

“We’re losing our country”: Barack Obama, Race & the Tea Party

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The United States is not as racist as it was when I was born in 1941. Asians have become citizens, blacks can vote in Southern elections, and interracial marriage is now legal nationwide. However, these advances in racial justice do not mean that racism is dead in the United States; indeed, it continues to exercise a powerful hold on the American imagination. How could it be otherwise? American democracy was created on a racial foundation, and although the election of a black president represents a historic step in the nation’s racial modernization, it does not signal “the end of white America.” Even if it did, this development would not mean that Asians, blacks, Mexicans, and other Spanish speakers would get along with each other.¹ Race will continue to plague American politics even as the demographic composition of the nation changes. The idea that the death of whiteness might usher in racial nirvana rests on a demographic determinism that the history of the American Republic renders problematic.

If we take a long view of race and politics, the demise of white hegemony is an interesting but premature notion suggesting that contemporary American racial liberalism, like the Garrisonian abolitionists in the nineteenth century, has been swept up in a moment of self-congratulatory wishful thinking. Both the end of slavery and the election of Barack Obama constitute important turning points in the history of race in America. And both events shed light on the Republican Party. I

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refer to the Republicans not because I think the Democrats have wonderful racial politics but because the GOP has become the voice of white victimology in a supposedly post-racial and multi-cultural world.

Contemporary Republican victimology expresses itself in the Tea Party movement. The Tea Party is the latest phase of a transformation that has been taking place in the Republican Party since 1968, when the Nixon administration began pursuing its “Southern Strategy” to woo the South. The issues that galvanized the Republicans to court white Southerners in the 1960s were the civil rights movement and the expansion of federal power; today, according to intellectual historian Mark Lilla, three issues energize the contemporary Tea Party: “A financial crisis that robbed millions of their homes, jobs, and savings; the Obama administration’s decision to pursue health care reform despite the crisis; and personal animosity toward the president himself (racially tinged in some regions) stoked by the right-wing media.”² The Tea Party, then, is an extreme right-wing or conservative outgrowth of the Republican Party. Not all conservatives are Tea Partiers, but Tea Partiers are radical conservatives. Some of the party’s spokespeople have called for the elimination of government agencies such as the Departments of Education, Energy, and Environmental Protection and the Federal Reserve and for either abolition or privatization of Social Security and Medicare. Several of these programs have benefited blacks in the United States because the post-World War II bureaucratic state has been central to leveling the so-called playing field between blacks and whites. So what role does race play in the Tea Party members’ claim that they have lost their country?

Race is never absent from American politics, and this is no less true of the Tea Party movement, though it claims not to be racist and has some black members. Yet according to a recent CBS/*New York Times* poll, white Tea Party members think “too much has been made of race in America and that the policies pursued by the Obama administration promote the interests of poor blacks over those of the white middle class.”³ Given these attitudes, why would blacks be members of the Tea Party?

The answer to this question is not to be found solely in the history of black people but of minorities in general. The desire to be accepted cuts across lines of ethnicity, race, and sexual preference, and thus is not limited to black people. The quest for acceptance can be seen in the history of court and assimilated Jews in Central and Western Europe, in Booker T. Washington’s program of cultural rehabilitation during the last quarter of the nineteenth century in the American South, and in the careers of gay men like Roy Cohn and David Brock. Cohn denied he was gay and actively persecuted gays during the Army-McCarthy hearings. Brock, like Cohn, was a closeted gay conservative activist who made a reputation smearing liberal politicians and black women. Brock came out of the closet after he found the conservative movement’s homophobia intolerable. It would be easy to call these people opportunists, but to do so would be an overstatement and would simplify the complicated history of minorities generally and black people in the United States specifically.

What we have here are groups and individuals who want to normalize their history and escape the stigma of being thought of as outsiders. In the case of black Tea Partiers, this effort means disassociating oneself from the history of

black welfare dependence, crime, and racial militance. Charles Butler, a black Tea Partier, told a Chicago radio station that “the Democratic social welfare policies of Roosevelt and Kennedy negatively affected Black people then and continue to affect Blacks today.”⁴ Butler is not alone in thinking the government is the enemy of black people. Lloyd Marcus, another black member of the Tea Party, has been quoted as saying that “the Democrats are focused on keeping Blacks thinking they are victims and dependent on social welfare.”⁵ To escape the stigma of welfare, if you are black, you have to be baptized in the cult of individualism and self-help to overcome the notion that your color marks you as a victim; you must be reborn as a tax-producing rather than tax-consuming citizen.

