

Socialists and Barack Obama: Viewing An Historic Presidential Nomination

Tuesday 1 July 2008, by [MIAH Malik](#) (Date first published: 20 June 2008).

NOW THAT ILLINOIS Senator Barack Obama has become the presumptive Democratic nominee for president, what does it say about U.S. civil society? What stance should progressives and socialists take?

When Obama crossed that 2118-delegate threshold with the final primaries in Montana and South Dakota, all African Americans—Democrats, Republicans, independents and even socialists—understood the meaning of a son of a African immigrant from Kenya and a white mother from Kansas, to get this far in American politics. Martin Luther King, Jr., may have had a "Dream" that it could happen, but few believed it could occur in the lifetime of those who marched in Selma.

An Important Discussion

In the previous issue of Against the Current (ATC 134, reproduced below) I explained why Obama's campaign was an important indicator of changes in U.S. society. At the same time, I noted that racism is still alive and well as reflected in the virulent attack on Obama's former pastor Rev. Jeremiah Wright.

I particularly explained the fact that Obama did not immediately throw Wright under the bus when Wright used old fashioned Black Nationalist rhetoric to criticize U.S. domestic and foreign policy. Obama's Philadelphia speech on the history of race relations was noteworthy coming from a major capitalist politician having a chance to become president.

In response to my article in the May-June issue, which included a look at the history of Black Liberation Theology, some on the left felt my stance implied sympathy for lesser evilism - perhaps that saying independents and socialists should embrace and engage the supporters of Obama, especially his young backers, was a move toward supporting a candidate of one of the major Big Business parties which have a global policy of neocolonialism and neoliberalism.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Rather, the Obama ascendancy reflects some fundamental changes in society that must be recognized by those of us seeking a working class government and state. The societal changes are based on the victory of the civil rights revolution of the 1960s.

We are not in a "colorblind" society as the neoconservatives pretend. The fact that most of his supporters, and Obama himself, is a by-product of an era where most young people freely mingle with other races and ethnic groups is new. Most believe a Black man or a woman can be elected president is a direct result of real changes. They are not simply cosmetic or temporary.

At the same time, racism is a daily occurrence for the typical Black person. A tall Black man walking down the street who is not known still strikes some fear in many. Going into an all white area where a Black person is not known strikes a similar response. However, what's "new" is you can now do that without necessarily being attacked or arrested. An African American can now move into those neighborhoods if you have the wealth to do so.

The power structure, of course, is still controlled by white men. But the rise of a middle class of all races is real. The fact that Hillary Clinton received 18 million votes and had a fervent following of women who grew up in the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, means young women believe a woman can now become commander in chief of the United States.

The *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert observes in a June 7 column, "Savor the moment," that 40 years ago, the same year that Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy were both assassinated, "The notion in '68 that a Black person — or a woman — might have a serious shot at the presidency would have been widely viewed as lunacy." He adds, "A Black man president? You must be joking."

A woman as president? "According to the National Organization for Women, in a statement of purpose issued in 1966, fewer than 1 percent of all federal judges were women, fewer than 4 percent of all lawyers, and fewer than 7 percent of doctors," Herbert notes.

Sexism and racism are still prevalent. But the real progress is evident everywhere — the majority of medical school graduates are now women, and there are many women on Fortune 500 Boards and officers, and dozens of women in the Senate and House. These positive changes must be acknowledged.

My Stance — Positive Opposition

The reality is young people have been galvanized by the Obama phenomenon. The stance toward Obama thus should be of positive opposition, not "critical support" as some progressive Black leaders have advocated.

I cannot vote for a Democrat or Republican candidate, as each party represents the policies of the ruling class. As a socialist, it is not possible to vote for an African American or woman as the head of either party that is responsible for wars of aggression and occupation in Afghanistan or Iraq and threatens Iran and Palestine. I firmly believe we need to build a mass labor party and political party of the left that can defend the true interest of working people.

I reject "critical support" to Obama for that reason. But since we don't yet have the labor or mass left party, and we don't have mass social movements or a large-scale active antiwar movement, the challenge is to raise the class issues in the context of the electoral arena.

