

# **For Jobs and Freedom, 50 Years On: The Struggle for Racial Equality in the Age of Obama**

**By Bassam Gergi**

The paradox of race in contemporary America, laid bare by the election and then reelection of Barack Obama, is the wide divide between the extent of racial progress on a symbolic level and the significant racial material inequality that persists to the present day.

Half a century ago, civil rights leaders and tens of thousands of other peaceful protesters descended on the national mall in Washington, D.C. to demand concessions from those in power. In August 2013, those in power – including the first African-American president of the United States - returned to the mall to pay homage to the sweat and sacrifice of those early civil rights pioneers. On both a symbolic and social level the anniversary of the March On Washington was a testament to the historic breakthroughs for racial progress that have been achieved in America. And yet, black America continues to suffer under the unequal weight of mass unemployment, social neglect, economic abandonment, and intense police surveillance.<sup>1</sup>

How to explain this discrepancy between the symbolic and the substantive in American race relations has puzzled scholars and practitioners alike. The ascendance of individual African-American business leaders and elected officials is seen as a sign of hope. However, the persistent struggles of African-Americans as a group to claim a full and equal part in America's economic and political life have disappointed that hope. Why does the position of African-Americans in the United States remain so fragile? We cannot

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<sup>1</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, The New Press, New York, 2012.

offer a definitive answer here. But we can explore trends in the struggle for equality, highlighting the depth of material inequality and the Obama paradox.

### **From the street to the ballot box**

Political scientist Michael Preston, writing about the surge of black elected officials in the wake of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, declared that “politics is now the cutting edge of the civil rights movement.”<sup>2</sup> The Civil Rights Movement had been fought in the streets; the ‘Moses generation’ of black leadership, composed of hallowed names like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Bayard Rustin, Anna Cooper and Jim Lewis, had defied fire hoses and dogs as they marched to awaken the conscience of nation.

However, these men and women of the movement, in many cases, “didn’t cross over the river to see the Promised Land.”<sup>3</sup> The responsibility of carrying on the struggle was imparted to the ‘Joshua generation’, the contemporary generation of African-Americans who have seen their place in American life improve as a result of the legislative victories of the 1960s, but who realize there is much left to do. In contrast to their predecessors, the ‘Joshua generation’ believes that traditional politics, most notably elected office, is the crucial next step in winning new respect and power for the African-American community.

Taking advantage of their numbers and an awakened political consciousness, African-Americans - starting in the late 1960’s with the election of Carl Stokes in Cleveland, Ohio and Richard Hatcher in Gary, Indiana – took charge of the electoral process to elevate members of their community to the top offices of some of America’s

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<sup>2</sup> Michael B. Preston, "Limitations of Black Urban Power: The Case of Black Mayors," in Louis A. Masotti and Robert Lineberry (eds.) *The New Urban Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger, 1976), p. 111.

<sup>3</sup> David Remnick, The Joshua Generation, *The New Yorker*, November 17, 2008.

largest cities. Many activists took these early electoral victories as affirmation that the focus of their efforts could now shift from the politics of the street to the arena of electoral policy. In particular, changing social demographics within American cities - characterized by the flight of whites and the concentrations of black majorities— created new electoral opportunities for blacks to seize control of municipal power sources.<sup>4</sup> By concentrating on political participation and electoral success, black activists sought to use elected power to achieve social progress and to shape a fundamentally different and more equal political reality.<sup>5</sup>

Underlying the emphasis on electoral politics by black activists was the belief that if more blacks were elected to public offices then these elected officials could more effectively serve the needs of their communities.<sup>6</sup> This belief stemmed from a pluralist conception of the American democratic process, described by Robert Dahl when he wrote, “Nearly every group (within the democratic system) has enough potential influence to mitigate harsh injustice to its members, though not necessarily enough influence to attain a full measure of justice.”<sup>7</sup> The assumption was that the representative aspect of the democratic system would largely protect African-Americans from the negative policies of the majority, while at the same time allowing them to extract at least some of the desired resources from the political system to become a viable part of the American body politic. As a result, even before their election, elected black officials had enormous responsibilities

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<sup>4</sup> William Nelson Jr. ‘Black Mayoral Leadership, a Twenty-Year Perspective.’ In *Black Electoral Politics*. Ed. Lucius Jefferson Barker. Transaction Publishers: 1990. p.189.

<sup>5</sup> Lani Guinier,. ‘The Triumph of Tokenism’. *Michigan Law Review*, 89 (5), 1991. p. 1089.

<sup>6</sup> Preston, Michael. ‘Big City Black Mayors: An Overview’. In *Black Electoral Politics*. Ed. Lucius Jefferson Barker. Transaction Publishers: 1990. p.133.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Dahl in William D’Antonio and Howard Erlich, eds, *Power and Democracy in America*, (University of Notre Dame Press, 1961), 89.

placed on their shoulders to fight and win the ongoing struggle for black social justice and economic security.

