

## **Post-Racial America?**

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**Obama cannot fully inscribe himself in a traditional vision of African American racial politics as the struggle of slave-descendants for equality. He is better approached as a participant of today’s global reality. His trajectory invites a reconsideration of the connections Americans—and particularly African Americans—have maintained with other countries, continents and people.**

**Reviewed:** Desmond S. King, Rogers M. Smith, *Still a House Divided: Race and politics in Obama's America*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011.

In 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. dreamt of true equality between blacks and whites. He was asking far less than what Barack Obama achieved when he became the first black president to enter the White House in 2008. Following this unpredictable moment, America faced its past, one in which tense race relations had abounded. The question was asked whether out of this new conjuncture a new collective self could emerge that would rid America of centuries of racial oppression and turn it into a “post-racial nation.” Could a new societal paradigm open a new era of racial peace?

Desmond S. King and Rogers M. Smith are not willing to adhere to what they consider as a trope not accurately representing the history of American politics. They prefer to explore racial politics and define it as a leading force for change in the American society. Specifically, they consider that racial tensions and confrontations are the true incentives which led to the evolution of America towards a more egalitarian society. Jointly elaborating on public policy-making and questioning American racial politics, they propose to restate the centrality of race and thereby deconstruct the founding myth encapsulated in the national motto *E Pluribus Unum*.

*Still a House Divided* looks at the intersection of American politics and racial politics through a series of legal and political confrontations over racial inequality and its social, political and economic effects. They confirm that racial divisions are a defining feature of American politics and that “contestation [...] has always been integral to American racial politics” (p. 16). Predictably, race appears as an original wound, regularly reopened, contrasting with America’s claim to have created unity out of the diversity of its citizens’ identities and trajectories. The authors point to the permanence of racial divisions in American politics, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The American house still is divided along the questions of racial equality, minority status and the social effects of racial discrimination. For King and Smith, the debate should therefore not center on the reasons why the theme of race runs through all of American politics but how it imposes a constant redrawing of political lines over the same recurring issues; how regular clashes between Republicans and Democrats, pro- and anti-slavery, “race conscious groups” and advocates of color-blindness, gradually created a political cartography which, though it changed over time, structured American politics.

### **Race Alliances: the DNA of American Politics**

King and Smith use race politics as a grid to put forward what they define as a “racial alliances framework” (p. 16-29) and argue that American political history is ruled by race-based coalitions between pressure groups, religious institutions, trade unions, community activists and politicians. American politics are “polarized” by racial issues which determine time periods: the Antebellum and the Jim Crow eras, the Civil Rights and the Affirmative Action eras, and the era of multiculturalism.

The originality and complexity of this work comes from a challenge set at the beginning of the book: to explore the “role of politics in the formation of racial doctrines” alongside “recent” studies (p. 17).<sup>1</sup> The point is not only to create new paradigms but also to propose a cross-disciplinary study using an impressive amount of data (graphics, statistics, legal accounts, tables, etc). Graphics, depicting the evolution of congressional votes related to race (1789 to 1857), public records on free and slave labor in the states joining the Union; tables on race-conscious alliances over school vouchers between (between 1978 and 2008) illustrate detailed accounts of day-to-day oppositions between Republicans, Democrats and minority lobbies.<sup>2</sup> Ranging from political studies, institutional and legal studies as well as African American history, the authors show an extensive knowledge of policy-making processes and history.

King and Smith convincingly state that African Americans initiated, willingly or not, major social and political battles that reshaped the country. They confirm the links between race, politics and social inequalities in America, a point already well documented in recent historiography.<sup>3</sup> This focus on the trajectory of African Americans tends, however, to leave aside white domination as it applied to other ethnic minorities, as the authors themselves recognize (p. 25-26). But race also represents a divisive line for Latinos, Native Americans and Asian Americans, who similarly took part in racial alliances to claim their rights and contributed to American politics.<sup>4</sup> King and Smith's discussion may have extended to racial alliances between African Americans and other ethnic minorities. The authors prefer to turn to the question of how to interpret Barack Obama's election in the history of American racial politics. Solely evaluating his presidency in the light of the history of African American' struggle for equality is, the authors contend, misleading. Though, as an African American, Barack Obama carries this heritage, he does not promote an activist-oriented policy intended to conclude the Civil Rights

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<sup>1</sup>Among the studies on Obama's election and the post-racial model, see Tracy Denean Sharpley-Whiting (ed.), *The Speech: Race and Barack Obama's "A More Perfect Union,"* New York, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> The United States Constitution was ratified in 1789. In 1857, the Supreme Court decision, *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, stated that slaves were not citizens of the United States and could not sue in federal courts.

