Black Awakening in Obama's America: The End of an Illusion

Tatjana Vukelić

Ph.D. Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,

University of Rijeka, Croatia

Abstract

The aim of this study is to present and describe the social and political situation in the United States before and after Barack Obama's presidency regarding Black people and their position in the American *mainstream* society. What exactly does Obama's election portend for race in America? This essay uses the tremendous racial disparities in the American social and political system to assess race and racism as key features of contemporary society. In America, African Americans were, and are, locked in a "racial prison". As Blacks, their identities were defined in opposition to whites and whitness. Of course, Blacks could free themselves by changing their names, reframing their identities, and discharging their culture and heritage. To do so, as Malcolm X pointed out, required some radical action, a kind of suspension of judgement that would permit Blacks to see themselves in tension with the normative white gaze. As long as African Americans place their faith in political rightness and correctness of American democracy, they would never know what it feels like to be equal. The hope and optimism that coursed through Black America in anticipation of Obama's victory as the first Black president in 2008 seemed a million miles away. It seems like slavery was never abolished; it was only redesigned.

Keywords: racial politics, Barack Obama, police brutality, #BlackLivesMatter, transition

Introduction

In 2008 the impossible happened: An African American was elected president of the United States. When Barack Obama was elected as the first African American President in the history of the United States, more than thirteen million people of African descent living in the United States believed that things would finally and drastically change for the better. Unfortunately, things did not improve much. Some cosmetic changes have been going on, but the core issues are still deeply rooted in the American society. Black people celebrated Obama's presidency, and truly hoped that it would finally end racism, discourse of segregation, and racial disparity but Black

people are still struggling oppression, stigmatization, fundamental human and economic inequality, mass incarceration and dehumanizing forms of police brutality.

While the United States may have been considered an "affluent society", for the vast majority of African Americans, unemployment, underemployment, substandard housing, and police brutality constituted what Malcolm X once described as an "American nightmare." The relentless burden of those conditions would propel more than half a million African Americans – almost the same number of troops sent to fight in Vientnam – to rise up in the "land of the free" over the course of the 1960s. It is never useful to compare eras but painful continuities between the present and the past remind us that the past is not yet past.

Over the period of ten months, from the summer and fall of 2014 into the winter and spring of 2015, the United States was rocked by mass protests, led by African Americans in response to the police murder of a young Black man, Michael Brown. In August, the people of Ferguson, Missouri, rose up and brought the world's attention to the crisis of racist policing practices in the United States. Eight months later, some forthy miles from the capital, the city of Baltimore exploded in fury at the police killing of young Freddie Gray. What began as a local struggle of ordinary Black people in Ferguson in the pursuit of justice for Brown, grew into a national movement against police brutality and daily police killings of unarmed African Americans.

In Philadelphia, the birthplace of American democracy but also home to one of the most brutal police departments in the country, the Department of Justice conducted an investigation of the Philadelphia Police Department from 2007 to 2013, and it found out that 80 percent of the people Philadelphia police officers had shot were African Americans, even though less than half the city's population is African American. Out of 382 shootings by the police, only 88 officers were found to have violated department policy. In 73 percent of those cases there was no suspension or termination (Taylor, 2021).

Today, the United States accounts for 5 percent of the world's population but 25 percent of the world's prison population. There are more that a million African Americans in prison because Black people are incarcerated at a rate six times that of whites. As Michelle Alexander has pointed out in her book *The New Jim Crow*, the imprisonment of Black people has led to social stigma and economic marginalization, leaving many with few options but to engage in criminal activity as a means of survival. When white men with criminal records are as likely to be hired as Black men with no criminal records, one can only image slim prospects for legitimate work for Black men returning from jail and prison. The entire criminal system operates at the expense of African American communities and society as a whole (Alexander, 2010). The perpetuation of deeply ingrained stereotypes of African Americans as particularly dangerous, impervious to pain and suffering, careless and carefree, exempt from empathy and solidarity, is what allows the police to kill Black people

with no threat of punishment. The United States is often referred as a "colorblind" society or "postracial" society where race may once have been an obstacle to a successful life. Today, Black people are told that race does not matter any more.

