

**Political Power and Social Theory**  
Volume 22

# Rethinking Obama

**Julian Go**  
Editor



# RETHINKING OBAMA

# POLITICAL POWER AND SOCIAL THEORY

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POLITICAL POWER AND SOCIAL THEORY VOLUME 22

# RETHINKING OBAMA

EDITED BY

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# CONTENTS

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS	<i>vii</i>
SENIOR EDITORIAL BOARD	<i>ix</i>
STUDENT EDITORIAL BOARD	<i>xi</i>
EDITORIAL STATEMENT	<i>xiii</i>
EDITORS' INTRODUCTION	<i>xv</i>

## PART I: OBAMA AND THE POLITICS OF RACE

INTRODUCTION: EXAMINING, DEBATING, AND RANTING ABOUT THE OBAMA PHENOMENON <i>Louise Seamster and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva</i>	<i>3</i>
THE BLACK PRESIDENTIAL NON-SLAVE: GENOCIDE AND THE PRESENT TENSE OF RACIAL SLAVERY <i>Dylan Rodríguez</i>	<i>17</i>
BARACK OBAMA'S COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AS NEW BLACK POLITICS <i>Tamara K. Nopper</i>	<i>51</i>
THE MORE THINGS CHANGE: A GRAMSCIAN GENEALOGY OF BARACK OBAMA'S "POST- RACIAL" POLITICS, 1932–2008 <i>Cedric de Leon</i>	<i>75</i>

THE TEA PARTY IN THE AGE OF OBAMA:  
MAINSTREAM CONSERVATISM OR  
OUT-GROUP ANXIETY?

*Matt A. Barreto, Betsy L. Cooper, Benjamin Gonzalez,  
Christopher S. Parker and Christopher Towler* 105

THE SWEET ENCHANTMENT OF COLOR  
BLINDNESS IN BLACK FACE: EXPLAINING  
THE “MIRACLE,” DEBATING THE POLITICS,  
AND SUGGESTING A WAY FOR HOPE TO BE  
“FOR REAL” IN AMERICA

*Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Louise Seamster* 139

**PART II: SCHOLARLY CONTROVERSY:  
THE CIVIL RELIGION OF BARACK OBAMA**

BARACK OBAMA AND CIVIL RELIGION

*Philip S. Gorski* 179

CIVIL RELIGION AND THE POLITICS  
OF BELONGING

*Joseph Gerteis* 215

CIVIL RELIGION FOR A DIVERSE POLITY

*Andrew R. Murphy* 225

THE UNFINISHED COVENANT

*Michael P. Young and Christopher Pieper* 237

REJOINDER: WHY CIVIL RELIGION?

*Philip S. Gorski* 245

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*Political Power and Social Theory* is a peer-reviewed annual journal committed to advancing the interdisciplinary understanding of the linkages between political power, social relations, and historical development. The journal welcomes both empirical and theoretical work and is willing to consider papers of substantial length. Publication decisions are made by the editor in consultation with members of the editorial board and anonymous reviewers. For information on submissions, please see the journal website at [www.bu.edu/sociology/ppst](http://www.bu.edu/sociology/ppst).



## EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

I am honored to present Volume 22 of *Political Power and Social Theory* (PPST). This volume is a landmark, in that it is among the first volumes of PPST to be dedicated to a single topic. With the 2012 U.S. Presidential Election in sight, this special volume on the meaning of Barack Obama's presidency from a critical social science perspective is especially timely. For the first part of the volume, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Louise Seamster have put together a diverse collection of essays on the politics of race in the age of Obama. For the second part (the Scholarly Controversy section familiar to PPST readers), Philip S. Gorski offers provocative reflections on Obama and civil religion in the United States, with critical commentary from Joseph Gerteis, Andrew R. Murphy, and Michael Young and Christopher Pieper.

