Obama, Clinton and identity politics

Patrick Martin
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The victory of Senator Barack Obama in the contest for the Democratic presidential nomination has been hailed by the American media and political establishment as a testament to the progressive and democratic character of American politics and society.

Obama is the first African-American to win the presidential nomination of one of the two major big-business parties. His chief rival, Senator Hillary Clinton, whom he narrowly defeated in the protracted primary contest, is the most successful ever female candidate for the presidential nomination.

Clinton touched on identity politics in her speech Saturday in which she officially bowed out of the race, suspending her campaign and endorsing Obama. The speech was greeted with rapturous applause from both the Democratic Party leadership and the media.

Throughout her 28-minute address, Clinton presented her campaign as a pioneering effort for women's rights that, while falling short of the ultimate goal, nonetheless represented a step forward. "As we gather here today, the 50th woman to leave this Earth is orbiting overhead," she declared. "If we can blast 50 women into space, we will someday launch a woman into the White House."

In her most explicit embrace of a feminist rationale for her campaign, Clinton said, "I was proud to be running as a woman, but I was running because I thought I would be the best president. But I am a woman, and like millions of women I know there are still barriers and biases out there, often unconscious, and I want to build an America that embraces and respects the potential of every last one of us. We must make sure that women and men alike understand the struggles of their grandmothers and their mothers and that women enjoy equal opportunities, equal pay and equal respect."

At the same time, she hailed Obama's campaign as equally transformative. "When we first started, people everywhere asked the same questions. Could a woman really serve as commander-in-chief? Well, I think we answered that one. Could an African-American really be our president? And Senator Obama has answered that one. Together, Senator Obama and I achieved milestones essential to our progress as a nation, part of our perpetual duty to form a more perfect union."

Obama responded in kind, with a statement declaring, "I am thrilled and honored to have Sen. Clinton's support. But more than that, I honor her today for the valiant and historic campaign she has run. She shattered barriers on behalf of my daughters and women everywhere, who now know that there are no limits to their dreams."

According to the American media, the emergence of African-American man and a woman as leading presidential candidates represents a social advance for masses of people—despite the fact that Obama was carefully groomed by wealthy corporate interests, while Hillary Clinton owes her political prominence to her marriage to the former president.

The tone of uncritical media celebration was expressed quite openly by *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert in an op-ed piece published June 7 under the headline, "Savor the Moment." Herbert contrasts the Obama-Clinton contest in 2008 to the prevalence of racism and sexism in the America of 1968, when George Wallace ran as an independent candidate for president on a segregationist platform and women were largely excluded from politics and many professional careers.

"Racism and sexism have not taken their leave," Herbert writes. "But the fact that Barack Obama is the presumptive nominee of the Democratic Party, and that the two finalists for that prize were a black man and a white woman, are historical events of the highest importance. We should not allow ourselves to overlook the wonder of this moment."

The columnist concludes, "We'll see whether Senator Obama gets elected president. But whether he does or not, this is a moment of which Americans can be proud, a moment the society can build upon. So a victory lap is in order. Not for Senator Obama (he still has a way to go), but for all those in every station in life who ever refused to submit quietly to hatred and oppression. They led us to a better place."

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What precisely is the nature of this “better place”? What has been the real record of American society over the four decades since 1968? No doubt there has been a decline in the overt expression of race and gender bias. But in the most fundamental sense, in class and economic terms, America is more unequal today than at any time since the days of the Robber Barons in the late nineteenth century.

The top one percent in American society controls more than 45 percent of the wealth. The top one-tenth of one percent has monopolized nearly the entire increase in national wealth over the last two decades, while the vast majority of the people have seen their living conditions deteriorate, their jobs become more precarious, their overall social position become more insecure.

For black workers and youth, the decline has been even more precipitous. It is hardly necessary to recite the well-known figures: more young black men in prison than in college, crumbling schools and other social services in the inner cities, poverty levels once again approaching those of the early 1960s, disproportionate levels of unemployment, drug abuse, violence, homelessness and other social evils.

This social polarization has been to some extent masked by the inclusion of a small layer of blacks, women, gays, Hispanics, etc., in the privileged elite. But the rise of an Oprah Winfrey or a Tiger Woods or a Barack Obama (or a Hillary Clinton) does not make America a more egalitarian society.

Having a black man, Colin Powell, as chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff during the 1991 Persian Gulf War, or a black woman, Condoleezza Rice, as national security adviser and now secretary of state during the ongoing war in Iraq does not alter the imperialist and predatory character of those wars. Nor did having an African-American (CEO Stanley O’Neal) at the helm of Merrill-Lynch make the collapse of the subprime mortgage market—due largely to rampant speculation and deceptive lending practices—more tolerable for millions of low-income borrowers (a disproportionate number of them from minority communities).

Herbert harks back to the conditions of 1968, but ignores the class-conscious political response to the social upheavals of that era on the part of the American ruling elite. It embarked on a deliberate policy of recruiting a layer of black professionals who could be promoted as the “representatives” of their community, while leaving the basic social structure of America untouched.

The big cities that had become battlegrounds during the ghetto eruptions of the 1960s were largely handed over to African-American mayors. A layer of black and Hispanic congressmen and congresswomen took office, providing an essential prop of the Democratic Party. Similar efforts took place in the media, in the trade union bureaucracy and in the ranks of corporate management.

One of the most conscious advocates of this process was Richard Nixon, whose administration—it is now widely forgotten—pioneered the concept of “affirmative action” as a means of recruiting and co-opting a privileged layer in the black middle class. With consummate cynicism, Nixon combined this policy with a strategy based on appealing to a white racist backlash, particularly in the South, to bolster the electoral base of the Republican Party.

The coincidence of appeals to racial prejudice and the promotion of identity politics was not accidental. The essential aim of the official promotion of identity politics was, and remains, to foster divisions within the working population and divert attention from the more fundamental social and economic sources of poverty, exploitation and oppression.

What Herbert ignores, like most commentators in the bourgeois media, is the essential division of American society—the class division.

There is no doubt that the Obama nomination—and still more, should it transpire, an Obama presidency—will be used to whip up popular illusions in the democratic character of American society. The social reality, however, is very different.

An Obama administration will represent and defend the interests of the financial aristocracy that rules America. Tens of millions of working people—black, white, Hispanic and Asian, men and women—will come to recognize this social fact in the course of explosive and bitter struggles.

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