OUR HOUSE OF CARDS: POPULAR CULTURE IN THE OBAMA ERA

written by Dan La Botz | April 22, 2014

Americans' profound cynicism about Washington finds full expression in the wildly popular *House of Cards*, the Netflix series created by Beau Willimon and based on a novel by Michael Dobbs in which Francis J. "Frank" Underwood (Kevin Spacey), will stop at nothing—including murder—to achieve his political ambitions. Underwood, the fictional Democrat from South Carolina who works to extend the retirement age needed to qualify for social security, attacks public education and the teachers unions, and provokes a high stakes trade war with China to punish a political rival, is engaged behind the scenes in threats, bribery, extortion, kidnapping, and more than one murder to maintain his grip on power, eventually becoming U.S. president. From time to time, like a character in a Shakespearean drama, Underwood turns to speak to the audience, expressing his contempt for the politicians, lobbyists, businessmen, political challengers, and all the toadies and timeservers by whom he is surrounded. It is a contempt for the world of Washington that one suspects the viewers share.

We find the same world in ABC's *Scandal,* based in part on the life of George H.W. Bush's press aide Judy Smith, where the protagonist Olivia Pope (Kerry Washington), , runs a crisis management firm that handles problems for many, including the Republican President Fitzgerald Thomas Grant III of Santa Barbara, former governor of California. Olivia Pope the fixer, and the president's sometime mistress, is the vehicle for exploring Washington, a place of lies, intrigue, deception, kidnapping, torture, and murder, a good deal of it committed by whacked-out former special forces agents. The president himself, we learn, had a personal hand in Operation Remington, a black op carried out a generation ago that revolved around the downing of Flight 522 to London and the death of hundreds of passengers. The commander-in-chief has been involved in the kind of cloak-and-dagger plots and skullduggery that accompanied the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and that in fact forms part of all foreign policy, diplomacy and statesmanship from time immemorial.

We have come a long way from Aaron Sorkin's *West Wing* (1999-2006) whose President Josiah Bartlett (Martin Sheen), though involved in political wheeling and dealing and occasionally touched by scandal, violence, and the violence of the War on Terror at home and abroad, appeared to be a basically good and decent man (albeit with the narrow political vision of American politicians) struggling to deal with immensely complicated situations. President Bartlett after all struggled to save Social Security. Even at the time, of course, Americans joked that Bartlett was the good president we wished we might have had as opposed to the Bush-Cheney presidency we were actually suffering through.

House of Cards and *Scandal* show us Washington as we suspect it is: crooked beyond redemption. The newspapers and TV and radio show it to us daily, and, if you read between the lines and watch carefully, it is not so different: a place of lies and deception, though most of the kidnapping and murder that we're aware of takes place through the execution of black ops and drone attacks carried out in other countries. Here at home our political leaders merely destroy social programs, attack public employee unions, and promote policies that may also we know lead to hunger, illness physical and mental, and eventually death, but in the slow, suffering way of ordinary people that is not nearly as entertaining as *House of Cards*. The homeless mother and her children face enough drama in their lives, but it is far from amusing and seldom occupies prime time.

One can gauge Americans' skepticism about our political system in other more quantitative ways than their TV viewing. Since the 1960s less than 60 percent of the voting age population participates in elections, while President Obama was the first president since FDR and Eisenhower to be elected twice by more than 50 percent of the voters. Most of our elected officials hold power on the basis of having won the votes of little more than 25 percent of the electorate. Then too, we have the approval ratings. At present (March 2014) only 40 percent of Americans approve of the job that President Barack Obama is doing—he has several times recently been down as low as 38 percent, while Congress's approval rating is at 13 percent, the lowest in American history. The thing is, *House of Cards* and *Scandal* are a lot more suspenseful and exciting than watching the Republicans shut down Congress or following the technical, economic, social, and political failure of Obamacare. The TV shows are fun, confirming us as they do in our anger and disdain for evil politicians, but life is less fun for most of us under the real politicians who run the country.