How? It means positively engaging the Obama supporters and campaign on the broad agenda issues. It means attending the campaign's events and talking to the young supporters about upcoming rallies against the war, solidarity with striking workers, and for single payer health care.

Electing the first African American president, like electing the first Black mayors 40 years ago, is relative progress but not a solution to underlying class and social issues.

That's why the campaigns of progressive third parties are important electorally. But for me the stance of attacking Obama as a Democrat, quoting Malcolm X's "The Ballot or the Bullet" speech, and going all out for a small socialist group's campaign on ideological grounds, or for the Green Party campaign of Cynthia McKinney or the "independent" candidacy of Ralph Nader, is not the most effective way to influence those who will become disillusioned.

While I will likely vote for one of these options (even though pure electoralism is not the road to mass independent working class action), I consider the priority to be positive engagement with Obama supporters.

The challenge is to recognize history in the making while not moving away from the goal of a mass labor party and working-class based government.

* From <http://www.solidarity-us.org/>

Reverend Wright and Black Liberation Theology

THE GROUNDSWELL OF broad support for Barack Obama (both among Blacks and whites) is a phenomenon that deserves a serious analysis and understanding. It cannot be down played by passing it through the lens of pure-and-simple lesser-evilism.

Some radicals dismiss the mass phenomenon, because Obama is a candidate of a ruling-class party. That simplistic rejection of Obama's campaign and its mass support is sectarian: The issue isn't whether to vote for a Democrat, but rather our response to a development that is having a wide-scale impact. How many times, in state after state, have we ever seen citizens of all races line up for hours to hear an African-American man talk about "hope," on a platform that is fundamentally no different than his opponents?

While I do sympathize with those activists choosing the Green party campaign of Cynthia McKinney or the "independent" Ralph Nader for their more progressive political program, I believe progressives and socialists should focus our attentions on critically engaging Obama supporters, identifying with their desire for a "new type of politics and direction for the country" — while explaining that Obama is no answer to stop the aggressive wars of U.S. imperialism.

In that spirit of critical engagement, an objective evaluation of Obama's support, and why it's grown, is instructive.

Mass Appeal Beyond Electoralism

The mass sentiment for the Obama campaign represents more than pure electoralism. It indicates a possible shift in political consciousness, which can either lead to broad-scale disillusionment or begin to awaken the new young generation to engage in more radical politics when the first African-American president acts like all his predecessors in defending the imperial state.

The Obama phenomenon is a result of fears and frustrations, and of hopes that the country can be better. Most Blacks, of course, are excited by an unprecedented possibility of a "Black president." Others, including many white workers, are fed up with standing still or going backward as the country enters a recession. Obama taps these multiple anxieties. His mass rallies show the desire for change.

The "messiah effect" is why Obama could take on the issue of "race and racism" in the way he did on March 18 in Philadelphia. It's appropriate to look at that speech and fallout — some 40 years after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. — to see the complexities of racial progress.

Outstanding Speech

As a Democrat and mainstream politician, Obama's speech was far superior to what anyone on the

left or the country likely expected. Some have criticized it for not analyzing the institutional racism deeply embedded in capitalism — another case of looking much too narrowly at what Obama means for tens of millions of people.

Overall, this was an outstanding speech. Obama refused to throw his former Chicago minister, Rev. Jeremiah Wright, under the moving bus for Wright's sermon outlining the history of violence by the rulers of the United States.

(It should be noted that Obama later told the ABC daytime talk show, *The View*: "Had the reverend not retired, and had he not acknowledged that what he had said had deeply offended people and was inappropriate and mischaracterized what I believe is the greatness of this country — for all its flaws — then I wouldn't have felt comfortable staying there at the church.")

The speech's significance, however, is not what he said or didn't say about Rev. Wright. It is the fact that Obama dared to elaborate on the topic to a national audience even if it hurt his chances to win the presidential nomination or to be elected in November. It confirmed to his followers and detractors alike that he is a different kind of mainstream politician.

Obama outlined the origins of American racism from the dawn of English colonialism and Independence to the present — the slave trade, chattel slavery, Jim Crow segregation and the racism still prevalent in society, especially among many whites who speak and act certain ways in private, not necessarily consciously but because of cultural upbringing.