Black awakening

Racial discrimination and racial disparities between Blacks and whites prevail in almost every segment of life – in employment, poverty, housing quality, and access to education and medical care. Even before Obama was elected, there had been great optimism about what a Black presidency could mean for American racial politics. President Obama turned out to be very different from candidate Obama. In his race for the Democratic nomination against the establishment candidate Hillary Clinton, he spoke of economic inequality and tried to connect with the young generations of Black people. In the election night Victory Speech in Grant Park, Chicago, Illinois on November 4, 2008, Obama addressed the audience and said:

"We have been warned against offering the people of this nation false hope. But in the unlikely story that is America, there has never been anything false about hope. … It was a creed written into the founding documents that declared the destiny of a nation: Yes, we can, it was whispered by slaves and abolitionists as they blazed a trail towards freedom through the darkest nights: Yes, we can. It was sung by immigrants as they struck out from distant shores and pioneers who pushed westward against an unforgiving wilderness: Yes, we can. It was the call of workers who organized, women who reached for the ballot, a president who chose the moon as our new fronties, and a king who took us to the mountaintop and pointed the way to the promised land: Yes, we can, to justice and equality. Yes, we can, to opportunity and prosperity. Yes, we can heal this nation. Yes, we can repair this world. Yes, we can" (Obama, 2021).

His speech was wildly misinterpreted by liberals and the mainstream media. The American journalist, David Corn, writing for *Mother Jones*, described Obama's speech as "trying to show the nation a pathway to a society free of racial gridlock and denial. …Obama was not playing the race card. He was shooting the moon" (Corn, 2008). Obama had been pressured for weeks to rebuke and distance from his pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, who had delivered a sermon titled "God Damn America," referring to the wrong the United States had committed in the world. Obama distanced himself from Wright, whom he described as "divisive and with a profoundly distorted view of this country" (Obama, 2008).

Yet, no one running for the president of the United States had ever spoken so directly and openly about the history of racism in government and society as Barack Obama. In that sense Obama broke the mold, but also established the terms upon which he would engage race matters – with dubious evenhandedness, even in response to events that required decisive action on behalf of the racially aggrieved. His eloquent speech about the nation's dark history and original sins failed to connect the sins of the past to the crimes of the present. In 2006, 52 percent of Black youth (ages eighteen

to twenty-five) described the US government as "unresponsive" to Black needs, while 61 percent said they had experienced discrimination when looking fo work and 54 percent believed that Black youth receive a "poorer education" than white youth (Cohen, 2012).

The election of Barack Obama to the presidency inspired many to marvel at the seeming evaporation of race as a basis for social ordering in the United States, a euphoria often expressed in proclamations that are now present in a post-racial America (Hua Hsu, 2009). It was believed that his ascendancy to the country's most powerful position would suggest a change in race relations and simultaneously, it would guarantee for the next several years, at least, conversations on race, and perhaps even on racism on a daily basis (Thompson, 2009).

But there was a reason to hesitate before celebrating. The nation elected Obama amid profound economic, environmental, martial, and constitutional crises. Perhaps the crises, coupled with Obama's exceptional background – combining Kenya and Kansas, an immigrant success story, and the positive exotic of Hawaii – better explain his election than any purported fundamental shift in racial attitudes (Lopez, 2010). A pollster with special expertise on race said just before the election that „a black man (cannot) be president of the United States of America. However, I think an exceptional who also happens to be black can be president of the United States of America" (Ambinder, 2009).

Optimism and hope prevailed among Black people. Hip-hop artis Young Jeezy lyricized "Obama for mankind, we ready for damn change so y'all let the man shine!" Jay-Z linked Obama's run to longer narrative of Black struggle: "Rosa sat so Martin could walk; Martin walked so Obama could run; Obama is running so we all can fly!" (Martin, 2008). Rap mogul Sean Combs said, "I am not trying to be dramatic, but I just felt like, Martin Luther King, and I felt the whole civil rights movement, I felt all that energy, and I felt my kids. It was all there at one time. It was a joyous moment" (Martin, 2008).

Black millenials felt happy and optimistic and the excitement about Obama turned into postelection euphoria. On the election night, it was almost strange and rare scene to see a multiracial crowd gathered in Chicago, one of the most segregated cities in the United States. It was not just a blind hope but the expectation that the things would be better. Yale sociologist Elijah Anderson said: "Now we have a sense of future. All of a sudden you have a stake. That stake is extremely important. If you have a stake, now there is risk – you realize that the consequences of compromising an unknowable future" (Verini, 2001).

From Grant to the Future

Just weeks before Obama was to be inaugurated as the next president, shots rang out. In the early morning hours of New Year's Day 2009 an armed officer named Johannes

Mehserle shot in cold blood an unarmed twenty-two-year-old Black man, Oscar Grant, who lay face down in handcuffs on a public transportation platform. Black Oakland exploded in anger, with thousands of people protesting on the streets, demanding justice. Protests, marches, activism, public forums, and organizing meetings sustained enough pressure to force local officials to charge Mehserle with murder. In the end, Mehserle spent less than a year in prison, but the local movemnt and activis foreshadowed events to come. For African Americans, Obama's presidency had been largely defined by his reluctance to engage with and directly address the racial discrimination.

