President Obama and the Crisis of Black America: Interview with Cornel West

written by Dan La Botz | January 19, 2013

NP: For four years we've had an African-American president, and that has led some people to argue that we are living in a post-racial society. What do you think of this argument?

CW: I think they're using election of a black president to make extravagant, exaggerated claims. Certainly the election of Barack Obama means that we are less racist than we were 30 years ago when it comes to electoral politics; there is no doubt about that. But unfortunately, sadly the legacy of white supremacy is still quite vicious; it's still very overt at times. It's overt in terms of the stop and frisk policy. It's overt in the differential treatment of black or brown poor people in regard to the war on drugs. So that you end up with two very contradictory realities: less racist in terms of electoral politics but deeply racist in terms of practices and policies as it relates especially to people of color who are poor.

If you keep track only of the election of Barack Obama, or the black heads of Fortune Five Hundred companies, or black professors in Ivy League Schools, you think that, lo and behold, we're living in a new age, a post-racial age. But if you actually have your feet on the ground, you understand the ways in which gentrification is setting in, the vicious attack on public education , and the privatization of public education, that is in many ways an attack on poor children of color. We saw it in the Chicago Teachers' strike, right — and we were with them in deep solidarity. Six-hundred and eighty-four schools — only one out of four schools have arts and music programs. Six-hundred and eighty-four schools—and 200 nurses for all of those precious children, over 80 percent of them black and brown and over 87 percent of them poor or near poverty. So the issue of race — racism, white supremacy — is still very, very much alive and doing damage to people's lives. If you keep track only of the breakthroughs of black faces in high places you're going to think that it's a different post-racial age.

NP: You've already referred to some of the issues, but I wonder if you could expand on the question of the state of African-Americans today after four years of the Barack Obama administration?

CW: When it comes to the black poor and working class, we're in a catastrophic situation. We've got Depression levels of unemployment and underemployment. We've got dilapidated housing and disgraceful school systems that have been out of control for a long time. We've got guns and drugs and in the community, devastated lives and too many people dead, especially young people dead. We've got, of course, crack houses and liquor stores, and deeply conservative churches on every corner, the signs of people searching for hope, faith, a refuge.

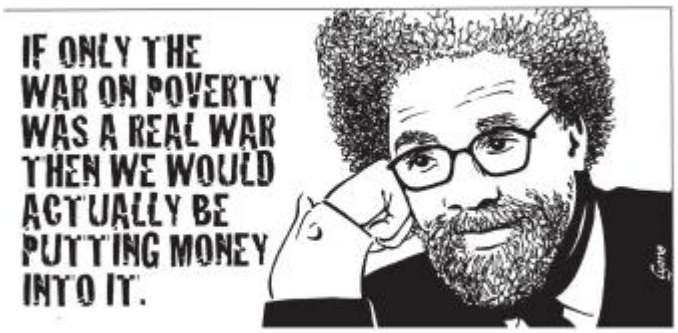
For the middle classes, of course, there's been a tremendous blow. Fifty-six percent of black middle class folk lost their wealth when they lost their homes or the value of their homes as a result of the housing bubble. As for the black well-to-do, they're doing very well, all slices.

We're dealing with a situation which is clear for all to see: that capitalism has failed poor and working people, especially of color. It has not worked for poor and working people, especially of color, and yet it's quite enticing for the upper middle classes and above.

NP: How do African-Americans today reconcile the situation? That is, we have on the one hand the election of an African-American president which represents a tremendous change in our society, and

yet at the same time a catastrophic situation for the black poor, working class, and many in the middle class.

CW: Right now there is utter confusion. You have a shameful silence on the part of most black leaders. The elected officials won't say a word even though they resonate with what brother Tavis Smiley and myself have been doing with the Poverty Tour. But they won't say a word, because if they did, they wouldn't be reelected, given the fetishizing of Barack Obama that has taken place in black America, and that's very real. Criticizing him means you can be demonized.



NP: Why do you think there is this "shameful silence," as you call it, among the black leaders?

CW: I think that black leaders found themselves making this thick wall of protection around a president who had no serious loyalty to them. It's quite ironic that he's been loyal to Wall Street, but Wall Street is not loyal to him, but black people have been loyal to him but he has not been loyal to black people.

NP: Yet there are some more critical voices…

CW: Yes, that's right. We've had Glenn Lowry,[3] Maxine Waters,[4] Tavis and myself have been hitting it hard. And Glen Ford and the Black Agenda Report,[5] and I applaud them, I salute them, because they tell some serious truths. I may not agree with all of it, but they are telling some important truths.

But I really don't want to put Obama at center stage. We've got to talk about the social forces behind this situation. We've got to talk about why he ended up with a Wall Street government. Why Geithner? Why Sommers? Why Daley? We can go on and on in terms of advisors and secondary advisors, straight out of Wall Street. Wall Street gets bailed out; homeowners don't. Workers don't get bailed out; they've got to restructure their contracts—but they won't touch the contracts of Wall Street. Workers get layoffs and lower wages, but the auto industry gets new CEOs dictated by public officials. That fundamental bias toward the oligarchs and plutocrats fills me with righteous indignation.