Soon enough, readers will be able to assess for themselves the significance of these essays and commentaries. Here I would like to thank Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Louise Seamster for putting together the special section and to Philip S. Gorski and the commentators for sharing their thoughts. Finally, many thanks to Stephanie Hull and the rest of the team at Emerald for bringing this volume to completion.





**PART I**  
**OBAMA AND THE POLITICS**  
**OF RACE**



# INTRODUCTION: EXAMINING, DEBATING, AND RANTING ABOUT THE OBAMA PHENOMENON

Louise Seamster and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva

## ABSTRACT

*In this special section of Political Power and Social Theory, we present the work of scholars from various disciplines documenting and analyzing the Obama phenomenon. The work in this section, including both theoretical and empirical analysis, is an early step in the much-needed academic discussion on Obama and racial politics in the contemporary United States. We offer this compendium as a call-to-arms to progressives and leftists, encouraging the revival of radical critique of Obama's discourse and policies instead of the fulsome praise or confused silence that has so far greeted Obama from the left.*

The election of Barack Obama as 44th President of the United States brought breathless excitement to the progressive community. Many wept with joy on November 4, 2008, when his election was confirmed. This excitement blunted progressives' critical capacity, making them pudding-like; they suppressed anything but good, happy, "hokey changy"<sup>1</sup> stories and analyses about Obama. Throughout the campaign, the few voices who dared ask questions about his background, politics, policies, connections to Wall Street, and the

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like were practically silenced and were regarded as traitors, racists, people jealous of Obama's success, pimps needing racism to continue to maintain their "business," etc. For radical scholars and activists, this sudden passion over electoral politics and outcomes is unusual and disconcerting. The total investment of energy in the election and now re-election of Obama has translated to less attention paid to the urgent issues we face, including (but not limited to) high unemployment (especially for minority folks<sup>2</sup>); mass incarceration of people of color (Alexander, 2010); rising deportations<sup>3</sup> and increasingly racist and restrictive immigration laws; failing education (and its privatization advocated by conservatives as well as by the Obama Administration<sup>4</sup>); attacks on unions in Republican-led (e.g., Florida, New Jersey, Wisconsin, Ohio, and Michigan) as well as Democrat-led states (e.g., Massachusetts and Obama's stand on teachers' unions); a horrid health care system (the health care reform that passed will do little to control costs, the Achilles heel of the system; see Oberlander & White, 2009); a concerted attack on women (e.g., the state initiatives to restrict abortion and family planning); and continued, misguided American involvement in what are now four separate wars. Although many of these issues predate Obama's ascent to the presidency, curiously (for us, *expectedly*) he has not done much to counter these troubling trends and, on some issues, one can argue he has done less than previous presidents.

It is way past time for members of the progressive academic community to wake up and stop smelling the Obama hope roses. We must, as we have done historically, analyze the class, gender, race, and imperial nature of the politics of the administration in charge of the American state, regardless of the skin color of the occupant of the White House. In fact, as several of the authors in this issue argue (including the editors), Obama's blackness has become in many ways "the best possible shell"<sup>5</sup> for the smooth operation of the American political regime. Accordingly, we have assembled a group of scholars in this special section of *Political Power and Social Theory* to examine, debate, and rant a bit about the Obama phenomenon – we believe that ranting is a much underappreciated form of resistance and a must for progressive politics. The scholars in this issue have different views on Obama, the meaning of his election, and his politics, but we included people who are seriously thinking and engaging on Obama-related matters rather than just supporting (or critiquing) Obama without much efficacy or intellectual vigor. We were (and still are) dismayed by how during and after the campaign, many renowned scholars of color at Princeton, Georgetown, Harvard, Columbia, Maryland, and other prestigious institutions offered "analysis" that was not much better than what we read from liberal writers

in *The New York Times* or hear from MSNBC's commentators every night (and, in fact, some are paid commentators for this TV station or seem to have a direct line to *The New York Times*). And much of the first generation of books on Obama consists largely of nationalist celebrations ("We are so happy and proud of our first Black president") or books that state the obvious and easy point – that racism is alive and well. Lastly, we would be remiss if we do not acknowledge the fact that the "liberal-labor" coalition (Domhoff, 2010), and their representatives in the media have not done much better than minority scholars with visibility and the first generation of books on Obama.

