

## **Color Blindness and Racial Politics in the Era of Obama**

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**At a time when a supposedly “post-racial” America is becoming increasingly polarized over its first black president, historian Thomas Sugrue proposes a badly needed perspective on Obama’s attempts to negotiate between color blindness and race consciousness. Despite the depth of his historical perspective, he understates how destructive Obama’s religious moralism is for the cause of racial progress.**

Reviewed: Thomas J. Sugrue, *Not Even Past. Barack Obama and the Burden of Race*, Princeton University Press, 2010.

Thomas J. Sugrue’s *Not Even Past* is one of the latest contributions to the exploding field of Obama studies. Sugrue discloses in the opening pages that he voted for Barack Obama, made a small financial contribution to his campaign, and even worked on the candidate’s urban advisory committee, but his objective in his own rendering of Obama’s breathtaking rise to the White House is “balance”. In a moment when the United States is becoming increasingly polarized over its first black president, with a rising crescendo of criticism on both the right and left of the American political spectrum, this is an ambitious project to say the least. But Sugrue, an eminent Professor of History and Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania and a pioneer in the new urban historiography of race and power in the postwar American metropolis, is just the guy for the job, even if, in the final analysis, Obama’s detractors will no doubt have more

complaints with the book than his supporters<sup>1</sup>. And yet, if one gets the sense that Sugrue is at times pulling punches, he ultimately manages to produce an even-handed and illuminating analysis of the Obama story.

*Not Even Past*, which consists of three essays adapted from a series of lectures the author presented at Princeton University in 2009, stands out among the recent works on what Barack Obama means to the United States, in part, because Sugrue remains true to his métier<sup>2</sup>. Joining a field crowded with works of a somewhat polemical and journalistic bent, Sugrue delivers a rich, lucid, and badly needed account of the historical events, political movements, and ideological currents that shaped the ground upon which Obama negotiated his racial identity, developed his political views, and positioned himself for an improbable run for the presidency. Yet, this is as much a story about the world that made the man than it is about the man himself. “It is the story”, Sugrue writes, “of a journey through one of the most contentious periods of America’s racial history, through America’s post-1960s multicultural turn, into the syncretic black urban politics of the late twentieth century, onto the contested intellectual and cultural terrain of race and ‘identity politics’ in the late 1980s and 1990s, and finally to a moment in the early twenty-first century when America still lived in the shadow of the unfinished civil rights struggles of the previous century while influential journalists, politicians, and scholars hailed the emergence of a post-racial order” (p. 16). These were treacherous waters indeed for black politicians and white liberals alike, both of whom had to navigate a course through the ideological cross-currents of color blindness and race consciousness. These conditions had the Democratic Party lost at sea for the good part of three decades. Obama’s journey to political and racial self-discovery is also the story of how the Democrats rediscovered their bearings in a country drifting ineluctably rightward.

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<sup>1</sup> Sugrue redefined the study of the postwar metropolis with his path-breaking book, Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.).

<sup>2</sup> Some examples of recent works on Obama are: Paul Street, *Barack Obama and the Future of American Politics* (New York: Paradigm, 2008) and Tariq Ali, *The Obama Syndrome: Surrender at Home, War Abroad* (New York: Verso, 2010).

## **Yes I Can!**

On March 4, 2007, several weeks after announcing his candidacy for the presidency, Barack Obama addressed an almost entirely black audience at the Brown Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Selma, Alabama. This was the church where some 600 civil rights protestors had gathered to pray nearly 42 years earlier, before being beaten with billy clubs by Alabama state troopers under orders from the state's infamous segregationist governor, George Wallace. Graphic images of the ensuing frenzy of violence — beefy, helmeted troopers flailing wildly at what looked like a procession of well-dressed, respectable, and certainly nonviolent churchgoers — led to an outpouring of Northern support for the civil rights movement, which, in turn, facilitated passage of the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965. This was a special place for African Americans, and Obama was going to use his appearance here to define his relationship to this past and to the future of black politics. The media covered the event as if it were some kind of intimate black community affair — Obama talking from his heart to his own people — but this was pure fiction. In the modern era of American presidential campaigning, little is said or done that is not intended for mass consumption. In fact, Obama's now famous Selma speech was political theater of the highest order — a one-act play intended as much for a white audience as for a black one. And what this white audience saw, much to its delight, was a stern daddy talking tough to his wayward children. It was here, in retrospect, that we learned that the slogan “Yes We Can” was as much about personal responsibility and self-help as it was about any sense of collective progress.