The Barack Obama era will go down in American history as one of the least liberal and most conservative periods in American history. Unlike any other period since the Gilded Age of the late nineteenth century or perhaps the Roaring Twenties, capitalists have prospered enormously while workers have suffered tremendously and income inequality has grown exponentially. A 2013 OECD study showed that the United States had the highest income inequality in the developed world (only less developed Chile, Mexico and Turkey were more unequal), while another group of economists found that income inequality has grown faster in the United States than in any other developed nation, with the top 1% having doubled their income from 10 to 20 percent of the national total since 1970. The Pew Research Center study published in December 2013 demonstrated that income inequality in the United States was now the highest since 1928.

We all know they're getting richer, while the rest of us are falling behind. The woman or man on the street will tell you this. Or you could go to the movies. Martin Scorsese's film *The Wolf of Wall Street* would make it clear that, for some in the era of Bush and Obama, the Great Recession—even with government investigations and some new regulations—represented no obstacle to making money, even if occasionally they are caught with their hand in the till. Jordan Belfort (Leonardo DiCaprio) having lost a job in high finance finds another in penny-stocks and makes a fortune allowing him to live the high life—high on cocaine, call-girls, extravagant parties, and conspicuous consumption. Belfort, is a fictional representation of the real Belfort, is a man without conscience or remorse who, after doing a little time in prison for welching on a deal with the FBI, goes off to run sales seminars in New Zealand. Prison after all is really for poor, mostly dark complexioned people, while rich white crooks seldom see the inside of the slammer, and if they do are soon out and back at it, bilking the rest of us.

Scorsese's film makes an interesting contrast with Oliver Stone's 1987 film *Wall Street*, a similar story in many respects, except that in that earlier film the avarice of Bud Fox (Charlie Sheen) stands in stark contrast to the working class and labor union values of his father Carl Fox (Martin Sheen), president of a Machinists Union at Bluestar Airlines. In that earlier fictional representation of Wall Street and its crooked deals, torn between corporate raider Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas) and his father, Bud come down on the side of his dad, even though it means he goes to prison. In the most recent Wall Street film, there are no moral fathers, there are no unions, and there seems to be no alternative to ruthless capitalism.

The Wolf of Wall Street presents a tale that Americans believe and that we are gratified and entertained to see on the big screen, the tale of the corrupt guys at the top, lavishly spending the money that working men and women have lost. At least in the films we see the truth that the system is unjust—even if the emphasis is on the corruption and not on the inherent injustice of capitalism itself. And then too—and least for some of us—there is our identification with the characters, the vicarious thrill of being, at least in our imaginations, rich, powerful, stoned and sexually titillated for

about 120 minutes, before we return to searching for a job, brooding about our inadequate pensions, or figuring out how to ever buy a house when prices are so high. It was great to get a way for an hour or two into the world of the rich bastards who never have to worry about these things.

Under Obama's watch the banks, insurance companies, and corporations, which had been on the verge of collapse, were buoyed up by massive infusions of taxpayer money, returned to profitability, and the neoliberal economic arrangements that they desire and require were continued with little significant alteration. Of course it is true that Obama can't be blamed for all of the economic inequality. The current trends toward inequities in the American economy and society began in the late 1970s under presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan and accelerated under presidents George W.H. Bush, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. But Obama's administration took no measure to put its foot on the brake, in fact, after helping to get the capitalist car back on the highway after the near crack-up in 2008 to 2010, the government stepped on the gas again, fundamentally continuing the same economic policies. We are on the road again, Obama in the driver's seat and watch out for that sharp turn coming up ahead.

The historical argument that Democratic Party administrations always act to ameliorate the misery of the poor and to attenuate the exploitation of workers, as they purportedly did under the leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s and Lyndon B. Johnson in the 1960s, proved wrong in the first decades of the twenty-first century under Obama. Before his election, Obama had supported Bush's bank bailout, the Trouble Assets Relief Program (TARP) that nominally provided $700 billion in loans to rescue U.S. and foreign banks and insurance companies, though actually closer to $450 billion. Obama's own American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 provided a nominal $787 billion in stimulus to the U.S. economy, later revised up to $831 billion, in a variety of job and benefit programs. Liberal critics like Paul Krugman argued, and continue to argue, that the stimulus of that size was too small to cope with $2.1 *trillion* in lost production. The Great Recession that began in 2007 officially ended in June 2009, though even a year late economists were still in doubt about that claim. In 2013 the Economic Policy Institute produced a briefing paper asserting that "growth since mid-2009 has been too sluggish to move the economy out of its depressed state and restore it to full health." Meanwhile the banks, if not making as much money as they would want, (When would they ever?) are doing pretty well. Let's go back to the movies.