Therefore, this issue is but a first salvo on the long road to recovery from the Obama hope hangover (Bonilla-Silva, 2008). We may not have done all that needs to be done or said all that needs to be said in this issue, but as David Simon, producer of *The Wire*, stated in his farewell letter after the show ended, "Nothing happens unless the shit is stirred!" Like Simon, our goal with this issue is to provoke, challenge, annoy, and, hopefully, force a debate at a time when there is none.

Before introducing the authors and articles in this issue, however, we provide a brief account of the Obama political landscape since the election. This, we believe, is necessary because the 'Obama craze' (González, 2008) has mystified recent history, and what happened yesterday is forgotten today.

## **AMERICAN RACIAL POLITICS "FOR REAL" SINCE OBAMA WAS ELECTED PRESIDENT**

Political scientist Michael Dawson has pointed out that Obama's election represented a moment of "middle-class black nationalism" (Dawson, 2008). For far too many blacks (and not just middle-class blacks), Obama's election was sufficient evidence that "we have overcome." Indeed, it is quite plausible that middle-class blacks will profit from Obama's election: the symbolic capital of having a black president may help them prove that "we're not all alike" to wary whites at the expense of most blacks for whom, as Dawson argues, "the 'American Dream' still largely remains an 'American Nightmare'" (Dawson, 2008). To assure Obama's success, the unspoken but clear strategy that Obama and his handlers have used is to avoid any talk about race and racism, even when racial issues emerge.

For example, after the Obama administration forced Shirley Sherrod<sup>6</sup> to resign following the circulation of a faked video purportedly showing her

“racism,” President Obama “called for a national discussion of race issues around kitchen tables and water coolers and in schools and church basements” (Montopoli, 2010). Besides the fact that race is already discussed around kitchen tables, water coolers, and church basements (Myers, 2003) albeit often in disguised terms (Bonilla-Silva, 2009), “calls” for discussions, dialogues, or conversations about race from liberal politicians are actually ways to deflect dealing with race issues at all! (Just announcing the need for these conversations uses all available breath for serious discussions and helps all parties return to the normalcy of politely not talking about how race matters.) This speech was also an attempt to distract from the fact that Shirley Sherrod was fired by Obama’s own administration, not by someone standing at a water cooler in Oklahoma. This could have been the moment for waking up and realizing Obama is not serious about dealing with racial matters. However, like with the Gates incident and the ensuing “beer summit,” Obama and his people were successful in sealing the racial crack and somehow convincing everybody that this was all a big misunderstanding forced on the Administration by a conservative blogger (see our analysis on this incident in our chapter in this issue).

But Obama’s support is not limited to middle-class blacks. The symbolic importance of his election is evident among poor and working-class blacks as well. This accounts for the fact that black voter turnout increased almost 5 percent for the 2008 election (López, 2009), finally reaching parity with white turnout. While less well-off blacks are not likely to benefit materially from Obama’s election, they shared the excitement over having the first black president and have become consumed by and symbolically invested in his success. In many ways, they seem willing to give him a pass on almost anything he does, and they somehow believe that his success is theirs, too. Presumably, they also expect Obama to enact policies that would improve conditions for blacks in the United States, but far too many are willing to rationalize his inactions in this area as the product of the mess President Bush left for him.<sup>7</sup> As Keeyanga-Yamahtta Taylor points out, Obama’s actual track record over the past three years has not been good for poor and working-class blacks we can look at his 2010 budget, which included cuts to HUD and heating assistance that will hurt poor blacks more than any other community, the rising black unemployment, and the disproportionately high rates of foreclosure among poor and working-class blacks who were targeted by unscrupulous bankers and mortgage specialists in the past 10 years (Rivlin, 2010; Rugh & Massey, 2010; Taylor, 2011). As we send this issue to press, there are strong indications that Obama, through his emissary, Vice-President Biden, will again “compromise” with the Republicans on the budget

and agree to Medicare and Medicaid cuts that will likely disproportionately affect poor folks of color (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005).