How can Obama mention Martin Luther King Jr.'s name, with those drones dropping bombs on innocent people? And you've got Martin Luther King's statue up there and at the same time in the Oval Office, they've got to deal with killer lists every Tuesday.[6] The legacy of that great freedom fighter has been besmirched by those who are running the empire.

NP: I recently saw an interview on public television with Prof. William Darity of Duke University who studies and speaks out on many of the same issues you do.[7] *He said that he was "sitting this one out," that he would not cast a vote for the office of president. His exact word were, "I'm going to vote for the other offices that are on the ballot, but I'm just not going to cast a vote for the presidency."*[8] *Yet if I understand your position, and correct me if I'm wrong, you would not share Darity's position; you would despite your strong criticisms advocate voting for Barack Obama? So I wondered what you thought of the position that Darity has taken?*

CW: I resonate with that, I really do. When you put together the war crimes, when you put together the Wall Street government, when you put together turning its back on poor people and so much of black America — how could I justify voting for him?

The only thing I have left, is what Bernie Sanders told me, which is that if a Romney government were to come in, there would be just so many more actual deaths as well as damaged lives under a Romney administration as opposed to an Obama administration. It's a choice between catastrophe (Romney) and disaster (Obama)—and a disaster is better than a catastrophe.

A lot of it has to do with what state you live in. If you live in Ohio (as you do) or in Florida you have a much harder choice than those of us who live in New York or California. But Darity is from North Carolina, it could go either way in North Carolina.

I really do think that if my vote were the tipping point between Romney and Obama —I'd vote for Obama in a minute. But, I would say that I am voting for a war criminal, extension of Wall Street; I'm voting for no backbone when it comes to the working class, or even the trade union movement and the Employee Free Choice Act, and so forth, but I do think the Romney administration would generate more deaths and more damage on the ground. That's still very real for me. That's just a moral issue in terms of each life being precious.

But that's a tough call. I have great respect for my comrades—such as the brothers and sisters of Black Agenda Report — who disagree with me and focus almost exclusively on the dark side of the Obama administration, because that dark side is very real.

NP: With the African-American community in such a terrible economic situation, I have been struck by the fact that the black community protests much more against criminal injustice than it does against economic injustice. We have the large spontaneous protests over the killing of Trayvon Martin and the huge demonstration in New York over stop-and-frisk, yet, while there are union strikes over wages and protests over foreclosures, we seem to see less of a movement for economic justice. Why is that?

CW: Historically black people have been dealing with such raw fear and trauma that we have more immediate responses and we even have better infrastructures to deal with the raw physical violence coming at us, rather than with the ugly economic exploitation coming at us. So when you actually have bullet-from-gun-of-police-into-black-body the immediate response is there — you have infrastructures. You can even get some ministers out. You can get a whole lot of people out, who wouldn't say a mumbling word about some of the economic exploitation taking place. It's more visible, public, and we just have a longer history of responding to that.

And yet, we know that the two — criminal injustice and economic injustice — go hand-in-hand. You get the demonizing and criminalizing of young people, which means it's just open season on them very often, yet at the same time dehumanizing and devaluing is part and parcel of the fact that they can live in dilapidated housing. They can have Depression levels of unemployment for decades, and yet if it hits the mainstream it's a crisis.

NP: Yet, of all the issues facing us, facing both the African-American people in particular and the American population as a whole, you have chosen to focus on poverty with your Poverty Tour.[9] *Why is that?*

CW: I think that if we make poverty a priority it would result in making massive investment in jobs with a living wage a priority, which is tied also to trying to strengthen unions as the countervailing force against the rule of oligarchs and plutocrats in our capitalist economy. That is a major first step.

They all go hand-in-hand. Now of course we want massive investment in education and housing and infrastructure and bridges, and we can go on and on. That is the major reason that brother Tavis and I, building on the legacy of brother Martin King, put the eradication of poverty at the center on the domestic front.

Then, of course, we have the drum beat on the imperial front, which is the drones dropping bombs on innocent folks. Once you hit the drones, then you can begin to tell a story about U.S. policy past, the last 30 or 40 years that has been so tied to the corporations and geopolitical interests.

NP: Yet neither of the major political parties, neither the Republicans nor the Democrats, can or will do anything about this…

CW: No neither one, neither one.

NP: …so I wonder, do you see the African-American people in particular and the other people, white, Latino, and other immigrants who live in poverty work for low wage and fight these wars because they cannot find another job, do you see them creating some independent political force? Can you foresee them creating a new political party?

CW: I think right now that the political system is so poisoned with big money, and the domination of oligarchs and plutocrats —and that includes both parties — that I don't think either party has the capacity to respond to the urgent needs of the masses of people. I think that if we engage, for example, in taking out big money, the campaign finance reform that people have talked about, and allow new voices to be heard, based not on the fact that they had big money but on the fact that they had broad and visionary perspective on the world, then there would be a very good chance of a third party formation, a very good chance of a variety of progressive voices in parties to emerge. I don't know if it would be just one party, but I think there would be a variety of different voices out there that would make a difference.

But I am much more tied to social motion, momentum and movement than I am to political parties.

NP: Yet, when we have had movements and great social upheavals, they have tended to be re-institutionalized. People talk about FDR and the New Deal, but they saved capitalism and captured the labor unions and the social movements. How do we ever escape this dynamic? Will another great social upheaval be able to find expression in independent political action, in a new political party on the left?

CW: That is the $64,000 question. You know you've got the Frankfort School and you've got Sheldon Wolin who write about "fugitive democracy" and that the best we can do is unleash the energy from below, and then it gets incorporated.[10] Democracy is never an institutionalized practice, but it is a "fugitive moment." Each moment absorbed is incorporated and its leaders refreshed, and you have to bounce back again. That's the cycle. That's the best we can do. Now I don't like to settle for that, but I do take that Wolinian view very seriously. If there's any truth to it, it just means that the social motion, momentum, and movement is something we've got to focus on, no matter which party's in power and fill the jails and the streets as often as we can.

NP: You and Tavis Smiley have just finished your Poverty Tour 2.0, what do you see as your next project?

CW: We are still working on the poverty issue. We're pushing the issue on our radio show, Smiley and West.[11] And Tavis is pushing it very hard on his show.[12] We're still going very, very strong on that.

The next project is going to be a matter of trying to connect the struggle around immigration, the struggle around stop-and-frisk, and the struggle for working class rights. We have to somehow bring together the struggles against the vicious legacies of white supremacy, against the legacies of class privilege from above — the trade union movement at its best — and of our Latino brothers and sisters dealing with the racist immigration policies linked to both parties. We're reflecting right now: how do we take it on the road and make the connection.

As you know, part of the challenge is the corporate media, multiplex. One of the things that Tavis and I have been blessed with is high visibility vis-à-vis the corporate media, the ability to raise these kinds of issues on the corporate media. The corporate media has various persons running things on MSNBC, CNN, C-Span and Fox News that will have Tavis and me on their shows to debate. We've got to use our platforms all we can before we go under to highlight these kinds of issues and hope that we can bring together.

NP: Is there anything else on your mind that you'd like to say before we end this interview?

CW: I'd like to dedicate the interview to my pastor Willie P. Cooke, the pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church in Sacramento, California who baptized me 51 years ago. He just passed away. He was the kind of pastor who, if you were looking for the pastor, was usually up on the roof fixing the leaks. They wanted to buy him a house out in the suburbs, but he said, "I got a house in the hood; I don't need to go anywhere." He wouldn't allow any anniversary for fund-raising because he never would pad his pockets with the money of hard-working folk in the congregation. It was a very working class, proletarian church right there in the hood, in the ghetto of Oak Park, in Sacramento.[13] Drove a VW his whole life as a minister. Never asked for a raise. He was a servant of the people. He had that kind of love. The funeral that we have, and, of course, I was blessed to be there as one of the speakers, it was a love feast. It was all about love and justice for everybody. On a deep moral and spiritual love that's where I come from.

It's a beautiful thing to have Marx, and a beautiful thing to have Walter Benjamin and Lukacs, Stanley Aronowitz and Jeffrey Faux, and Barbara Ehrenreich and Richard Wolff, who have given us these magnificent insights into the global class war — but my fundamental roots go back to Shiloh Baptist Church and Cooke, you see, who taught us "to be willing to live and die for the least of these," the prisoners of war, the orphan, the widow. And that goes back to prophetic Judaism as you know, goes back to Micah. And he means the world to me, and now he's gone.

Footnotes

1. DSA website at www.dsausa.org/dsa.html.

2. "Cornel West & Tavis Smiley on Obama, 'Many of Us Are Exploring Other Possibilities in Coming Election,'" Democracy Now, Aug. 9, 2011.

3. Glenn C. Lowry, Profesor of Economics at Brown University. See his essay, "Obama is No King."

4. "Maxine Waters to Obama: Pay more attention to blacks," *Los Angeles Times*, August 18, 2011.

5. *Black Agenda Report*.

6. Jo Becker and Scott Shane, "Secret 'Kill List' Proves a Test of Obama's Principles and Will," at New York Times, May 29, 2012.

7. Darity's Duke Sanford School of Public Policy site.

8. Judy Woodruff, “North Carolina Up for Grabs in 2012 as Voter Enthusiasm Wanes,” video and transcript at PBS Newshour; William Darity.

9. The Poverty Tour: A Call to Conscience, 2.0.

10. Sheldon S. Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy,” *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical & Democratic Theory*; Vol. 1 Issue 1, (April 1994) pp. 11-25.

11. Smiley and West.

12. Tavis Smiley Show at PBS, WNET.

13. Walking Tour of Oak Park neighborhood, Sacramento, California.