Another moment when Black America collectively came to terms with Barack Obama's refusal to use his position as president to intervene on behalf of African Americans was the execution of Troy Davis, a Black man from who was arrested in 1989 for the murder of Mark Allen MacPhail, an off-duty police officer who was brutally murdered in Savannah, Georgia. In 1991, Troy was sentenced to death. Over the next 20 years, Troy continually maintained his innocence but unfortunatelly without success. The state executed him on September 21, 2011, amidst a global outcry. There were protests around the world; support from global dignitaries involved in the international movement to stop Davis's execution; the European Union and the governments of France and Germany implored the United States to halt his execution, as did the Amnesty International. People around the owrld waited for Obama to say or to do something, but in the end, he did nothing. He did not make a statement but sent press secretary to deliver a statement in his behalf. One Black observer expressed deep disappointment: "President Obama gives opinions on everything that is safe and what he thinks America wants to hear, but he straddles the fence on issues important to African Americans" (Freeman-Coulbary, 2011). It was a moment of awakening for the Black millennials and a moment of new understanding of the limits of Black presidential power, not because Obama could not intervene, but because he refused to do so (Taylor, 2021).

The murder of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, in the winter of 2012 was a turning point. Like the murder of Emmett Till, nearly fifty-seven years earlier, Martin's death broke the delusion that the United States was a postracial society. Till was a young boy who, on his summer vacation in Mississippi in 1955, was lynched by white men for an imagined racial transgression. Till's murder showed the world tha racist brutality in the heart of the "world's greatest democracy" (Taylor, 2021). Martin's crime was walking home in a hoodie, talking on the phone, and minding his own business. George Zimmerman racially profiled Martin, telling the 911 operator that "the guy looks like he is up to no good, or he is on drugs or something" (*Socialist Worker* editorial, 2012). It was a seventeen-year-old boy walking home from a store. Zimmerman followed the boy, confronted him, and shot him in the chest, killing him shortly after. The police accepted Zimmerman's account that Martin was a treath and the aggressor. The story began to trickle through the news media, and as more details

became public, it was clear that Martin had been lynched. Marches, protests, and demonstrations lasted for weeks all over the country. The anger was fueled, and the demand was simple: arrest George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin. Forty-five days after the murder Zimmerman was finally arrested. For weeks, President Obama avoided giving any statement, commenting only that it was a local case. After a month of riots and protest Obama finally said: "If I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon. …When I think about this boy, I think about my own kids. I think every parent in America should be able to understand why it is absolutely imperative that we investigate every aspect of this, and that everybody pulls together – federal, state and local – to figure out exactly how this tragedy happened" (Thompson & Wilson, 2012). In the summer of 2013, more than a year after Zimmerman's arrest, he was found not guilty of the murder of Trayvon Martin. President Obama addressed the nation, saying: "I know this case has elicited strong passions. And in the wake of the verdict, I know those passions may be running even higher. But we are a nation of laws, and a jury has spoken. We should ask ourselves, as individuals and as society, how can we prevent future tragedies like this. As citizens, that's a job for all of us" (Obama, 2013). There is a dual system of criminal justice – one for African Americans and one for whites. The discriminatory disparities that run in criminal justice also run in all aspects of American society regarding African American community.

The list goes on. The killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery in 2022 triggered a national and international response unlike any other since the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1954 set off a national movement to address Black political disenfranchisement. In both instances, ordinary Black people raised their voices to demand restoration from generations of systemic and intentional efforts to exploit and subjugate Blacks and their communities.

#blacklivesmatter

No movement appears out of thin air. There is always a prologue to certain situations which lead to the conditions and circumstances that set for the movements to emerge. Some of them are historical, the others political or economic, and finally social issues beyond someone's control. But still, there is always a human factor that is the most crucial. The emergence of some changes does not refer solely to the history since the proponents of the present situation may not even be aware of historical issues they stand for.

