A conversation with Mark Harris, director of *Black & Privileged*

Nick Barrickman
11 April 2020

On April 4, the *World Socialist Web Site* posted a review of *Black & Privileged*, directed by independent, Chicago-based filmmaker Mark Harris (*Black Butterfly*, *Black Coffee*, *Nothing L ike Thanksgiving*).

The film examines in part how an affluent African-American community is turned upside down by the arrival in its midst of several low-income blacks. In other words, Harris's work, as we wrote, deals with "a nearly taboo subject in America—wealth and class divisions, including…within the African-American population."

Black & Privileged is significant for this reason. At the same time, the review was critical of certain aspects of the film, including its failure to fully *follow through* on that important theme.

Unusually for an artist, especially one who has been criticized to one degree or another, Harris contacted the WSWS. We expressed our appreciation for his objectivity and level-headedness and suggested an interview to further explore some of the key elements of the film, a proposal to which he generously agreed.

What emerged in the hour-long discussion were a number of notions about history and the current state of American society, some of them insightful and some of them, in our view, confused and contradictory. In any event, such discussions and debates are vital to the rebirth of more critical film and art.

Below is a transcript of our discussion, edited for length and content.

* * * * *

Nick Barrickman: I appreciate you granting us this interview. I wanted to know if you would give us a little background about yourself, your personal history and your work in film.

Mark Harris: Sure. First of all, thank you for reviewing the film, it was an honor to see it on your website.

I was born and raised in Englewood, Illinois [a Chicago neighborhood and the setting for *Black & Privileged*]. I now live in Hyde Park. I started making movies in 2005, with a film titled *Black Coffee*. I did another film called *My First Love*, as well as a film titled *Stock Option* on MTV. I'm doing a lot of work with Netflix and Amazon Prime right now.

NB: In my opinion, *Black & Privileged* raises a very important issue—the issue of social inequality. To be honest, this issue hasn't been well-addressed at all in recent art, let alone in popular film, and even less so in respect to how it appears within the African-American community. Could you speak a little about how you view this issue and how it influenced your film?

MH: Sure, the way I see it is, in society, the average person who hasn't been born and raised in a black community usually isn't willing to walk through one at night. Why? They're afraid of violence and so on. In most communities, the question of violence is connected to economic issues; the lack of jobs, but also, the lack of wealth and the ability to invest and create jobs for others.

NB: There's a scene early in *Black & Privileged* with Dawnisha Halfkenny, in which she hears that new residents from a nearby housing tenement are being sent to live in Englewood. At first, she acts very "progressive" and is supportive of it all. She quotes W.E.B. DuBois and says how they must lend these poor people a helping hand. Then, almost overnight, when she sees the new residents out in the community, drinking malt liquor, with their "bad manners" and all, she gets hysterical and calls the police on them.

It's almost like a situation where the "idea" of poor people is more attractive to her than the actual people themselves. Once they appear, up close and in person, the reality is just too much for her to bear. In my opinion, this scene is very well-done and honest. It seems to me that you are critiquing an attitude that exists in wealthier, better-off parts of America. Can you speak to that?

MH: I purposefully exaggerated that scene you are mentioning to make a point. I'm definitely critiquing this "I'm better than you" mindset.

Like you say, when Dawn's husband, Samad [Simeon Henderson], mentions the new residents to her, she's cool with it. But the very next day, with the new neighbors arriving, with their bad habits and all, she sees it differently. That's definitely a type of personality [which has] some sympathy for the poor, as long as "they" stay over *there*.

She basically switches her views with Samad, who from the start doesn't want the new residents there. He is kind of left saying to her, "I told you so."

Sometimes, black people, we don't like to admit to certain things. In more middle-class communities, even when other black people move in, we don't like to take a look in the mirror and examine ourselves. They are to an extent defending *black* privilege.

I'm not even really speaking about their skin color; it's a way of thinking.

NB: There is another scene near the beginning, in which Eldon [Corey Hendrix] is angry that the new residents will be moving in.

© World Socialist Web Site

He refers to their integrating into the community as "redlining" [the practice of refusing (a loan or insurance) to someone because he or she lives in an area deemed to be a poor financial risk, often black, inner-city neighborhoods]. It seems to me he is being serious when he says that, but, in my view, it is quite ironic. Could you explain that concept and how it's used here?

