, revive at least temporarily the credibility of American imperialism at home and abroad.

In his domestic policies, there is absolutely nothing Obama proposes that would threaten the interests of the corporate elite. A few heads might roll, among the mortgage-securities sharks or Iraq war profiteers, but that will only be to provide the illusion of change.

In his foreign policy, as the candidate reiterated in another speech the following day, an Obama administration would represent a change in the tactics to be employed in the Middle East and Central Asia, but not the strategic goals. It would be unshakably committed to the defense of the interests of American imperialism in that oil-rich region and throughout the world.

The theme sounded by all the liberal commentators praising Obama’s speech was that to directly address the subject of race relations in the United States was an act of considerable political courage. The unstated thesis of such praise is the belief—near-unanimous among liberal opinion-makers—that the vast majority of white working people are racially prejudiced.

The truth is, however, that the “third rail” of American capitalist politics is not race, but class. What unites blacks and lower-income whites and immigrants is not that they are discriminated against or disrespected or victimized in some nebulous way. What unites them is that they are all part of the same class, the working class, whose labor produces all the wealth of society, which is expropriated from them by another class, the owners of capital.

This elementary Marxist proposition is the starting point of a scientific understanding, not only of the 2008 elections, but of the world political situation.



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