The acquittal of George Zimmerman by a Florida jury of murdering 17-year-old unarmed Black teenager Trayvon Martin in 2012 marked the origin of the Twitter hashtag #blacklivesmatter. Alicia Garza, an Oakland activist, watched the verdict on TV from a local bar. Frustrated and angry she wrote a 'love letter' on Facebook, as she said, to all Black people ending it with the phrase "Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter" (Arnold, 2017). Two other activists and Garza's friends, Opal Tometi and Patrisse Cullors joined forces with Garza, commented her post on the social media

platform in the same way by writing #blacklivesmatter and in just a few days it became viral and historic slogan. Three years later, BLM has developed and grown from a hashtag into a powerful organization of a new generation of Black people challenging racial discrimination and injustice. Two incidents lighted a spark – Trayvon Martin's murder in 2012 and Zimmerman's acquittal in 2013 sparked nationwide awakening in August 2014 with the rise of collective activities in Ferguson, Missouri.

However, it was the police killing and brutality against Michael Brown, an unarmed teenager, in Ferguson, Missouri in August 2014, and widely broadcasted and tweeted mass riots and demonstrations that followed, that the slogan Black Lives Matter evolved from the world of social networks to the real street politics. Millions of Americans watched images on television and social media of Black people who stood up against state violence, and the devaluation of Black life, in a way the world had not seen since the Civil Rights era. The Ferguson uprising was a key moment for the early twenty-first-century struggle for Black freedom. They defied state power and protested against what many people outside the Black community would rather ignore – racial capitalism and systemic racism. Ferguson became the center of Black resistance to the state oppressive politics and its violent tactics control and discrimination. Three weeks after Ferguson protests, Patrisse Cullors joined forces with activist Darnell Moore to organize social network followers who would give support to solidarity freedom rides protesters in Ferguson. The Black Lives Matter Network, later the BLMGN (Black Lives Matter Global Network), grew out of that action. In spring 2017, it had forty-three affiliations, and a global profile in three countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada (Ransby, 2018).

At the same time, other national and regional organizations were formed. They include the Chicago-based national Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100) with a membership of young adults between eighteen and thirty-five years old in affiliations around the country; The Dream Defenders, a multiracial organization led by the people of color in Florida in order to inspire an uprising in culture through transformational organizing; the St. Louis-based Organization for Black Struggle; and Million Hoodies Movement for Justice, a people of color-led multiracial national group based in New York City. In addition, a whole range of local organizations emerged or grew larger in size and influence in response to mass killings.

Between 2014 and 2016 almost everyday incidents of police violence and backlash, and other forms of state violence were the trigger for the uprising of Black people – old, young, working-class people, intellectuals, scholars, and others. Although police violence and dehumanizing treatment and discrimination of Black people on all social levels were at the center of protesters' anger, the list of serious issues appointed to the state authorities was far more extensive. The lack of affordable real estates, minimum wages, or no decent jobs for colored people at all, rising personal debts,

inaccessibility to health care, and the same opportunities for education have all facilitated the death of tens of thousands of Black people who became disposable to twenty-first century economy of racial capitalism.

The election of a Donald Trump as the forty-fifth president of the United States in November 2016 represented an indirect backlash against the radical antiracism of BLMM/M4BL. By openly supporting the white nationalists, Trump's administration provoked and directed the movement into a new phase of activity focusing on integrity, unity, and coalition work. At the beginning of 2017, a coalition of more than 50 groups representing the interests of Black communities across the United States was formed and named The Movement for Black Lives (M4BL). It was the crucial platform for a cross-movement campaign under the title "Beyond the Moment" which marked the fiftieth anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s historic "Beyond Vietnam" speech which called for new strategies of resistance.

Conclusion

The debate over the nature of Black inequality is not benign; it has deep political implications for the nature of American society and American democracy. There are enormous ruptures in the United States narrative over its triumph over racism as a defining feature of its society. The murder of Emmett Till in 1955 exploded the rhetoric of the moral and democratic superiority of American society. Historically, the incidents of police brutality have sparked Black uprising, but they are the tip of the iceberg, not the entirety of the problem. Today is no different. African Americans under Obama experienced the same indifference and active discrimination, in some cases, these were even worse.

Barack Obama became president right at a time when Black people needed help the most, yet he has done precious little. In fact, when he ran again in 2012, he reassured the nation by saying that he was not the president of Black America, but of the United States of America. It was not only that Obama was reluctant to offer or support Black agenda; he also played a destructive role in legitimizing racial disparities, mass incarceration, and police brutality. This essay gives evidence of all forementioned issues. Finally, this essay explores and discusses an interesting issue of why the movement marching under the banner of Black Lives Matter has emerged under the nation's first Black president. I also examine Obama's ensuing silence on the critical issues facing African Americans. The political action of young generation of Black people is not happening in a vacuum; it is a part of the same radicalization that gave rise to the Black Lives Matter movement and coalesced around the murder of trayvon Martin.

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