MH: In Englewood, the community in which the film is set, today it is majority African American. When my mother first moved to it from Alabama, the community was almost entirely white. [The gangster] Al Capone even used to own a home there.

When my mother moved in, there was white flight, and the neighborhood started becoming what it is today. While the racial majority of the neighborhood turned from white to black, through redlining, blockbusting and other racist policies, in the movie, this "I'm better than you" mentality remains. It seems like the mentality transferred from the former residents to the new, whose parents had to deal with that same treatment when they first arrived.

NB: Another way to say this is that while the residents' skin color may have changed, the class status they inherited has, ironically, led them to adopt similar discriminatory views seen during the Jim Crow era.

MH: Yes.

Incidentally, I also wanted to address your criticism about the movie's editing.

The production is purposefully rough in places. I wanted the movie to reflect the chaotic and contradictory parts of society. At the end of the movie, there's a particular scene in which a little girl is looking up at the adult characters. I wanted to show the audience the world from the little girl's perspective, which is disjointed. We have a lot of contradictions; between old and young; rich and poor; black and white; in politics; in religion. I wanted these shots to reflect these conflicts within the black community.

NB: Fair enough. I would like to ask a more critical question. As our review suggests, your film seems to "back off" from following through on the theme of social inequality and pursues something completely different in the second half of the movie which, in my opinion, is far less interesting. Would you agree the movie pivots away from this issue, and if so, why?

MH: I think your criticism is valid, but here is the reason why—if you follow the narrative, the film is set into three chapters. The Eldon character gives an outline of each. In my film, the three assassins who appear in the plot are actually meant to represent an idea, not actual people. That idea is "America." If you note, each assassin wears a specific color: red, white or blue.

The assassins are killing off the female characters. Malcolm X referred to the black woman as the most unprotected person in America. As the plot unfolds, the citizens of Englewood regroup and kill off these ideas.

NB: What about America is embodied in these ideas?

MH: The legacy of slavery, Jim Crow, the residue of the Civil Rights movement. Symbols of history.

NB: You seem to be placing Jim Crow segregation in the same category as the Civil Rights movement. Wouldn't it be more appropriate to say the Civil Rights movement was out to vanquish Jim Crow and the legacy of slavery?

MH: Many people look back to the Civil Rights movement period as this great thing. But within it, you had these major figures—Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jr.—who were assassinated.

I'm sure you're familiar with American history. After the Civil War, you had the creation of Black Wall Street, not only in Oklahoma, but in cities across America. After the Civil Rights movement, black communities lost their hotels, their banks and things like that. Some people may disagree with me, but these things were lost.

NB: It seems to me you're mixing too many things together in one pot. On the one hand, you have the period of Reconstruction, which followed the American Civil War to end slavery. During this time there was an effort to genuinely *integrate* blacks into American society. But then you're also conflating this with the period of Jim Crow, which was against integration. Finally, the Civil Rights movement was striving for genuine equality and to do away with Jim Crow and the doctrine of "separate but equal."

The Civil Rights movement made real gains, but due to the role played by the Democratic Party, which diverted the movement for social equality into channels promoting "black capitalism," instituted by [Republican President Richard] Nixon, and programs such as Affirmative Action, genuine social equality was never achieved. I wouldn't want to "kill off" the ideas behind the movement, though. We shouldn't try to turn back the clock to Jim Crow, we have to deal with the central issue of *class* privilege today. I think that your film does a good job of that in several places, revealing how that appears in our day-to-day life.

MH: Thank you. It's a contradictory history, for sure. I would say the film is that way. There are certain socialist ideas in it, such as the better-off citizens pooling together their funds to help put the newer residents through school. It's a capitalist community, for sure, but it's contradictory.

NB: In wrapping up, what are some other projects you are working on at the moment?

MH: I'm working on two films: *Black Coffee 2*, which is a romantic comedy. It's about a couple that buys a coffee plantation in order to compete with Starbucks. They end up going to Belize, and different conflicts arise. The other film is called *The House Behind the Tracks*, it is about a police officer who kills an honor student and then tries to obtain forgiveness from the family.

NB: They sound interesting. Thank you again for your time.

MH: No problem. I also was very pleased and honored to see that your website had chosen my film for a review, and that you had done your research about me and my views.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site