<sup>3</sup> See Manning Marable, *The Great Wells of Democracy: The Meaning of Race in American Life*, New York, Perseus Books Group, 2000; Glenn Loury, *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> See the rather old but still accurate book from Wilson Julius Wilson, *The Bridge Over the Racial Divide: Rising Inequality and Coalition Politics*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999.

Movement.<sup>5</sup> Instead, he presents himself as a leader who wants to unite the nation. He recalls the history of the American presidency and follows the steps of his predecessors to be an American president, not an African-American one.

### **Race as a Category of Analysis**

Desmond King and Rogers Smith depict the political uses of race but neither interrogate its use in American race politics nor do they question the use of race as a category of analysis. They do not, for instance, discuss how American politics in Obama's era has been "racialized" by commentators and scholars.<sup>6</sup> *A House Still Divided* thus unwittingly shows how much of a challenge to a traditional bi-racial vision of American politics Obama presents as another type of African American, one who not only retains African origins but is both African and American, without any direct link him to slavery or segregation. As Manning Marable mentioned, Obama's mixed-race identity forces him to question racial categories and their social and political relevance. Though he may check the "Black, African Am" box on the census form, he, like many Americans, carries a multifaceted self, for which a racial definition grounded in white majority/black minority dichotomy, does not work.<sup>7</sup> Obama cannot fully inscribe himself in King and Smith's traditional vision of African American racial politics as the struggle of slave-descendants for equality. On the contrary, it opens up to the rest of the world and especially to contemporary African people. As Ben Pitcher says, Obama's transnational heritage grounds him in "the multicultural and global reality of today's world."<sup>8</sup> Fighting against racism and for "racial progress" (p. 285) becomes a global cause, emancipated from its American origin to address the plight of all discriminated people. Unlike King and Smith's contention, African Americans have always imagined their struggle in transnational terms: from the early times of abolitionism to the

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<sup>5</sup> See Peniel Joseph's recent criticism of Civil Rights historians who read Obama's presidency as a final step in the 1950s-1960s struggle (Peniel Joseph, *Dark Days, Bright Nights: From Black Power to Barack Obama*, New York, Basic Civitas, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> On the interpretation of Barack Obama's presidency in terms of racial progress or divide, see Manning Marable, "Racializing Obama: The Enigma of Post-Black Politics and Leadership," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, vol. 11, n. 1, 2009, p. 1-15.

<sup>7</sup> As an example of mixed race studies literature questioning existing racial categories, see Michele Elam, *The Souls of Mixed Folk, Race, Politics, and Aesthetics in the New Millennium*, Stanford University Press, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> On the interpretation of Obama's standpoint in a post-black perspective, see Ben Pitcher, "Obama and the Politics of Blackness: Antiracism in the "Post-black" Conjuncture," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, vol. 12, n. 4, p. 87-102.

black nationalisms of the 1960s, they connected with African and black people elsewhere, interpreting, for instance, African independences and South Africans' fighting against Apartheid as similar fights against Western imperialism and white supremacy.

Indeed, Obama begs a larger question not asked in the book: how can African American political history and American racial politics be articulated not in terms of the opposition between a white majority and black minority, but in a way that reveals the connections Americans—and particularly African Americans—have maintained with other countries, continents and people? Defining Obama as the heir to racial alliances within the framework of American politics is only part of the story, which should be completed by a transethnic and transnational perspective.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Radhika Parameswaran, "Facing Barack Hussein Obama: Race, Globalization, and Transnational America," *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, July 2009 v. 33, n.3, p. 195-205; Robert L. Allen, "A Black Scholar Readers' Forum on President Obama: Barack Obama and the Children of Globalization," *The Black Scholar*, Winter 2008, v. 38, n. 4, p. 32-34.