Reflections on class and race in America

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It is striking that the American media, beginning on election night and continuing in the aftermath of the vote, has been virtually unanimous in interpreting the victory of Barack Obama entirely in racial terms. This trend is epitomized in the treatment of the Democratic sweep by the *New York Times*, the most prominent organ of the American liberal establishment, which ran a banner headline on Wednesday declaring, "Obama: Racial Barrier Falls in Decisive Victory."

Even by elementary journalistic standards, this headline is remarkable for its lack of any pretense at objective reporting. This is not a news headline. It is not how a mainstream newspaper normally presents the outcome of a national election.

In the 1960 election, John F. Kennedy repeatedly said that he was not the Catholic candidate for president, but rather the Democratic candidate, who happened to be a Catholic. His bid for the White House came only 32 years after a Catholic Democrat, Alfred E. Smith, was overwhelmingly defeated. Yet when Kennedy became the first Catholic in US history to win a presidential election, the press treated the religious question as a minor theme.

The *Times*, by contrast, chose to present Tuesday's election entirely as a referendum on race—not a popular repudiation of the Bush administration and the right-wing politics of the Republican Party, not a repudiation of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, nor of three decades of social policy single-mindedly devoted to the further enrichment of the financial elite. This interpretation ignores the indisputable fact that the most decisive issue in the election was the economic crisis, which prompted tens of millions of working people and youth, of all races, to vote for Obama in the hope that his election would signal a reversal of previous economic policies.

An array of pundits have taken to the airwaves to repeat the same racial mantra, and in their remarks on the election outcome Republican candidate John McCain and President George W. Bush similarly presented Obama's race as the central issue in the vote.

This constant invocation of Obama's skin color and personal background underscores the pervasive manner in which conventional political analysis in America operates within racial categories. But it also serves definite political aims. It facilitates an attempt to obscure the political issues that drove the election, including popular opposition to war. The fact that Obama initially established his credibility by running as the candidate who had opposed the war in Iraq is virtually ignored.

This, in turn, clears the way for a continuation of the right-wing economic and foreign policies that were repudiated by the electorate. That the president-elect is preparing just such a course is already clear from his decision to name as his chief of staff Congressman Rahm Emanuel, an early supporter of the Iraq war and key ally of Chicago real estate and financial interests, and reports that Obama will appoint at least two Republicans to his cabinet.

Does the portrayal of Obama's victory in racial terms portend that those who oppose his policies will be attacked on racial grounds? There is every indication that the answer is "yes."

Empirical evidence from exit polls and other sources indicates that race played only a minor role in the decision of the vast majority of those who cast ballots. For his part, Obama avoided presenting himself as the representative of a single race, or of minorities in general. His ethnic background did, however, play a critical role in the development of his political persona, not in an overt way, but rather in the implicit premise that an African-American president would be more sympathetic to the plight of working people—a conception that was promoted by various middle-class "left" and opportunist tendencies, such as the *Nation* magazine, which sought to conceal the social and class interests represented by his campaign.

To contest the media obsession with race is not to deny the brutal history of racial oppression of African-Americans in America. However, the real question that haunts American politics is the class question. Precisely because the issue of class is so explosive in America, no political figure contending for office dares utter the words "working class."

Until the last four decades, it was widely accepted among progressive-minded intellectuals and liberal political commentators that racial oppression was bound up with the class structure of American society. But since the early 1970s, American politics and intellectual life have been dominated by a rejection of class issues. Instead, secondary issues of gender, sexual preference and, above all, race have been elevated to become the be-all and end-all of permissible political discussion.

There is, according to the political and media establishment, no working class in the United States. There is only the "middle class," a term once used to denote certain intermediate social layers, such as lawyers, dentists and shop keepers, but which is now used to denote all but the very rich and the very poor. This terminological revolution (or counterrevolution) has coincided with an increase in the proportion of the population whose survival depends on a pay check and a staggering growth of social and economic inequality. Even as its existence has been denied, the working class has, over this period, suffered an immense decline in its social position.

Nowhere has this social decline had a more brutal impact than among the economically lowest ranks of the working class, particularly among African-American workers. The dismantling of large sections of industry and the disappearance of the trade unions as a significant social force have led to a decay of the inner cities, the virtual collapse of their public schools, a pervasive lack of health care, crumbling housing and infrastructure, a growth of illnesses associated with poverty such as diabetes, and chronic unemployment.