Obama told the story of his white Kansas grandmother, who feared Black men even though she loved him. These honest views are felt by all ethnic groups. Everyone has similar family contradictions.

Obama did not discuss institutional discrimination and disadvantages that "people of color" still face for simply being Black, Latino, Native American or Asian — something a white person has never experienced. That discrimination is why some employment and other opportunities are not offered, or the benefit of the doubt not given, by a mostly white male-dominated power structure.

Yet he went further than I expected, which is the only way to view his comments on Rev. Jeremiah Wright and racial politics. It's why what he said about Wright rang true to the audience:

"Given my background, my politics, and my professed values and ideals, there will no doubt be those for whom my statements of condemnation [of Rev. Wright's 'divisive' comments] are not enough.... But the truth is that isn't all that I know of the man.

"The man I met more than twenty years ago is a man who helped introduce me to my Christian faith, a man who spoke to me about our obligations to love one another; to care for the sick and lift up the poor.... who served his country as a U.S. Marine; who has studied and lectured at some of the finest universities and seminaries in the country, and who for over thirty years led a church that serves the community (by) housing the homeless, ministering to the needy, providing day care services and scholarships and prison ministries, and reaching out to those suffering from HIV/AIDS...

"Not once in my conversations with him have I heard him talk about any ethnic group in derogatory terms, or treat whites with whom he interacted with anything but courtesy and respect. He contains within him the contradictions — the good and the bad — of the community that he has served diligently for so many years.

I can no more disown him than I can disown the Black community. I can no more disown him than I can my white grandmother...."

Wright is No Hatemonger

Reverend Jeremiah Wright is no “hatemonger” as slandered by the right and many Clinton supporters. He did not give a “hate” speech. His sermons are, in fact, in the best tradition of Black Liberation Theology.

Read what Rev Wright (now retired) said in his now infamous December 2007 speech:

“We took this country by terror away from the Sioux, the Apache, Arikara, the Comanche, the Arapaho, and the Navajo. Terrorism.

“We took Africans away from their country to build our way of ease and kept them enslaved and living in fear. Terrorism.

“We bombed Grenada and killed innocent civilians, babies, and non-military personnel,” he preached.

“We bombed the Black civilian community of Panama with stealth bombers and killed unarmed teenagers and toddlers, pregnant mothers and hard working fathers.

“We bombed Qaddafi’s home, and killed his child. ‘Blessed are they who bash your children’s head against the rock.’ [This is a reference to the seldom-quoted final two verses of Psalm 137, which was Rev. Wright’s text for this sermon on the dangers of revenge lust —ed.]

“We bombed Iraq. We killed unarmed civilians trying to make a living. We bombed a plant in Sudan to pay back for the attack on our embassy, killed hundreds of hard working people, mothers and fathers who left home to go to work that day not knowing that they’d never get back home.

“We bombed Hiroshima. We bombed Nagasaki, and we nuked far more than the thousands in New York and the Pentagon and we never batted an eye.

“Kids playing in the playground. Mothers picking up children after school. Civilians, not soldiers, people just trying to make it day by day.

“We have supported state terrorism against the Palestinians and Black South Africans, and now we are indignant because the stuff that we have done overseas is now brought right back into our own front yards. America’s chickens are [here the congregation joins in completing the sentence —ed.] coming home to roost.

“Violence begets violence. Hatred begets hatred. And terrorism begets terrorism. A white ambassador [a U.S. diplomat previously quoted in Wright’s sermon —ed.] said that y’all, not a Black militant. Not a reverend who preaches about racism. An ambassador whose eyes are wide open and who is trying to get us to wake up and move away from this dangerous precipice upon which we are now poised. The ambassador said the people we have wounded don’t have the military capability we have. But they do have individuals who are willing to die and take thousands with them. And we need to come to grips with that.”

True or false?