Indeed, after beginning the speech by reducing racism to a mere detail with the assertion that the civil rights movement had brought blacks “90% of the way there,” Obama then proceeded to reproduce a litany of time-worn stereotypes related to the pathologies of black ghetto culture. He evoked neglectful black parents telling their children that “reading and writing and conjugating your verbs was something white”, and allowing them to watch television instead of doing their homework; he conjured up a lazy “Cousin Pookie” who won't “get off the couch”, told black women to “take off [their] bedroom slippers”, and criticized “too many daddies [for] not acting like daddies”; and,

finally and perhaps most importantly, he spoke of black folks making excuses for their problems, telling them that “sometimes it’s easy to just point at somebody else and say it’s their fault.” The message was not subtle, it was loud and clear — the longstanding and currently increasing gap between blacks and whites in every measure of social mobility known to statisticians should no longer be blamed on institutional racism, but rather should be viewed as a by-product of black cultural shortcomings. It goes without saying that if these same words had left the mouth of a white politician, his or her career in public life would be over, and some black leaders were clearly appalled. Jesse Jackson, for example, would later be overheard off-camera slamming Obama for “talking down to black people” and claiming he wanted to “cut his nuts off”.

Sugrue, for his part, offers a different interpretation of the Selma speech. The opening essay of *Not Even Past*, “This Is My Story: Obama, Civil Rights, and Memory”, analyzes the speech in the larger context of Obama’s project to cast himself as “heir” to Martin Luther King, and by doing so to present himself as “an agent of national unification... who could finally bring to fruition the few lingering, unmet promises of the civil rights movement” (p. 54). This is no easy task, for the memory of King has been so thoroughly reshaped in the context of the conservative ascendancy of the last few decades that his famous dream of a nation in which his children would “not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character” is now commonly used by conservatives to justify rolling back race-conscious policies aimed at closing the widening gap between blacks and whites in education and employment. The King that now occupies center stage, Sugrue perceptively explains, is not the King who criticized white moderates and demanded such radical redistributive measures as a guaranteed annual income; it is the King of nonviolence, religious piety, color blind justice, and national unity. But if Sugrue understands the complexities of this use of King for a project of unification, he does not seem fully willing to acknowledge the extent to which Obama was, in fact, playing the conservative game with King’s memory. In fact, Obama’s politics of unity are based as much on a defense of the myth of color blindness as they are on any kind of myth of “redemption” for past racial sins. Of course Obama would be loath to directly exploit King for the cause of color blindness — he did, after

all, admit that blacks still have another 10% of the way to go before attaining parity with whites — but his endorsement of a “culturized” view of black poverty amounts to a similar denial of racism in the service of color blindness<sup>3</sup>.

### **Postracial Racism**

The circumstances surrounding Obama’s gravitation towards a political ideology oriented around a black, middle-class vision of personal responsibility and Christian morality is the subject of Sugrue’s brilliant second essay, which is perhaps the best of the three. The key moment, according to Sugrue, came during Obama’s later Chicago years, when he became personally acquainted with two of the most influential figures in his intellectual development — the famed black sociologist William Julius Wilson and the provocative South Side Chicago minister, Jeremiah Wright. From Wilson, Obama took an emphasis on the role of both class and culture in the black community, as well as the idea that the best way to uplift the black poor from a public policy standpoint was through a “hidden agenda” that covered up race-conscious objectives with economic and class rationale; from Wright, he took “a profoundly moralistic critique of personal dysfunction and individual sin” (p. 87). As Obama was working out the symbiosis between these ideas in the early 1990s, the Democratic Party leadership was advocating a similar platform for recapturing the “Reagan Democrats” who had abandoned the Party in the 1980s, one that involved a retreat from welfare and affirmative action combined with a tougher stance on crime. The rest is history. “By 2008,” Sugrue argues, “Obama had developed a patchwork quilt of social politics, one that combined left-leaning calls for cross-class alliance building, Clintonite advocacy for the end of welfare as we knew it, and a Christian moralism that allowed him to build an unlikely bridge between black churchgoers and culturally conservative whites” (p. 91). If Obama can take credit for pioneering any one part of this winning combination, it would surely be the religious dimension. He was one of the first Democratic Party politicians to bring a strong religious strand into progressive politics. This was, we should remember, the age of