Happiness is the Smell of a New Car

Mad Men, Mathew Weiner's award-winning AMC cable series about Don Draper (Jon Hamm), the brilliant, deeply conflicted and fundamentally unhappy advertising agency executive, is set in the Madison Avenue world of the 1960s. Draper—whose very identity is a lie, having stolen a dead man's during a Korea War battle—is the perfect symbol of an industry which, if not actually based on lies (which it so often is), is certainly based on the idea that we can change *our* identities or at least our images—to become healthier, happier, more relaxed, but at the same time more alert, and above all more attractive, and sexier people—through buying the products they advertise.

Why has *Mad Men* so captivated the American public? Perhaps it is because through it we are able to return to the *Affluent Society*, as John Galbraith's 1958 book characterized the era of post-war prosperity in America. Draper's company deals with all of the products of that so profitable and prosperous time from the Chevy to Lucky Strike cigarettes, from the Hilton Hotels to the airlines, for advertising, after all, is merely the enticing and more beautiful reflection of the commodity. Draper's copywriters and artists turn the most banal objects of everyday life into the fetishes we crave. If there is a tendency to the reification—the thingification—of our lives, it is the Madison Avenue ad men who, if they did not exactly cause it, made it so natural and attractive. They make us feel okay about consuming. As Draper says, "Advertising is based on one thing, happiness. And you know what happiness is? Happiness is the smell of a new car. It's freedom from fear. It's a billboard on the side

of the road that screams reassurance that whatever you are doing is okay. You are okay."

Mad Men makes us long for a past where people naively and obliviously live lives—lives of two-pack-a-day cigarette smoking, three martini lunches, not-so-casual infidelity, big cars that burn leaded gas, suburban sprawl covering farmland and wetlands, the Vietnam War, and politics as usual—which, as we know, lead to personal and social disaster, and lead to today.

Ah, what a simpler world it was: racist and anti-Semitic, patriarchal and homophobic; a world where wealthy white men, as the song says, had the world (and the women) on a string. Yet as the series proceeds we witness the emergence of the beat counter-culture of the Village, the first steps toward workplace racial integration in the North, the rise of women struggling for their liberation various ways, not all of them dignified and only some of them successful. Through *Mad Men* we vicariously partake of the wealth and luxury but also hope, optimism, and progressive change of the 1960s.

How could this not be attractive in our own era of the unfair society build upon enormous economic inequalities, economic crisis, and the false promises of hope and change? *Mad Men* has apparently led to an increase in the sale of suits and a resurgence of 1960s décor furniture. Still, hopeful at that may be, it will not lift us out of the recession, which we are told (contrary to our own experience and observation) we have already left behind.

They Got Us All Fucked Up

If one's only encounter with America were its films, one might think that the country had in the last couple of Obama years made tremendous steps forward in dealing with its long history of racism and was well on the way to confronting and solving the problem. Three major films—*Lincoln* (2012)*, Django Unchained* (2012)*,* and *12 Years a Slave* (2013)—have explored the history of African American slavery and the political response with a seriousness seldom seen before in film history. *12 Years a Slave* based on the memoir of Solomon Northup as adapted for the screen by John Ridley and directed by Steve McQueen (no, not the action film actor), portrayed the kidnapping of the free carpenter and musician Northup (Chiwetel Ejiofor) who is sold into slavery in the South in the 1840s and suffers all of the violence and brutality, as well as the humiliations and indignities of the that horrifying system. We have never before had such a graphic and honest Hollywood film about the African American experience of slavery.

Django Unchained, Quentin Tarantino's spaghetti western, shows the reaction to that system as incarnated in the black avenging angel Django (Jamie Foxx), a slave who is freed from a group of slave traders by the German abolitionist Dr. Schultz (Christoph Walz), no doubt, one of those famous European revolutionary refugees, the Forty-Eighter immigrants, many of whom were revolutionary democrats and socialists. With blazing guns of glory and righteousness Django and Schultz not only kill the arrogant and sadistic plantation owner (Leonard DiCaprio) but also destroy the big house, and symbolically shatter the plantation. Django is Spartacus and Toussaint L'Ouverture, Gabriel, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner all rolled into one; he is John Brown and the the slave revolutionaries John Brown hoped to meet at Harper's Ferry; he is the Civil War that's coming and a dramatic representation of those nearly 200,000 black soldiers who fought in it for their own liberation. Django is the new and hopeful future of black power and black freedom as he goes riding off into the sunset with the black woman he has freed beside him as the big house explodes behind them, slavery obliterated, overthrown and undone, free at last. Not since *Glory*, the 1989 film by Edward Zwick, have we had such a portrayal of African American dignity, courage, and heroism.