King’s Precedent

In 1967 and 1968, shortly before his assassination, Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke at the Riverside Church in New York City about the Vietnam War. This is what he said:

“The only change came from America, as we increased our troop commitments in support of governments which were singularly corrupt, inept, and without popular support. All the while the

people read our leaflets and received the regular promises of peace and democracy and land reform. Now they languish under our bombs and consider us, not their fellow Vietnamese, the real enemy. They move sadly and apathetically as we herd them off the land of their fathers into concentration camps where minimal social needs are rarely met. They know they must move on or be destroyed by our bombs."

King called for the immediate end to this "madness." In his 1968 speech at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, he returned to the theme:

"It is said on the Statue of Liberty that America is a home of exiles. It doesn't take us long to realize that America has been the home of its white exiles from Europe. But it has not evinced the same kind of maternal care and concern for its Black exiles from Africa. It is no wonder that in one of his sorrow songs, the Negro could sing out, "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child." What great estrangement, what great sense of rejection caused a people to emerge with such a metaphor as they looked over their lives."

He added:

"There are those, and they are often sincere people, who say to Negroes and their allies in the white community, that we should slow up and just be nice and patient and continue to pray, and in a hundred or two hundred years the problem will work itself out because only time can solve the problem."

"I think there is an answer to that myth. And it is that time is neutral. It can be used either constructively or destructively. And I'm absolutely convinced that the forces of ill-will in our nation, the extreme rightists in our nation, have often used time much more effectively than the forces of good will. And it may well be that we will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words of the bad people and the violent actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people who sit around and say wait on time.

"Somewhere we must come to see that social progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated Individuals. And without this hard work time itself becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. And so we must help time, and we must realize that the time is always right to do right."

Wright and King delivered the same message of truth.

Black Liberation Theology

This political mixture of the Black Christian church and militancy has deep origins in the African-American community. It is called "Black Liberation Theology." It is rooted in Black Nationalism and the traditions of Black radicalism. It goes back to the resistance to slavery. The modern version arose during the civil rights movement. It basically combines the philosophy of the Black Christian church and Black Nationalism.

Supporters of the ideology of Black Liberation Theology believe that the system can be reformed and Blacks can bring themselves up by the bootstraps and become full equals in U.S. society. The advocates see a future where the poor can become middle class and CEOs of major corporations; and, of course, elected U.S. Senator or even President of the country — some day.

One of the main intellectual articulators of the theory is the Rev. James Hal Cone of Arkansas. As part of his theological analysis, Cone argues for God's own identification with "Blackness." He explains in *A Black Theology of Liberation*:

“The Black theologian must reject any conception of God which stifles Black self-determination by picturing God as a God of all peoples. Either God is identified with the oppressed to the point that their experience becomes God’s experience, or God is a God of racism...The Blackness of God means that God has made the oppressed condition God’s own condition. This is the essence of the Biblical revelation. By electing Israelite slaves as the people of God and by becoming the Oppressed One in Jesus Christ, the human race is made to understand that God is known where human beings experience humiliation and suffering...Liberation is not an afterthought, but the very essence of divine activity.” (63-64)

Based on the preeminence of “Black experience,” Cone defines theology as “a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the gospel, which is Jesus Christ.”

Cone’s theology asks (and seeks to answer) the question, “What does the Christian gospel have to say to powerless Black men whose existence is threatened daily by the insidious tentacles of white power?” His answer emphasizes that there is a very close relationship between Black theology and what has been termed “Black Power.”

Black Power is a phrase that represents both Black freedom and Black self-determination “wherein Black people no longer view themselves as without human dignity but as men, human beings with the ability to carve out their own destiny.” Cone says Black theology is the religious counterpart of Black Power. “Black Theology is the theological arm of Black Power, and Black Power is the political arm of Black Theology.” And “while Black Power focuses on the political, social, and economic condition of Black people, Black Theology puts Black identity in a theological context.”

Black Nationalists (self identified or not; few are today) — whether of the Booker T. Washington philosophy of seeking to reform the system, or the more militant Black power ideology of Marcus Garvey and the 1960s followers of Malcolm X — all argued that Blacks must pull themselves up and stand on their own two feet.

Wright’s United Church of Christ congregation includes middle-class Blacks like Obama but in the majority are poor and working class. Rev. Wright speaks to the reality of Black history and the subtle and actual racism that his typical church goer has experienced.