While progressive and liberal whites<sup>8</sup> support Obama for reasons other than blacks (perhaps including the “status” they earn by being able to claim their antiracism; Effron, Cameron, & Monin, 2009), their love for Obama seems unconditional. This love has blinded them too, as they see nothing wrong when Obama does Bush-like things. Just a few years ago, many of these whites spearheaded a vigorous anti-war movement and marched and agitated against the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. But as Obama has continued these interventions<sup>9</sup> and added Libya and Pakistan to the imperial plate of entanglements, these same whites stopped showing up at protests (Heaney & Rojas, 2011) and developed tortuous political arguments to explain away Obama’s expansionist and militarist record (“Obama needs to show Americans and the world that he can lead, be strong, and kill terrorists like Osama Bin Laden”). Where was the (mostly white) left when Obama started bombing Libya or when he doubled the number of troops in Afghanistan? Where was the left in questioning the legality and wisdom of Bin Laden’s assassination (aside from Noam Chomsky (2011))? Domestically, where is the left’s response to Obama’s attack on public schools by hiring neoliberal, anti-union cronies like Arne Duncan and by continuing “No Child Left Behind” under its new name “Race to the Top”? While we applaud the recent pro-union protests in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Ohio, we lament that the left has not pressured Obama to take a stronger stand in support of working people. Instead of a reasoned and sustained critique, progressives have behaved like Obama boosters, only voicing concerns with what would happen if a Republican president got into the White House. (Have we seen this movie before?)

While the minority masses and a large segment of the white community (see endnote 5) are still in Obama-doration, a number of voices from the left have begun to critique Obama and his policies. One of the most eloquent of these dissenting voices has been the civil rights activist Harry Belafonte, who recently appeared in *Democracy Now* to talk about his new documentary and Obama’s presidency. Belafonte lamented that

there is no force, no energy, of popular voice, popular rebellion, popular upheaval, no champion for radical thought at the table of the discourse. And as a consequence, Barack Obama has nothing to listen to, except his detractors and those who help pave the way to his own personal comfort with power – power contained, power misdirected, power not fully engaged. (Belafonte, 2011)

Beyond Belafonte, there is more rumbling suggesting that support for Obama may not be as uncritical this time around. Latino leaders in particular have



expressed ambivalence about 2012. Luis Gutierrez, Democratic Representative from Illinois, has announced that he may not support Obama unless the Administration comes through with progressive immigration reform (Rodríguez, 2011). Oscar Chacón, executive director of the National Alliance for Latin American and Caribbean Communities, said in response to Obama's recent El Paso speech on immigration that "we cannot help but to feel truly trapped between a rock and a hard place when it comes to the political choices available to Latino voters" (NALACC, 2011) – less than a ringing endorsement. Bruce Dixon, managing editor of the *Black Agenda Report*, documents how Latino activists and nonprofits are frustrated by soaring deportations, failure to pass the DREAM act, and the "Secure Communities" act, a measure that continues the expansion of local and state governments into the business of hunting and deporting undocumented people (Dixon, 2011). And ahead of Obama's trip to Puerto Rico this June, activists are organizing a large protest demanding self-determination (NILP, 2011).