The election of black mayors in the early 1970s therefore marked not only a symbolic turning point for the black community, but led to rising expectations for what the future might hold for the urban black community. The quest by African-Americans for a more egalitarian society, in which the ills of urban society could be met in a more progressive and humane manner came to rest squarely on the shoulders of these mayors.<sup>8</sup> Yet the optimism that initially flowed from the increase of black elected officials began to wane in the 1980s as scholars and activists began to argue about whether the election of African-Americans to political office was merely another symbolic gesture in the struggle for black social justice.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, while African-Americans were successful in winning power in cities where they represented a majority, or at least a plurality of the population, their success on the state and federal level was, and remains, far more limited. A study published by the *American Political Science Review* in 2009 found that African-Americans are systematically being shut out of the political process.<sup>10</sup> In particular, the near absence of black US Senators illustrates the challenges that the community has faced in trying to elevate African-Americans to higher office. Only four African-Americans have been elected to the Senate in all of American history. In fact, those candidates who broke the race barrier, such as Doug Wilder who was elected Governor of Virginia in 1990 - the first

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<sup>8</sup> In 1970 there were 81 black mayors in the US; 314 in 1990; and more than 500 in 2000 (National Conference of Black Mayors). The number of African-American state legislators in the south increased from 3 in 1965 to 320 in 2010 (Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies).

<sup>9</sup> William Nelson, 'Cleveland: The Evolution of Black Political Power', in *The New Black Politics*, ed. Michael Preston, Lenneal Henderson Jr., and Pal Puryear (New York Longman, 1987), 172-99.

<sup>10</sup> Zoltan Hajnal, 'Who loses in American democracy? A count of votes demonstrates the limited representation of African Americans', *American Political Science Review* 103:1 (Feb 2009), 37-57.

African-American elected Governor of any state since the post-Civil War Reconstruction Era - often did so by downplaying the issue of race.<sup>11</sup> So while African-American candidates managed to break glass ceilings, there were, and may still be, doubts about the degree of America's acceptance of black candidates.<sup>12</sup>

The election of Barack Obama in 2008 was supposed to mark the culmination of black hopes and aspirations. A majority of national voters had elevated an African-American to the highest office in the land. Surely this was the end of race as a dividing line. However, as Professor Frederick Harris writes, to many the Obama presidency has been "reckoned a disappointment."<sup>13</sup> Instead of promoting a political vision centered on challenging racial inequality, black elites are seen, generally, as remaining silent on issues of economic and racial significance for their community.<sup>14</sup> The problem with this silence is that for a majority of the African-American community the election of Barack Obama has not brought immediate, significant benefits for their economic well-being.

### **Persistent racial material inequalities**

Bayard Rustin, who was the lead organizer of the 1963 March On Washington, wrote in its aftermath, "The struggle began with the problem of buses and lunch counters and theaters — in a word, with the problem of dignity... But since the roots of discrimination are economic, [African-Americans] cannot achieve even dignity without a job."<sup>15</sup> While many racial barriers toppled in the wake of the march and America has grown wealthier and better educated, the economic disparities separating blacks and

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<sup>11</sup> Margaret Edds, *Claiming the Dream: The Victorious Campaign of Douglas Wilder of Virginia*, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1990.

<sup>12</sup> Seth Stephens-Davidowitz, How Racist Are We?, *New York Times*, June 9, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Frederick Harris, The Price of a Black President, *New York Times*, October 27, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Nsenda Burton, Black Scholars Spar Over Cornel West's Remarks, *The Root*, May 18, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Bayard Rustin, The Meaning of the March on Washington, *Liberation*, October 1963.

whites across sectors remain almost as wide as they were in the 1960s. So while African-Americans have asserted their dignity, segregation, employment discrimination, mass incarceration and many of the other socio-economic roots of racial inequality remain firmly in place.

An award-winning article in *The Journal of American History* found that the historic pattern of black inequality based on social, economic, and political exclusion largely shattered in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>16</sup> But by the turn of the century, a new configuration of inequality had emerged. Unlike in the past, the new inequality between blacks and whites is supposedly not borne out of a massive mutually reinforcing legal and extralegal public and private system of racial oppression. Rather, a subtler series of screens filter African-Americans into lesser status, impacting their economic futures.<sup>17</sup> Whether the processes that enforce this inequality have changed is up for debate, but the larger point is that the negative outcomes have remained largely the same.