The Civil War nearly over, Steve Spielberg's *Lincoln* shows the president (Daniel Day Lewis) as he works to pass the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution that will grant freedom to the former slaves before the states of the Confederacy return to the union. Fearing that the returning Southern

states would attempt to restore slavery, Lincoln is determined to get the votes to pass the amendment by hook or by crook, handing out federal jobs to Democrats to get their votes, and slavery is ended in law as it was in fact through the war. While African Americans stand at the center of the other two films, in *Lincoln* black people are virtually absent, ignoring their contribution to the abolition movement and the key role they played in the war. Lincoln could only have accomplished what he did because of Django and his brothers in the Union Army who struck fear in the hearts of southern planters and helped to turn the tide of war.

Yet, despite the sense one might get from these films of a new understanding and reconciliation with our past and the historic debt owed to African Americans, under America's first black president, the country's black people are no better off and are in fact worse off in many respects than they have been since the Civil Rights Movement's victories of the 1960s.

As talk show host Tavis Smiley told Sean Hannity of Fox News in October of 2013 when asked if blacks were better off after five years under Obama, "The data is going to indicate sadly that when the Obama administration is over black people would have lost ground in every single leading economic indicating category. On that regard the President ought to be held responsible." Under Obama, African Americans have higher unemployment, more poverty, and continued high rates of incarceration. The overall unemployment rate for whites fell by February 2014 to 6.7 percent, but for African Americans it remained at 12 percent—and both of those should be doubled to get something closer to the real unemployment rate that includes discouraged workers and those who are underemployed. The black poverty rate continued to be much higher than that of whites, while African American men were six times more likely to be incarcerated than whites. One in three black men would go to prison during their lifetimes. By March 2014, two million Americans had run out of unemployment insurance.

The Democrats continue to hold on to their electoral base among African Americans, Latinos, women, and a minority of the white male working class simply because they are the not-very-lesser evil. As Bruce A. Dixon of *Black Agenda Report* wrote at the time, "To keep the Democratic party's brand alive as standard bearer for the oppressed and unemployed, elected Democrats and their enablers desperately need to blame this on those immoral, evil Republicans, who are also the reason the minimum wage hasn't risen, Medicaid expansion hasn't happened, workers can't organize unions without being blocked by bosses, and food stamps have been cut to unheard of levels."

Yet it is not the poverty and injustice that African Americans have continued to face under Obama that is the worst legacy of this regime. As Dixon writes, "After eight years of Barack Obama, black leadership and black America will have decisively lost and forgotten the habit, the inclination, even the example of standing against unjust and abusive power, and our former reputation around the world as a people of struggle. The height of the black Freedom Movement [lasted] only about eight or ten years, but it left an example of what it was to stand for justice and righteousness against bad laws and bad governance that inspired us and the rest of the world. Black youth who will reach maturity in the middle of this decade have no examples of struggle to look up to, only accommodations to power and excuses for inaction and ineffectiveness on every front."

Too many African Americans, the economic situation deteriorating, continue to live in the inner city ghettos, a world of low-paid workers and their families, of unemployment, poverty, and for too many of drugs, and crime. As rap artist K.R.I.T. sang a few years ago in his song "They Got Us All": Break my back for nothing (for nothing)/Lock me up for struggling/Only god can judge me, now/They got us all fucked up.