His sermons are mainstream, and not anti-American — or against capitalism. He is a “patriot,” as Obama described; but he is the Black American version, who serves as a medic for the Marines, fights the wars and comes home to face racial discrimination!

To Rev. Wright there is no contradiction in condemning real racism and urging Blacks to take more personal responsibility for the problems of their community. This is not “radical” or “hate” speech. His criticisms are based on hard facts, not make-believe or white liberal conservative views of patriotism. It’s that understanding that enables him to make the comparison between the U.S. empire today and that of the Roman era.

In Wright’s speech before the National Press Club, he identified himself with Black Liberation Theology and pointed out that the attack on Obama and him by the corporate media and others is in reality an attack on the Black community.

Barack Obama, the former Chicago community organizer, learned his roots as a Black man at his wife’s church. He learned his internationalist outlook from his white mother, who worked among the poor in Indonesia. But he is not an advocate of Black Liberation Theology even though he listened to Wright for 20 years. That’s why he can say he never heard Wright speak the words he did last

December. He did, and probably nodded in agreement — but as a mainstream presidential candidate with a chance of winning the presidency, of course, he must disassociate from Wright.

Those who expect otherwise are not realistic. The way he did so, by rejecting but not throwing Wright under the bus, was a nod to his youthful base and recognition of his historical roots in the Black community.

Obama is obviously aware of what is called the “Bradley effect” where a certain percentage of whites will never vote for an African American as president. (The Bradley factor refers to Tom Bradley, the African-American former mayor of Los Angeles, who had a double digit lead in the 1982 California governor’s election days before the vote. He then narrowly lost due to racial dynamics — whites telling pollsters one thing, and voting the opposite.)

Barack Obama is also a strong proponent of modern day Black capitalism. He told Business Week (April 14 issue) that, “My opponents to the right like to paint me as this wild-eyed liberal. But I believe in the market. I believe in entrepreneurship.”

(Civil rights leader Jesse Jackson is one of most prominent advocates of the market system and Black capitalism. The concept of Black capitalism has evolved over the decades. It used to mean advocating an independent “Black economy” — tied to the nationalist goal of “Black control of the Black community” — tapping the \$800 billion spent by African Americans within the American economy. Today it means striving and believing it is possible to become a capitalist like Bill Gates.)

Ironically, there has been more success in gaining a foothold in big business than in the political arena where Obama is the only Black in the U.S. Senate. Several African Americans have become heads of major corporations. Forty years ago there were none. African American Stanley O’Neil, for example, was CEO of Merrill Lynch, one of the largest investment firms on Wall Street. His grandfather had been a slave.

Since the decline of the civil rights and Black Power movements in the 1970s, the conservative pro-big business wing dominates the discussion on improving the lives of African Americans. Traditional Black Nationalism, including those who reject “Black Capitalism,” has few advocates today.

What Next

If Obama happens to get the Democratic nomination and wins the presidency it can sharpen the debates even more. That’s good for society. The real test is yet to come when the Republican right launches its inevitable race-baiting. To this point, the integration of elite African Americans in business, media, the military and politics has made that less effective.

The most interesting aspect about the Obama campaign for me, and what should be for those on the left of the political spectrum, is the mass consciousness unfolding in front of our eyes in support of a “color blind” or nonracial society. It is evident in all 50 states where “race does not matter” the way it did in the past.

Obama’s speech on race, and more importantly his campaign, has initiated a broad discussion about American history including its violence, racist past and why young people need to engage in politics. It could not happen if that change in attitudes weren’t taking place.

The left in particular should resist a sectarian response towards this unique mass phenomenon for Obama. The critical choice isn’t about voting for Obama, or even a third party alternative. Progressive political consciousness at the end of the day is not primarily an intellectual transformation. For most, it occurs by joining struggles to end wars and occupations like Iraq and Afghanistan, fighting racism and ending economic inequalities.

I for one think it is important to critically embrace those backing Obama's campaign. It is not a betrayal of socialist principles to do so.

* *From Against the Current (ATC) May/June 2008, No. 134.*