While poverty in the US has certainly declined over the past fifty years, it has declined in a way that has maintained the unequal proportions between black and white. In fact, when it comes to household income and wealth, the gaps between blacks and whites have widened. On other measures, the gaps are roughly the same as they were in the 1960s. The weight of evidence that the gap in economic outcomes between black and white has remained almost static can be at times overwhelming. While the black middle-class has grown since the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, African-Americans living in poverty

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<sup>16</sup> Michael B. Katz, Mark J. Stern and Jamie J. Fader, The New African American Inequality, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 92, No. 1 (Jun., 2005), pp. 75-108

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

have not seen much improvement in their lives. The poverty rate for blacks, for instance, continues to be about three times that of whites.<sup>18</sup>

In 2013, the unemployment rate among African-American men over 20 years old was 13.4 percent compared with 6.6 percent of white men over 20. Unemployment among African-American women over 20 was 10.9 percent, compared with 6.3 percent among white women over 20.<sup>19</sup> According to the Census Bureau, the black poverty rate in 1959 was 55.1 percent - just over three times the white rate. Although the percentage of black households in poverty has dropped considerably since then it still remains nearly triple the white rate.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, in 2011, the median income for black households was about fifty-nine percent of the median income for white households. This represents only a slight improvement from the fifty-five percent rate in 1967.

Perhaps one of the most startling studies was conducted by a Princeton University sociologist Devah Pager, who exposed that a black job applicant with no criminal history got a callback or job offer about as often as a white applicant with a felony conviction.<sup>21</sup> What's more, the criminal justice system seems to particularly target young black men—black inmates account for approximately 40 percent of the total prison population.<sup>22</sup> In *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander highlights that despite the fact that surveys indicate whites are as likely to use illegal drugs as blacks, blacks are far more likely to be in prison or in jail for a drug offense.<sup>23</sup> On top of this, data released by

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<sup>18</sup> Rob Wile, Black and White Poverty: 1963 Vs. Today, *Business Insider*, August 28, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Drew Desilver, Black unemployment rate is consistently twice that of whites, *Pew Research Center*, August 21, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> United States Census Bureau, [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)

<sup>21</sup> Devah Pager, The Mark of a Criminal Record, *AJS* Volume 108 Number 5 (March 2003): 937–75.

<sup>22</sup> National Poverty Center, [www.npc.umich.edu](http://www.npc.umich.edu)

<sup>23</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*.

the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention uncovered that large metropolitan areas account for more than two-thirds of deaths by gun violence each year, with inner cities most affected. The majority of the victims are young, ranging in age from their early teens to mid-20s, and black.<sup>24</sup>

According to these current trends, a black boy born tomorrow in the United States is six times more likely to be murdered than a white boy.<sup>25</sup> That same black boy is seven times more likely to be imprisoned in his lifetime than a white boy. He is also more than twice as likely to be born into poverty.<sup>26</sup> So for many black parents, as they watch their child leave home for school in the mornings, it's often not certain that their children will return; or, if they do come home, whether or not they will have the opportunities to lead free and full lives. Therefore, despite the election of Barack Obama, the question for too many African-American parents is not, will my son grow up to be President? But rather, how do I protect my son against a deck that seems stacked against him at the outset?

### **The Obama paradox and Ferguson**

There is a cognitive dissonance in America — and particularly white America — about the amount of progress that has been made toward racial equality. A study, conducted by researchers from Tufts University's School of Arts and Sciences and Harvard Business School three years into Obama's first term, confirmed that many now believe that anti-black racism matters less in America.<sup>27</sup> But, surprisingly, the study also uncovered a new development: Whites now believe that anti-white racism has not only increased but is a bigger problem than anti-black racism. The data demonstrated that a

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<sup>24</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

<sup>25</sup> Randolph Roth, *American Homicide*, Harvard University Press, 2012.

<sup>26</sup> National Poverty Center, [www.npc.umich.edu](http://www.npc.umich.edu)

<sup>27</sup> Tufts Now, Whites Believe They Are Victims of Racism More Often Than Blacks, May 23, 2011.



majority of whites believe that progress toward racial equality is linked to a new inequality — at their expense.

The challenge such beliefs pose is that it becomes very hard to find solutions to persistent racial material inequalities when many Americans refuse even to acknowledge their existence. As such, President Obama's election has marked a decline in a political vision centered on challenging racial inequality.<sup>28</sup> Americans seem to be, at least in part, less receptive to claims that there are still significant racial material inequalities when there is a black family in the White House. The mere election of a black man to the presidency has served, for some, as a reflection of a new racial enlightenment; in the imagined ideal, blacks and whites are now equal. As a result, the Age of Obama — marked by the president's historic election in 2008 — has witnessed a terrible monotony in America's dialogue about race.