Several black intellectuals and leaders have also voiced concern about Obama. Most famously, if also problematically, Cornel West has thrown his hat into the ring, telling Chris Hedges in a critique of Obama that "we become so maladjusted to the prevailing injustice that the Democratic Party, more and more, is not just milquetoast and spineless, as it was before, but thoroughly complicitous with some of the worst things in the American empire" (Hedges, 2011). Furthermore, segments of the Hip Hop community, a community that was vital for Obama's election, have also criticized Obama, and some artists have done so quite bluntly. During the 2008 campaign Immortal Technique and Davey D expressed their doubts that Obama could do much (Forman, 2010). Sean Combs, AKA P. Diddy (formerly Puff Daddy), said in an interview early in 2011 that although he still supports the president, he is disappointed with how little Obama has done for blacks. P. Diddy also said, "He (the president) owes us. I'd rather have a black president that was man enough to say that he was doing something for black people have one term than a president who played the politics game have two terms."<sup>10</sup> Recently Lupe Fiasco tweeted after Osama's assassination, "Osama Dead!?! Afghan Operation done now??? Now kill poverty, wack schools, and US imperialism..." (Fiasco, 2011). And in an interview with CBS News, "What's Trending," he went further and said that, "To me, the biggest terrorist is Obama in the United States of America." He then added, "For me, I'm trying to fight the terrorism that's actually causing the other forms of terrorism. The root cause of terrorism is the stuff that the U.S. government allows to happen, the foreign policies that we have in place in different

countries that inspire people to become terrorists. And it's easy for us, because it's really just some oil that we can really get on our own."<sup>11</sup>

Lastly, Richard Trumka, president of the AFL-CIO, has said his union is not going all-out for Obama and for Democrats unless they change their tune, and is likely to spend its money and troops on local campaigns (Stein, 2011). Blacks, Latinos, and unions are the three pillars of Obama's base – and yet all three groups are, halfhearted efforts aside,<sup>12</sup> largely taken for granted<sup>13</sup> as Obama continues to court white voters in swing states (as Cedric de Leon addresses in his article in this issue). But what would happen if all these votes could not be counted on to prop up Obama's chances? In that case, pundits, analysts, and campaign managers might remember that blacks, Latinos, and poor and working-class people *matter*, that their needs matter, and that they will not be satisfied with a symbolic vote. We could then push representative liberal democracy to its limits by electing politicians that could actually represent our interests.

## THE CONTRIBUTIONS IN THIS SECTION

We begin with two theoretical pieces by Dylan Rodríguez and Tamara Nopper focusing on the long and deep historical racial context behind Obama's election and contemporary racial discourse. They are followed by contributions from Cedric de Leon and from Matt Barreto, Elizabeth Cooper, Ben González, and Chris Parker examining Obama's connection to New Deal-era Democratic politics and the rise of the Tea Party, respectively. We conclude with our own contribution.

In his essay, "White Reconstruction and Slavery's Present Tense," Dylan Rodríguez provides a counterpoint to the current multicultural, "we have overcome" discourse by arguing that "our historical moment – and the Obama national-racial *telos* – cannot be politically severed from the substructure of racist/antiblack, genocidal and proto-genocidal violence that is formed in the crucible of racial chattel slavery" (p. 14). Rodríguez suggests Obama's election must be understood as a continuation, rather than a break, of the violent racial regime beginning in slavery. He highlights and contrasts the centrality of racial violence in contemporary America (e.g., the prison complex, the labor market, discrimination, etc.) (Jung, Costa-Vargas, & Bonilla-Silva, 2011) to the timid, feel-good invocations of racial progress by Obama and advocates a radical abolitionism that recognizes racial violence in the present tense so that we can "(finally) escape the historical gravity of the genocidally antiblack peculiar institution" (Rodríguez, p. 10).