On the other hand, identity politics, which has become the hallmark of American liberalism, has been highly successful in promoting a small section of African-Americans, for whom race has been removed as a barrier to political office, corporate positions, posts in academia

and the media, etc. Obama represents the triumph not of the aspirations of the vast majority of black workers, but rather of this privileged minority. His election is a reassurance that they can reasonably anticipate getting a cut of the wealth extracted from the labor of the working class.

The official obsession with race and suppression of class questions is an expression of the intellectual decay and rightward political trajectory of American liberalism. Historian Alan Brinkley writes insightfully in his 1995 book *The End of Reform* of a major shift in the ideology and politics of American liberalism that began during the declining years of Roosevelt's New Deal, accelerated during World War II, and was consolidated in the post-war period.

Brinkley explains that American liberalism, especially in the early years of the New Deal, generally supported a reform agenda that called for a restructuring of American capitalism to curtail the power of big business and introduce some form of industrial democracy into the workplace. Many New Deal Democrats advocated measures to redistribute the wealth and achieve greater social equality.

However, after the partial economic recovery of 1937 collapsed and strike battles in basic industry threatened to assume revolutionary dimensions, Roosevelt denounced the new industrial unions and Democratic Party liberalism began to retreat from the agenda of structural reform of capitalism, a process that was accelerated by World War II.

Brinkley writes that by 1945, American liberals "had, in effect, detached liberalism from its earlier emphasis on reform—its preoccupation with issues of class, its tendency to equate freedom and democracy with economic autonomy, its hostility to concentrated economic power. They had redefined citizenship to de-emphasize the role of men and women as producers and to elevate their roles as consumers."

The new industrial unions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, established in the heat of massive strike struggles, factory occupations and broad mobilizations of working class communities, adapted themselves to the shift in liberal ideology and politics—and the demands of the Roosevelt administration, which they supported—by jettisoning their earlier calls for structural reform of capitalism and democracy in the workplace. This shift was consolidated during the war, when the unions entered into corporatist relations with the state and business leaders in the interests of the war effort. Part of this war-time alliance was their enforcement of a no-strike pledge and wage controls.

In the class battles of the 1930s, workers affiliated with socialist and revolutionary organizations had played a central role. These mass struggles were animated not only by the demand for union recognition, better wages, shorter hours and improved working conditions, but also by a striving to make the labor movement an independent force in the industrial economy and in American politics, and a concept of industrial democracy that workers believed could, in Brinkley's words, "transform not just the lives of workers but the character of American society."

However, "By forging an alliance with the Democratic Party and the liberal state, and by abandoning such larger goals as the industrial-council plan or the idea of a labor party, organized workers gave up the chance of becoming an independent political movement… By 1945, the movement was on its way to assuming its modern form as a highly bureaucratized (and occasionally corrupt) interest group, with relatively narrow (and at times illiberal) aims, committed mainly to its own institutional survival."

This abandonment of any attempt to limit corporate power and establish some degree of autonomy and independent working class power in industry assumed a finished and fully reactionary form in the anti-communist witch-hunts and purge of left-wing elements from the unions in the late 1940s and 1950s.

The credibility of postwar American liberalism and the "middle-class" consumer society it espoused depended on a continuation of the economic expansion that followed the war and on ever-rising prosperity. But by the late 1960s, the boom was beginning to unravel. The impact of the Vietnam War, the civil rights struggles, urban riots and a strike wave fueled by worsening economic conditions undermined the New Deal coalition. Within a few years the Democratic Party was openly distancing itself from New Deal social reform policies.

As the promise of rising living standards through the expansion of the consumer society faltered, the Democratic Party sought to refashion itself, beginning with the McGovern campaign of 1972. In what was presented as a far-reaching democratic reform, racial and gender diversity became the watchword and any discussion of class issues was suppressed. The party incorporated into its very structure the principle of identity politics. "Affirmative action" and similar policies were employed to dispense privileges to elite layers among various racial and ethnic constituencies and among women, while the living standards of the broad mass of working people, African-American and Latino as well as white, women as well as men, stagnated or declined.

Now, under conditions of the deepest economic crisis of American and world capitalism since the 1930s, the elevation of race as the defining feature of American society is to be put to the test. Notwithstanding the efforts of the media to frame the election of Obama in racial terms, his victory is, in reality, the product of the initial stirrings of a class movement in opposition to policies of war and social reaction that are bipartisan in character.

This incipient revival of class struggle necessarily takes the distorted and contradictory anticipatory form, within the framework of American politics and its two-party monopoly, of the repudiation of the Republicans and election of a Democrat. But the pent-up working class anger and frustration that have propelled Obama into the White House will sooner rather than later be directed against Obama himself.

The election of Obama has set the stage for a new period of class struggle in America.

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