The Deporter-in-Chief

While there is great debate about the deportation figures, hundreds of thousands of immigrants continue to be deported by the Obama administration, leading immigration rights activists to call him the "Deporter-in-Chief." They argue that he has now deported more undocumented immigrants than Bush, with a total now approach two million. A similar number of families, they say, have suffered the loss of loved ones returned to Mexico, Central or South America. Wherever you live, if you turn your radio dial to the Mexican station with the *música ranchera* and you will hear tragic songs about how deportation is affecting Latino communities. "El Deportado," the song by the popular Los Terrible del Norte sings in Spanish the story of the deported man whose wife and American children remain behind in the United States. His child asks him, "When are you coming back?" He explains that they won't let him cross the border, but his English speaking child hardly understand him. "It's terrible the way I feel and makes me want to cry." Now they have only their mother. Some twelve million immigrants, most of them from Latin America and the largest percentage of those from Mexico, continue to live a world where a broken tail light or simply driving while brown can lead to arrest and then to a Kafkaesque chain of events, as they are taken from one prison to another—usually far from family and friends—have a quick hearing followed by rapid deportation, leaving behind their families with their economic and social problems, to say nothing of the trail of broken hearts.

With mid-term elections approaching and the presidential election not so far away, Obama issued an executive order in January 2014 halting deportation for many young immigrants brought to the United States when they were infants or small children. Then in March he ordered a review of deportation policies, another gesture to the immigrant and Latino communities. But Latinos are now so alienated from the president, that according to voter registration workers, they simply may not vote, feeling "frozen in frustration," according to Lisa Duran, executive director of Rights for All People.

The Apocalyptic Horizon

When the Obama years opened we talked of a looming environmental crisis in which the president showed little or no interest, at least not as judged by his environmental legislation. The crisis is looming no longer. Already greenhouse gases and climate change have led to melting ice caps and rising tides, and it is not the one you hear about that lifts all ships. The *New York Times* summed up in a headline the U.N. Panel on Climate Change report of spring 2014: "The Worst is Yet to Come." The future according to the report: wild weather, the ecological transformation of entire regions of the world, droughts, food and water shortages, and violent conflicts over these resources. Who will suffer most? The developing world's poor—but no one on the planet will be safe now that our climate and our entire environmental are changing so rapidly. The "Summary for Policymakers" puts it this way: "People who are socially, economically, culturally, politically, institutionally, or otherwise marginalized are especially vulnerable to climate change and also to some adaptation and mitigation responses (medium evidence, high agreement). This heightened vulnerability is rarely due to a single cause. Rather, it is the product of intersecting social processes that result in inequalities in socioeconomic status and income, as well as in exposure. Such social processes include, for example, discrimination on the basis of gender, class, ethnicity, age, and (dis)ability."

Environmental issues were projected on the big screen in the biggest way as the administration began. James Cameron's 3-D *Avatar* (2009)—a film said to have taken twenty years to make, so not exactly a response to short term social and political issues—presented a stark contrast between earthlings who had destroyed their planet's resources and therefore preyed upon another's, and the Na'vi of Pandora who lived in harmony with nature and the spirit that animated it. When the U.S. Marines attacked the planet to seize its precious mineral obtanium, in scenes reminiscent of the American Indian wars of the nineteenth century and the carpet bombing of Vietnam, one of the American agents, Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), who had been living as an avatar among the Na'vi,

joins the native beings who, assisted by the fauna of their globe, heroically defeat American intergalactic imperialism and return to living in peace and concord with nature. While our own early environment continues to deteriorate, perhaps now beyond control, we leave the theater gratified that on some distant planet or moon, the Na'vi have saved their ecosystems, their society, and their sovereignty.

If *Avatar* dealt—albeit in a Disneyish way—with environmental crisis and its relationship to racism and imperialism, one could say that *Elysium* projected on the big screen all of the domestic questions of environmental justice, health care, and economic and social inequality. Though set in 2154 it was all about the 2010s. Poor earthlings like Max Da Costa (Matt Damon) live and work in the teeming slums of our contaminated planet, while the rich reside on Elysium, an enormous space station (that looks rather like a Cancún resort) in luxury and, as the trailer explains, with "no war, no poverty, no sickness." Those on Elysium are citizens, those on earth are all "illegals." What divides them most is that the rich on Elysium have health care that *really* works, curing all their ills including cancer, while the poor on earth have none at all. Skipping most of the plot, suffice it to say that Da Costa, a factory worker and an incarnation of the proletariat, is transformed by gang-banger computer nerds into a one-man revolutionary army who takes over the computer and extends citizenship and health care to all earthlings. He is the white (or is he Latino?) working class *Django* bringing if not socialism at least genuine social democracy to our descendants a century and a half from now.

So far such rebellion seems more likely on the screen than in the streets.