While Rodríguez sees continuity with a white supremacist past in Obama's election, Tamara Nopper reminds us that the differences also matter in her essay on "Barack Obama's community organizing as new Black politics." Nopper evaluates the meaning of Obama's past as a community organizer, arguing that Obama represents the "new Black politics," a generation of politicians of color who have no connection to the Civil Rights movement and tend to shun issues of race (see also our contribution in this issue). She argues that many commentators point to Obama's time as a community organizer to suggest that Obama does have deeper ties to the grassroots and to progressive politics. However, Nopper contends that Obama uses this experience in his books and speeches to actually indicate the ineffectiveness of this model and to advocate his "post-racial" brand of politics. This move has allowed him to, on the one hand, express gratitude to old guard Civil Rights activists and politicians for the job they did while, on the other hand, suggest the need for a "Joshua generation" (Obama, 2007) of new leaders to achieve progress in a different way and style.

Cedric de Leon also debates the continuity-or-change argument in his contribution titled "The More Things Change." De Leon challenges the argument that Obama's election represented a change in party politics and suggests his election recapitulates events from the New Deal era. The Democratic Party introduced "New Deal" legislation that gave whites multiple structural advantages, but relied, like the Obama campaign, on incorporating blacks with offers of minimal civil rights reforms. De Leon points out that while the literature on whiteness and colorblind racism explains race in the modern era, this research has heretofore neglected the role of party politics in shaping racial hegemony. He also urges analysts of colorblindness to look at the long history (dating back to the 1930s) shaping the post-racial politics of today. Lastly, he examines the election returns in Virginia and North Carolina to show that, like in the past, the Democrats of today profited enormously from an increase in the white suburban vote along with a greatly increased black turnout. He concludes that whites are still likely to get much more than non-whites out of this political deal.

While it is important to evaluate the contradictions and tensions inherent in the present liberal party politics, with their semblance of colorblindness, Barreto and his coauthors remind us that we should not neglect the popularity of old-fashioned racism in many circles in the United States. To this end, Barreto, Cooper, González, and Parker explore the role of the Tea Party in their article, "What Motivates the Tea Party?" Relying on Hofstadter's (1964) theory of the "paranoid style" in conservative politics, they classify the Tea Party as a pseudo-conservative movement motivated

by anti-immigrant, anti-black, and anti-gay sentiment. They examine this claim with content analysis of issues and themes covered on various Tea Party websites along with a survey of attitudes among Tea Party supporters.

We close this special section with an article by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (with the assistance of Louise Seamster) titled “*The Sweet Enchantment of Color Blindness in Black Face*: Explaining the ‘Miracle,’ Debating the Politics, and Suggesting a Way for Hope to be ‘For Real’ in America.” In this contribution he reiterates the claim – a claim he has been making since 2008 – that the so-called miracle of Obama’s election is actually part and parcel of the post-Civil Rights racial regime that has been in place for arguably forty years (he calls it “the new racism”). He also examines the politics and policies that Obama advocated and has now carried out as president and, as he predicted during the election cycle, finds they are mostly center-right. Bonilla-Silva concludes his essay by forcefully articulating the need for the progressive community to moor their political practices in social movement rather than in electoral politics, as they have done since the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980.

## **STEPPING UP TO THE TABLE: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

Taken together, the chapters in this section develop the thesis that Obama’s presidency represents continuity with the racial past rather than a meaningful break epitomized by the empty slogan of “change we can believe in.” At the same time, however, the situation today is not *exactly* the same as in previous phases of white supremacy and racialized capitalism. Racism – or, more properly, racial domination – has transformed itself to survive the end of *de jure* in-your-face white supremacy, and it is now much more frequently of the “now you see it, now you don’t” (Smith, 1996) variety (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). To accurately identify the way this new political regime functions and develop the politics needed to challenge it, we need to pay close attention to the differences that have emerged [e.g., the new brand of colorblind minority politicians coming from both right and left, the post-racial version of colorblind ideology, the rise of a neo-mulatto group (Horton & Sykes, 2004) and its potential separation from the black community altogether, the meaning of imperialism in black face, etc.].

The issues raised in these chapters are an early stage in the larger debate about what the Obama presidency means, how we should interpret the