

The Gates arrest and the “national conversation on race”

Tom Eley
28 July 2009

The controversy stemming from the arrest of prominent African American scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. at his home on July 16 has dominated the media for a week. It has afforded another opportunity to pose race as the decisive social division and to obscure basic class realities, including the unprecedented assault on the living conditions of the working class being carried out by the Obama administration.

The details of the case, which have been endlessly parsed by the media, are by now well known. As a legal matter, Gates should not have been arrested. But far more revealing is the utilization of this incident to promote what President Barack Obama, whose unfortunate intervention in the matter catapulted it to the top of the news, refers to as a “teachable moment” on race.

The media, Obama, and other politicians have used the controversy surrounding the Gates arrest—which they themselves inflated into a major story—to argue once again that race is the one and only social division in contemporary America that really counts. The incident, they contend, demonstrates that the nation has not moved beyond its racial past, in spite of the election of the first African American president. They insist that what is needed, and what the Gates arrest might initiate, is a new “national conversation on race.”

This extraordinarily pompous formulation, implying that the nation is in the midst of some great intellectual discussion, is nonsense. No such conversation is taking place, on race or any other matter.

The “national conversation,” such as it is, raises the concept of race to an independent social category, outside and apart from class and the very economic structure of society—a viewpoint promoted for decades by layers of the academic elite, for whom race is a fixation. The proposition that such a bankrupt perspective can provide the basis for serious intellectual discussion only demonstrates the astounding retrogression in American social thought over the past few decades.

Enormous resources have been invested in an effort to declare race the central question in America, while minimizing, and virtually suppressing, any discussion of social inequality. The “conversation” is very much determined by powerful interests, who promote it in politics, media, and the universities.

The effort to abstract race from class inequality came to the fore in the 1970s only after the ebb tide of the Civil Rights movement

had set in. Right through the 1960s, it was broadly accepted that what was once called the “negro question” could not be addressed outside of a recognition that the exploitation and the repression of black workers were ultimately class issues bound up with the social structure both in the South and the urban areas of the North. In other words, exploitation, discrimination and repression were understood as racial expressions of an underlying social and economic reality. It followed that no major advance on the race question could be made without challenging this economic and social order.

This was the perspective that underlay Martin Luther King Jr.’s launching of the Poor People’s Campaign in 1968. King sought to assemble “a multiracial army of the poor.” He had determined that the struggle for economic equality was the second, and decisive phase of the Civil Rights movement. A month before the Poor People’s Campaign was to march on Washington, King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, where he had traveled to support a strike of city sanitation workers.

Malcolm X, the other famous proponent of the black struggle for equality in the 1960s, had begun to be influenced by the ideas of socialism shortly before his assassination in 1965. “Show me a capitalist, and I’ll show you a racist,” he was known to say. King’s and Malcolm X’s thinking was in fact being changed by the social aspirations and the mass movement of black workers in both the South and the North, a movement increasingly focused on economic grievances.

The understanding that race is not independent of the social order, but a product of it, has still deeper roots. W.E.B. Du Bois, who had been a founding member of the NAACP, was, like a great many black workers and intellectuals, electrified by the Russian Revolution of 1917. “Russia was trying to put into the hands of those people who do the world’s work the power to guide and rule the state for the best welfare of the masses,” he concluded. And the social rootedness of race infused the politics and prose of the great African American authors from the 1920s through the 1940s, among them Richard Wright, Zora Neal Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay.

This history is, of course, excluded from the “national conversation on race,” which first developed in the early 1970s. This new outlook on race corresponded to a definite shift in the ruling class’s policy toward minorities. Previously barred from elite colleges and universities, by custom if not by law, beginning in the early 1970s African American youth were recruited and

promoted at Ivy League schools and other top institutions. With degrees from the best schools, this new minority elite was then taken in hand and, once again through affirmative action policies, placed into leading positions in academia, the corporate world, government, and the military.

The two developments—the relentless promotion of race as the decisive social category, and the cultivation of a new black elite—were not incidental. The new minority elite found themselves worlds apart from the masses of poor and working class minorities, whose objective social interests were shared by white workers. The promotion of race and “identity politics” was the antidote to this reality, proffering that racial identity was more crucial than class reality.

Obama’s entire career, from his days at Columbia University, is the consummate expression of this process; it was ultimately by virtue of his ethnic identity that Obama was promoted to the presidency as “change” personified. In office, he has prosecuted the most ferocious class offensive against the jobs and living standards of the working class—black, white, and immigrant—in US history.

Obama and the black elite view themselves as the pinnacle of the Civil Rights movement. From their perspective, there is nothing left to achieve for black workers. Obama spelled this out in a recent speech before the NAACP, the erstwhile civil rights organization. “Because Jim Crow laws were overturned, black CEOs today run Fortune 500 companies,” he said. “Because civil rights laws were passed, black mayors, black governors, and members of Congress served in places where they might once have been able [sic] not just to vote but even take a sip of water. And because ordinary people did such extraordinary things ... that has led me to be here tonight as the 44th President of the United States of America.”

The “national conversation on race” is framed in a manner that serves the interests of the political establishment, while focusing on this small section of African Americans who have been promoted to the upper echelons of government and big business. Their individual successes have occurred against a backdrop of ever more devastating poverty and oppression for masses of African American workers and youth.

It is safe to say that in one week there has been more coverage given to the Gates arrest and its supposed racial meaning than the media has produced over the past several months on the devastating social impact upon black workers of the shutdown of auto plants in the Detroit area.

Indeed, in the same speech before the NAACP, Obama said that black working class youth were responsible for their own fate—the enormous unemployment and social misery unleashed by the crisis of capitalism notwithstanding.

“That’s not a reason to get bad grades, that’s not a reason to cut class, that’s not a reason to drop out of school,” the president said. “We’ve got to say to our children ... Your destiny is in your hands ... No excuses ... all those hardships will just make you stronger, better able to compete.” (See “Obama’s speech to the NAACP”).

Among the conditions that Obama dismisses as an “excuse” for “bad grades” is the enormous presence of the police and the criminal justice system in the lives of the youth. Police “racial

profiling” of African American, Latino, and immigrant workers is very real. This is because these populations constitute the most impoverished and oppressed sections of the working class. Doubtless Gates’ rage stemmed from the fact that, in spite of his considerable wealth and prestige, he was subjected to the sort of treatment that African American workers and youth in particular face on a daily basis.

Obama’s reaction to the Gates affair stands in sharp contrast to his indifference toward the acquittal of the police in the brutal murder of a young black worker in New York City, Shawn Bell, the night before his wedding, as a perceptive opinion piece in the *New York Times* recently noted. To that case, then-candidate Obama responded that “the most important thing for people who are concerned about that shooting is to figure out how do we come together and assure those kinds of tragedies don’t happen again.”

But police harassment, heavy-handedness, and violence are facts of life for working class youth, regardless of race. Beatings and “taserings” of young men occur every day; these incidents become news only when they are videotaped, or the victim dies as a result. Police killings take place regularly and are seldom punished.

Young men are constantly cycling in and out of the nation’s massive prison system. The US has only five percent of the world’s population, but 23.6 percent of its prison population. According to a recent survey, one of every 18 men in the US is in prison or on probation or parole. Among black men between the ages of 20 and 34, one in nine is behind bars. The prison population has quadrupled since 1980, the start of the last major class offensive against American workers.

These conditions confronting workers and youth were clearly not Obama’s concern when he waded into the Gates affair. Nor will they be the focus of the latest “national conversation on race,” whose very aim is to obscure this grim social reality as well as its source in the profit system.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact