Race and the Obama Era

written by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor | May 29, 2010

IT HAS BEEN MORE THAN A YEAR since Barack Obama was inaugurated as the first African- American president of the United States. Despite the obvious historic significance of his election, Obama's actions to date make it very doubtful that his presidency will alleviate the persisting conditions of racism, discrimination, and general inequality that continue to shape the experience of most African-Americans in the United States.

When Obama was first elected, the main question pursued in the media was whether or not the United States was entering a "post-racial" era; today the questions have centered on the meaning of "Black politics" when a Black president is overseeing the most regressive attack on Black living standards in a generation. Should special programs be established for Blacks to curtail the impact of the economic recession on Black living standards? Should African-American organizations protest the Black president when racists in the Republican Party and Teabaggers are also protesting the president? Do we need a new Black political agenda? These are just some of the questions that shape race in the Obama era.

The debate over political strategy stems from the blunt reality that Black America is drowning in the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. Despite all the querying over whether or not the U.S. economy is technically in or out of recession, Black unemployment, home foreclosures, evictions, and bankruptcies continue to grow. Just last March when the mainstream media crowed with excitement about the addition of 162,000 jobs to the economy, it was simultaneously reported that Black unemployment had grown from 15.8 percent to 16.5 percent.

The overview of unemployment doesn't begin to convey the extent of the jobs crisis in Black America. Officially, the nation's highest unemployment rate is in Detroit, which is 83 percent Black — joblessness is a staggering 28 percent. Unemployment on the mostly Black south and west Sides of Chicago comes in second at 22 percent. The top 10 areas in the country where unemployment is concentrated include Black neighborhoods in Toledo, Atlanta, and St. Louis.

For example, the rapid loss of jobs means that greater numbers of African- Americans are losing their health care, which will only worsen disparities around health care between Blacks and whites that already exist. In 2007, when Black unemployment was approximately 10 percent, 20 percent of Blacks were without heath insurance. With Black unemployment growing steadily today, the numbers of the Black uninsured are sure to rise, too.

Unemployment also impacts rising levels of poverty in Black communities. A recent report found that 90 percent of Black children are part of families that will use food stamps by the time they are 20 years old. All told, 40 percent of Black children live in poverty, according to the government's official statistics. According to the census, a full quarter of African-Americans were living in poverty in 2007 — two years before the unemployment crisis in Black America.

Rising unemployment is also exacerbating the foreclosure crisis in Black neighborhoods across the country. While foreclosures are not tracked by race, the number of Black homeowners who face the threat of losing their homes is believed to be twice that of whites. A study conducted by the Woodstock Institute in Chicago found an 18 percent jump in foreclosures across the city in 2008, but most were concentrated in African-American neighborhoods like Englewood and West Englewood. In these two neighborhoods alone, there were 725 foreclosures in a nine-month period. According to the Center for Responsible Lending, 53 percent of African-Americans who bought homes in 2006

have already lost or will lose their homes to foreclosure in the next few years, compared to 22 percent of white borrowers facing foreclosure.

Despite the obvious and disproportionate impact the economic crisis is having in African-American communities, Black political figures from Barack Obama to the Reverend Al Sharpton have been remiss to either talk about racism as a factor or to call for particular race- based programs to help the growing ranks of the Black unemployed and the Black poor. In an interview with *USA Today*, Obama responded to a question about Black joblessness, saying, "I will tell you that I think the most important thing I can do for the African-American community is the same thing I can do for the American community, period — and that is get the economy going again and get people hiring again…I think it's a mistake to start thinking in terms of particular ethnic segments of the United States, rather than to think that we are all in this together, and we are all going to get out of this together."

Obama has been skilled at enlisting prominent Black liberals in his colorblind jobs creation efforts and has faced little to no political pressure from African-American civil rights organizations or political groups for his lack of a clear program on ending the financial crisis in Black America today. Last February, prominent Black liberals Al Sharpton, NAACP leader Ben Jealous, and Urban League President Marc Morial met with Obama to discuss unemployment in the African-American community, only to emerge from the meeting to vow support for Obama's plan not to develop specific programs to help African-Americans. Ben Jealous, in an interview afterwards, commended Obama by saying, "What's clear is that we have a president that gets it." Al Sharpton praised Obama in a *New York Times* story for not having a "black agenda." In fact, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Sharpton has been to the White House five times since Obama became president and that he has been handpicked as Obama's "go-to-guy" to respond to grumbling amongst some of the Black political and academic elite about the worsening state of Black America while a paucity of policies are suggested by the Administration.

Sharpton's new role was on vivid display for all when last March he heatedly jousted with African-American talk show host Tavis Smiley over whether or not Obama should take up Black issues in particular. In a pointed exchange with Smiley during a popular Black radio program, Sharpton commented that it was "stupid" for Obama to become an "exponent for black views" because it would create fodder for conservatives who would then try to defeat Obama's agenda. Sharpton went on to argue that Smiley and other progressive critics of Obama were in fact guilty of applying a "double standard" to President Obama since they would never demand a "black agenda" from a white president. A few days after this exchange Smiley convened a meeting called "We Count: The Black Agenda is the American Agenda" on the Southside of Chicago, Obama's hometown, in front of a thousand of mostly Black residents. Smiley culled together a panel of Black intellectuals, political and religious figures including Louis Farrakhan, Cornel West, Michael Eric Dyson, Julianne Malveaux, and a handful of others, to discuss both conditions in Black America and the posture that should be taken by progressives towards Obama. Meanwhile the audience was restricted to "thirty seconds or one minute" to pose a question to the distinguished panel. While many panelists had critiques of the pace of change and the worsening situation for most Blacks, it was all couched in professions of "love and respect" for the president.

The ongoing row between Black liberals over how to respond both to the unraveling crisis in Black America and its facilitation by an African-American president is the most recent demonstration of the crisis and paralysis that racks Black politics today. The Black liberal strategy of placing no demands on the President yet hoping that will produce substantive changes in the condition of most African-Americans is naïve at best and self-serving at the very least. It is difficult to build a movement or any kind of resistance on this basis. In some ways both the Black political establishment and their religious and academic Black counterparts are reacting to two political

realities; on the one hand, despite Obama's inattention to the devastation in African-American communities, he remains hugely popular, with approval ratings among Blacks above ninety percent and secondly, but related, he and other African-American politicians have been subjected to withering racist attacks by Republicans, the Tea Party, and Fox News. The racist hysteria that was kicked up as the vote on the health care bill came closer should have ended all doubt about the actual character of the so-called Tea Party movement and their Republican lapdogs. A combination of both these factors have made Black leaders, at the very least, skittish about raising criticism of the President.

However, the inactivity of Black liberals and their organizations run deeper than the fact of a Black president. After all it's not as if these individuals and organizations were busy building a movement before Barack Obama was elected as president. For the thirty-five years or so since the social movements for Black liberation and against racism gave way to the alleged pragmatism of entering the realm of formal and electoral politics — the much vaunted move by civil rights leader Bayard Rustin from "protest to politics" — the barometer for measuring political success is based on access and proximity to political power. Thus, today Black liberals view the election of an African-American Democratic Party President as the culmination of a generation's struggle. And once this goal has been achieved there is very little space to be critical or challenge the President in that context, which is what we are witnessing today. As the Democratic Party has moved to the right over the last thirty-five years, so have African-American elected officials and the liberal organizations in their orbit as a means to maintaining their access and proximity to the power centers of the party. Thus, when Bill Clinton was president and used racism to push through welfare reform and expand prisons and the criminal justice system, he did so with little to no resistance from Black elected officials or the Urban League or the NAACP. If getting Democrats into the White House is the goal, then once that goal is achieved the pressure is to acquiesce, not mobilize the masses. But these strategic differences are not just based on political differences but also reflect the growing class cleavage in Black America. From the largest number of Black elected officials in history to the largest number of Black millionaires ever, not all African- Americans share the same interests. There are a growing number of African-Americans who have no problem with the system as it stands; they are just looking for greater access to its benefits. This is why the Black elite focuses on issues of personal responsibility among Blacks or their perceived lack of it to explain the disproportionate levels of poverty and social discord in Black communities. It if is not the system then it must be the people.This puts them at political odds with the interests of the majority of African- Americans who are the daily victims of American capitalism. Finally, whatever side of the debate the Black liberals are on, whether it is Tavis Smiley who is openly critical of Obama or Al Sharpton who is working in tandem with Newt Gingrich to push Obama's reactionary "school reform," they all agree that politics is viewed from the top down and is ultimately shaped by what happens in the Beltway. It is essentially Black millionaires and almost millionaires debating the future of ordinary and poor working class African-Americans.

It is simply bizarre that Al Sharpton and other prominent liberals would argue that African-Americans should not "pressure" Obama into creating a Black-only agenda. According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center, the 2008 election was unprecedented for two reasons — it was the lowest ever white voter turnout in Presidential election history, with only 66 percent of whites voting on the one hand, while it was the largest Black voter turnout ever, with more than 65 percent of Black voters casting a vote in the election, on the other. Sixty-eight percent of African-American women produced the highest turnout ever for a presidential election. Young African-American voters also were decisive in Obama historic victory. Amongst young Blacks aged 18-29 there was almost a nine percent increase in voter turnout from 49 percent in 2004 to more than 58 percent in the 2008 election. According to Pew, it was the highest turnout among young voters from any ethnic group in U.S. election history. In total, a whopping 95 percent of all Black voters cast

their votes for Barack Obama. For any other block of voters to mobilize for a candidate in this matter, it would be unquestionable that group of voters would be expected to place demands on the candidate who won office as a result of their unprecedented mobilization.

Yet, African-Americans are told that it is a "double standard" and unfair to place race based demands on Barack Obama. What Al Sharpton and others like him really mean to say is "We have never been invited to a summit at the White House. Today we have a seat at the table and access to the President — don't rock the boat because we don't know when or if this will happen again." Their contention that if Obama were to advocate for Blacks that it would destroy his Presidency reflects the utter cynicism that clouds politics in the United States. The idea that Obama would never survive advocating for programs to help Blacks who are facing historic levels of unemployment is rooted in the idea that ordinary whites are so racist that they would never tolerate such an agenda. Despite this popular notion in the press and amongst liberals, a CBS poll shows that most Americans have supported affirmative action programs for more than a decade, with almost 60 percent supporting race based affirmative action in 2000. In 2009, 51 percent supported race based affirmative action programs while 80 percent supported programs, that provided special help for people from "disadvantaged backgrounds." Of course, polls like these are always tenuous and in a climate of economic crisis, unemployment, and scapegoating, support for these kinds of programs could decline. The stark reality remains the same nonetheless: in the context of any halting or limited economic recovery, if particular plans are not developed to deal with the particular problems faced by Black workers, we will continue to see jobs created, while Black unemployment continues to rise or plateaus in the double digits.

President Lyndon Johnson, who had a nasty penchant for using the word "nigger," said in 1965,

> Freedom is the right to share, share fully and equally, in American society — to vote, to hold a job, to enter a public place, to go to school. It is the right to be treated in every part of our national life as a person equal in dignity and promise to all others. But freedom is not enough. You do not wipe away the scars of centuries by saying: Now you are free to go where you want, and do as you desire, and choose the leaders you please. You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, "You are free to compete with all the others," and still justly believe that you have been completely fair. Thus, it is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates.

That reality has not changed. LBJ did not come to this conclusion on his own; a grassroots movement in the South and North that clearly put forward a "black agenda" for jobs and freedom pushed him. The resources exist, of course, for the U.S. government to both create a jobs program and economic stimulus as well as reinvigorate a welfare safety net for all workers who are either out of work or underemployed, but a year and a half into the Obama presidency this clearly is not the plan.

The problem with Obama is not whom he is surrounded by or that he has not had sufficient time to push through his "other" agenda; rather politics in this country is shaped by millionaire donors, corporate influence and money, and political compromise between representatives of unprincipled parties who are willing to do anything to get their piece of legislation passed. This is an atmosphere that demands cooperation, compromise, and moderation — none of which create much space for the kind of radical change that is needed to get ordinary Americans — especially African-Americans — out of the worst crisis in eighty years.

Today, we are told that Obama must be given more time. But the question remains, if Obama has not been compelled to come up with particular programs to address the disproportionate impact of the economic crisis in African-American communities when he has had a super majority in Congress and was elected with a “super mandate” evidenced by unprecedented approval ratings around seventy percent, then what will he do when he potentially loses that super majority in the mid-term elections and already faces an approval rating that dips below fifty percent? The notion of giving Obama time makes the assumption that he is simply waiting for the right moment to unleash his inner radical and begin advocating for programs that put poor and working people first — as opposed to his program of bailing out banks, sitting idly while people lose their homes and expanding a war in Afghanistan that will not only cost hundreds of billions of dollars more but will kill tens of thousands of innocent Afghans.

Finally, it is true that Black support for Obama remains at historic highs and above ninety percent. It is also true that in the absence of a vibrant and visible movement for racial justice for more than a generation many African-Americans accept most of the conservative and reactionary explanations for the disproportionate levels of Black poverty and deprivation. This will remain the case until a movement changes the terms of the debate by focusing on the way in which the intractable inequity of capitalism distorts the lives of most Black people in this country. New grassroots movements against racism and injustice need to be organized around concrete questions like the creation of jobs for African-Americans, an end to foreclosures in Black communities which are destroying Black net worth, an end to the disproportionate number of evictions affecting Black women and Black families, and so on. The housing organization City Life/Urbana Vida has been very successful in organizing African-Americans against foreclosures and evictions in Boston with more than one hundred community people meeting weekly. These are the types of struggles that can be the beginning of the kind of a new movement that can put pressure on Obama or whoever is in the White House and Congress to deliver programs that can actually mitigate the destructive racism, discrimination, and inequality that shapes the lives of African-Americans in the United States.

Footnotes