When examples of prejudice or enduring inequality rise to the surface of the public debate the initial reaction is often to downplay the significance. A prime example is President Obama's response to the explosive events that played out in Ferguson, Missouri during the summer of 2014. Rather than engage with the black anger stoked by the tragic shooting of Michael Brown, the President called for calm and healing without commenting on the racial dimension of the events. Marc Lamont Hill, Professor of African-American Studies at Morehouse College, warned that by doing so the President risked reinforcing “the immature notion that racism can be defeated simply by pretending it doesn't exist.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Frederick Harris, The Price of a Black President, *New York Times*, October 27, 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Marc Lamont Hill, Obama, can't you see black anger in Ferguson?, *CNN Opinion*, August 15, 2014.

The President's response to Ferguson, however, fits into a larger pattern in which present day American society attempts to wish away those who perpetuate prejudice as bigots, critically endangered by the sweeping tide of history. In other cases, we discount the structural barriers to equality as the weakened remnants of an outworn order. Americans are inoculated against what sense of injustice they might have. Many fail to recognize the privilege and oppression that exists in their lives and social interactions with others. We also fail to view the defining political issues of our time through any racial lens. In effect, race has become depoliticized.

While a Pew Study found that a majority of Americans are willing to acknowledge some failings in the march towards achieving racial equality, there has been an extremely limited discussion about just how America can begin to rectify the situation.<sup>30</sup> This is because the structure of the public debate about race is oriented to conceal rather than to elevate these issues.

As recent empirical work has highlighted, American institutional features are firmly biased in favor of the status quo. The super-majoritarian nature of the U.S. Senate and policy stagnation, when coupled with economic and social factors that produce rising inequality, create a situation of cumulative inequalities that are hard to identify and even more difficult to reverse.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, because some significant progress was achieved by the civil rights generation, there is a dangerous assumption that further progress towards racial equality is inevitable. However, if the public discussion of race continues to downplay or dismiss enduring inequalities then those Americans who believe that change

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<sup>30</sup> Pew Research, King's Dream Remains an Elusive Goal, August 22, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Nathan J. Kelly, Peter Enns, Jana Morgan, Thomas Volscho, and Christopher Witko, Conditional Status Quo Bias and Top Income Shares: How U.S. Political Institutions Benefit the Rich, *Journal of Politics*, (forthcoming 2014).

is inevitable are unlikely to realize that even 50 years of progress can be rolled back if a society is not careful.

**“We are the ones we have been waiting for”  
The need for renewed collective action**

In the summer of 2013, as the Supreme Court rewrote civil rights history by striking down a key part of the Voting Rights Act, America slumbered. The cheers of progressives over a subsequent victory for the advocates of gay marriage activists muted any calls for protest. Yet those celebrating progress for gay rights were unaware of the hard lesson that had just been learned by activists for racial justice: political concessions achieved by social movements, no matter how hard fought, can only be sustained through the credible threat of renewed collective action.

The successful emergence of the civil rights movement in the 1960s was due to the convergence of political process and timing. The structure of political opportunity within institutions combined with human agency forced open a hinge of history. Facing down dogs, water hoses, intimidation, and imprisonment, black and white activists used the politics of contention to bend the arc of history in their favor. The Voting Rights Act, Fair Housing Act, desegregation of schools and public facilities, and a series of other legislative and political victories helped break down many of the legal barriers to equality. This disruptive period has given way to a less confrontational politics in which the movement for social justice has become bogged down in intellectual debates and identity politics. As charted earlier, the shift in focus among activists from street politics to the ballot box institutionalized the struggle for civil rights into electoral and patronage politics.

Thus the movement for black social justice has been forced into the narrow battlefield of institutional politics, a battlefield long biased in favor of the status-quo and structured against the interests of the black community. In the absence of renewed collective action, concessions won by activists can rapidly disappear leaving nothing but bitterness and resentment behind.

President Obama's 152-word statement expressing "disappointment" in the Supreme Court's decision in January 2013 to undo much of the Voting Rights Act could not save the day. Obama has not been able, to date, to force a polarized Congress to rework the Act in any meaningful way. Nor has he been able to pass legislation to address the significant racial material disparities that persist. It would seem, at least for the moment, that the movement for greater political and economic equality has stalled.

In justifying the majority's decision to strike down the heart of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Chief Justice John Roberts wrote, "Our country has changed." Unfortunately, it has not changed enough. What is demanded is a new coalition — as loud and as steadfast as the voices of 1963 — to pressure Republican lawmakers to join Democrats in restoring fairness to the election system. But there is also the need for a larger movement that picks up where previous generations left off and begins to confront the underlying causes of the persistent racial material inequality in America.

Full racial equality will only come when racism, and the institutions and processes that perpetuate racist outcomes, are appreciated with the gravity that centuries of prejudice and oppression deserve. They are part of a nation that is still healing and still needs work. In order to cast off the conditions of misery and inequity that bind our brothers and sisters, Americans, of all races, must once more come together to overcome

widespread indifference. By cultivating an ethic of common care, we can, and must, ensure that justice and opportunity are provided to all of our children, regardless of their skin color.