Instead of viewing these black conservatives as race traitors or individuals with false consciousness, they should be placed in the context of a black conservatism that predates the accommodationist policies of Booker T. Washington. Frederick Douglass, the Civil War champion of black equality, delivered a speech in 1862 that answered the question, “What shall we do with the Negro?” Douglass replied, “Do nothing with them, but leave them like you have left other men, to do with themselves.”⁶ He went on to say that “the bitterness of the black man’s fortune is the fact that he is everywhere regarded and treated as an exception to the principles and maxims which apply to other men.”⁷ Later on, Douglass changed his mind about government aid for the freed men. My point here is that black hostility to government programs designed to aid black people is not new and, in fact, has a distinguished genealogy.

Membership in the Tea Party situates black conservatives, as it does white ones, in a libertarian enthusiasm centered on the idea of an autonomous self. Tea Partiers view government as the enemy of freedom, and Obama, who they call a proponent of big government and socialism, is likewise an enemy of freedom. Tea Party opposition to Obama is religious in its intensity. I say this because when I see Tea Party rallies on television, they remind me of the revivals I attended as a child in Texas. At these camp meetings, the faithful, shouting and in the grip of religious ecstasy, would be rendered unconscious at the altar by the power of the holy ghost. A similar enthusiasm characterizes Tea Party gatherings, where a version of Greta Garbo’s mantra, “I want to be left alone,” activates the crowd and works it up into a frenzied state reminiscent of religious possession. Inspired by right-wing saint Margaret Thatcher, the former prime minister of Great Britain, the Tea Party grounds its faith in the belief that “there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first.”⁸ Thatcher’s comment is highly seductive if you have, as black Americans do, a history of being thought of as losers in a nation whose “national imaginary” is based on ideas of individual achievement and success.⁹

I use the term “national imaginary” here to mean “a system of cultural representations that makes the contours of the nation-state emotionally plausible.”¹⁰ In the United States, people, regardless of their color and whether their ancestors came from Asia, Africa, Europe, or Latin America, are bound together by the myth of individual success that sits at the center of the American “national imaginary.” It is the power of this idea that may have

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erased racial divisions in the Tea Party. Religious movements and political parties create their own realities; in the case of the black and white Tea Partiers, that reality is a shared sense of persecution by government. Combining both cultural politics and economic interests, the Tea Partiers have created a new political phalanx.

What unites black and white Tea Partiers is not social class but the Marxian concept of “political class.”¹¹ The black economist and historical sociologist Oliver Cox wrote, “[P]olitical class is a power group . . . organized for conflict.”¹² The recent history of the Tea Party in Massachusetts, South Carolina, and Utah suggests that Cox’s estimation is true. The Tea Party in those states has factionalized and disrupted the Republican Party operating as a “political class.” In South Carolina, for example, a woman of Asian descent, Nikki Haley, will become that state’s next Republican governor. As winner of that contest, Haley corroborates Cox’s claim that “political class . . . may include persons from every position.”¹³ Cox does not use the word *race*, but I think the phrase “persons from every position” may be interpreted as suggesting that a “political class” does not have to have a singular racial subjectivity. “Political class” can thus unite black and white conservatives against a black president deemed to be an enemy of individual freedom.

But this alliance of black and white conservatives rests on an imagined past. Like the Afrocentrists and Neo-Confederates, the Tea Partiers want to create a history that is a fiction. To say that “too much has been made of race” is delusional because it erases both slavery and Jim Crow from the master narrative of American history. The idea that blacks from the seventeenth century to the present were perceived and treated as individu-

als constitutes an imagining of black and American history as fanciful as Walt Disney’s *Song of the South*. Hard though they may try, conservatives cannot rewrite the American past to elide the fact that both slavery and Jim Crow oppressed blacks as a group and not as individuals. Racism, as I noted earlier, has diminished in American society but not disappeared.

Racism reared its head during Obama’s election campaign in a variety of venues, including newspapers, the Web, and public discourse. One white supremacist website expressed a crude form of racial animus that most blacks of my generation associate with an earlier period of American history. The site called Obama a “subhuman-black-supremeist[sic]-shit-skin beast.”¹⁴ This was not an isolated expression of hate. In Florida, for example, a seventh-grade school teacher told her students that Obama’s campaign slogan “CHANGE” meant “Come Help a Nigger Get Elected.”¹⁵ These two examples of racial antipathy indicate that America is not a post-racial society and that Obama is not perceived with equanimity by a segment of the country’s white populace. For these people, the election of a black president was unthinkable. Obama is their worst nightmare because his presidency may be the gateway to the establishment of an interracial democracy and a departure from the norm of an America ruled by white men.