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<sup>3</sup> I borrow this notion of the “culturization of politics” from Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon, 2004). For Mamdani, the term refers to a process through which political issues are explained as the consequences of “cultural essences”.

diversity and tolerance, values that made strange bedfellows with the country's increasing piety; it was not so important what faith one belonged to, Americans began to believe, as long as one believed in some god above. (An exception to this rule was of course added after September 11, 2001.)

If Sugrue's account of this moment is both instructive and engaging, we can't but help thinking he is overlooking just how destructive Obama's "moralism" has been for the cause of racial progress. After all, it is more than likely that Obama's meteoric success in the early Democratic primaries had a great deal to do with the fact that his moralistic, color blind vision connected on a profound level with a generation of baby boom, middle-class white voters who had been pummelled into submission by images of black "welfare queens," "poverty pimps," and "gangbangers" for their entire adult lives. The Republican Party's project of welfare reform, which, somewhat ironically (or not, depending on how you look at it), culminated under the watch of Democratic President Bill Clinton, captured the country's political center beginning in the 1970s precisely because of its appeal to the culturally- and racially-inflected (not to mention, neoliberal) notion that the poor had only themselves to blame. This had tragic consequences for the struggle for racial progress, which was dramatically reversed during the long and painful Bush, Jr. years. As revealed by the debacle of Hurricane Katrina, when the mainstream media and their white viewers looked at black flood victims scavenging for food and necessities as "looters" and welfare dependents who had waited around for government assistance rather than evacuating, the black cultural stereotypes that Obama has drawn from are not remnants from a distant past, but are alive and well in supposedly "postracial" America<sup>4</sup>. In fact, it is precisely the interplay of cultural racism and color blindness that was so evident in Obama's campaign rhetoric that keeps them alive. And this is something *Not Even Past* seems unwilling to admit.

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<sup>4</sup> On the perception of flood victims as looters and welfare dependents, see Eric Michael Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2005) and Slavoj Zizek, "The Subject Supposed to Loot and Rape: Reality and Fantasy in New Orleans," *In These Times*, October 20, 2005.

Indeed, while Sugrue possesses an impressive mastery over the theoretical and historiographical trends that intersect his story, he, somewhat surprisingly, sidesteps a consideration of sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's book *Racism without Racists*, which describes how the investment of whites in beliefs relating to color blind meritocracy, the supremacy of the free market, and the cultural nature of most social problems allows them to deny the existence of racism<sup>5</sup>. This is not to say that Sugrue is unaware of the power of color blindness and diversity to negate racism. In fact, he deals effectively with this topic in the book's final essay, when he explores Obama's attempts to navigate a course between color blindness and race consciousness during his campaign run. Yet he ultimately stops short of drawing a causal relationship between the two — of recognizing, as Bonilla-Silva asserts, that color blindness actually works to perpetuate insidious and politically powerful forms of racism. Such conclusions cast an ominous shadow over Obama's handling of race, and while scholars like Bonilla-Silva and Paul Street<sup>6</sup> might be going too far in claiming that Obama's politics actually reinforce white supremacy, it bears repeating that no white politician could have gotten away with saying the things he did about black people. "Cousin Pookie" — just imagine.

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<sup>5</sup> Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.).

<sup>6</sup> Paul Street, *Ibid.*