Because conservatives, like the Tea Partiers, seem incapable of accepting a number of the changes that have overtaken the nation since the 1950s, it is, as I observed at the beginning of this essay, premature to proclaim “the end of white America.” This notion assumes too much and ignores a recurring reality in American history, namely, the ability of segments of the American populace to be-

lieve things that are not true: that Japanese Americans were disloyal during World War II, for example, or that fluoridation of municipal water supplies is a threat to public health. Both of these ideas were harmful and fallacious but also powerful and seductive. Similarly, the Tea Party's assault on Obama is disturbing and based on untruths. What this means is that even though the nation's white majority is going to decline in numbers, the future of race relations in the United States is not unproblematic. Further, conservatives may even profit from that contested future.

Conservatives have already shown that they can use race as a wedge issue in their appeals to Mexicans in the West and Southwest and their construction of Asians as a "model minority." At some time in the future, both of these groups could, as a segment of black America has, decide it is in their best interest to ally themselves with a party that conceives of itself as the agent of traditional American values. What if whiteness is constructed as a culture rather than color?

The idea of some unified coalition of the so-called people of color is a doubtful proposition. The history of American racism has never been a single "invariant [process] but a number of *racisms*, forming a broad open spectrum of situations."¹⁶ In the United States, this va-

riety has led to the dispossession and genocide of Native Americans, the enslavement of blacks and their subsequent suffering under Jim Crow, the invasion of Mexico and colonization of Mexicans, and the exclusion of Asians. Because each of these groups occupies a particular space in the structure of American racism, each is open to the blandishments of a reconfigured racism based on culture. In the West and Southwest, this process can be seen in the hostility between blacks and Mexicans over contests for political office, competition for jobs, race riots in the high schools of Los Angeles involving black and Mexican students, and prison disturbances such as the recent one at the detention center in Chino, California. These conflicts point not to a post-racial America but to a country riven by racism.

Finally, although Obama was able to put together a coalition comprising Asians, blacks, and Mexicans, this alliance rests on a precarious foundation. If the economy continues to be depressed, the Tea Partiers have an opening to intensify their attacks on the nation's first black president by emphasizing his unsuitability for the job. It would be a mistake to say that Obama's election reignited racial conflict in the United States, but, sadly, his ascendancy does not prove that those divisions are a thing of the past.

ENDNOTES

¹ Hua Hsu, "The End of White America?" *The Atlantic*, January/February 2009.

² For discussion of the Tea Party movement, see Joan Swirsky, "We're Losing Our Country but What Can We Do?" <http://thebulletin.us/articles/2009/02/25/commentary/op-eds/doc49a4f20b4a04f416814151.txt>; Bob Cesca, "The Weird Contradictions of the Tea Bag Revolution," http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bob-cesca/the-weird-contradictions_b_176476.html (accessed January 31, 2010); Mark Lilla, "The Tea Party Jacobins," *The New York Review of Books*, May 27, 2010; Charles Postel, "Tea Party: Dark Side of Conservatism," <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0510/37217.html> (accessed May 16, 2010); Peter Schrag, "At the Tea Party: Minutemen and Birchers, Yes; Birthers No," <http://www.californiaprogressreport.com/site/?q=print/7675> (accessed May 22, 2010).

- ³ Cited in Lilla, "The Tea Party Jacobins," 53.
- ⁴ "Black Tea Partiers Speak," The Root, <http://www.theroot.com/views/black-tea-partiers-speak>; "AP Discovers That Black Tea Party Members Exist," <http://hotair.com/archives/2010/04/06/ap-discovers-that-black-tea-party-members-exist>; "A Black Tea Party Member Speaks," <http://www.bvblackspin.com/2010/04/15/black-tea-party-member>; all sites accessed June 18, 2010.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Frederick Douglass, "Free the Slaves, Then Leave Them Alone," in *Afro-American History: Primary Sources*, ed. Thomas R. Frazier, 2nd ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing, 1988).
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ "Epitaph for the Eighties?: 'There Is No Such Thing As Society,'" <http://briandeer.com/social/thatcher-society.htm>.
- ⁹ The phrase "national imaginary" is found in Katherine Pratt Ewing, *Stolen Honor: Stigmatizing Muslim Men in Berlin* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008), "Introduction," 2.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Oliver Cromwell Cox, *Caste, Class & Race: A Study in Social Dynamics* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1959), 154.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Quoted in Clarence E. Walker and Gregory D. Smithers, *The Preacher and the Politician: Jeremiah Wright, Barack Obama, and Race in America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), "Introduction," 3.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 40.