

HOUSE ORGAN

The Worst of Times

The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born:
in this interregnum, morbid phenomena of the most varied kind come to pass.

— Antonio Gramsci

Barack Obama's presidency began in glory and extraordinary promise, and nine months later is sinking into quicksand. His Nobel Peace Prize is a laughing stock, and the President once hailed as the harbinger of a "post-racial society" has become the object of a reactionary assault unprecedented in American politics for a vile racism directed at the Chief Executive himself. A considerable portion of the agitation has been engineered by a media apparatus second to none in the checkered annals of the United States press. The psychopathic Trickster Glenn Beck has been granted a national TV podium to spew over the air that Obama has "over and over again" exposed himself as "a guy who has a deep-seated hatred for white people or the white culture. I don't know what it is..." Beck, and others like the Harvard-trained nativist Lou Dobbs or the snarling Rush Limbaugh, stoke the rage. But they are only the lunatic edge of a mainstream "news" system whose main accomplishment is to sow ignorance and mass confusion.

The outbursts often contain credible death threats, and a baleful climate surrounds them, including a poll on the internet directory Facebook on whether Obama should be assassinated. Commentators have observed that the situation resembles that of Dallas, Texas, in November, 1963, before President Kennedy's visit. Others note that we now have the ingredients for a real fascism in the United States, with elements of the big bourgeoisie using increasingly desperate masses to energize a right-wing coup. In the words of Gore Vidal, America is "rotting away at a funereal pace. We'll have a military dictatorship fairly soon, on the basis that nobody else can hold everything together."

Liberals see Obama as the victim of this assault, and understand it to be an attempt to frustrate his progressive agenda. But things are not at all that simple. Consider the incident of September 9th when, during a heralded address to Congress concerning his stalled health care plan, Obama was interrupted by Joe Wilson, an obscure, reactionary Congressman from South Carolina, who stood up and shouted "You lie!" Wilson was later censured by Congress, after apologizing and un-apologizing for his rudeness, and he will surely pass into oblivion. But no official in living memory had treated a sitting President with so much contempt, rage, and disrespect.

Reform of the grotesque health system, the highest priority of Obama's domestic agenda, became buffeted during the extraordinary summer of 2009 by an engineered series of raucous, deluded, and menacing protests. Obama was attempting to put his political fortunes in order with his September 9th speech with a flourish of oratorical skill, as he had done at various crisis points in his turbulent career. Wilson's intemperate outburst was no doubt racist, for no one can imagine a white President being addressed this way. But its full significance was to reveal that matters had gone past the point of rescue by fine words.

Overtly, the Congressman was claiming that Obama's statement of the moment—that no medical care would be given under his health care program to any of the

12 million or so undocumented immigrants (the great majority from Latin America) who presently occupy the lowest rungs of the working classes—was untrue. Wilson was mistaken, because in fact Obama's health plan had been careful to exclude the "aliens," precisely to blunt the anger of the nativist wing of the U.S. right. In doing so, however, the President went far beyond pandering to reactionaries. He was negating the prime goal of his health program, which explicitly promised to guarantee everybody—every man, woman, and child, in sum, every human being within the United States—health care, in contrast to the present inhuman system. By appeasing the racist Wilson and the whole right-wing movement now advancing across the country like a plague of locusts, Obama had in fact made an alliance with it. And by denying undocumented immigrant workers the expansion of human rights that he claimed as the essence of his health reforms, he deepened their alienation. Set against the florid rhetoric of his claims, Obama's exclusion of the undocumented amounts to denial of membership in the human race itself. And this is, willy-nilly, an extension of racism.

Racism is an aspect of alienation, since to be racially degraded is to be regarded as a stranger less human than the superior peoples. Obviously, Obama had no racist intention in mind. He was simply playing according to the rules of the system. It just happens, however, that our system is set up to generate racism. Racism is a kind of cesspool in a society that fails to create the conditions in which all people are granted full humanity. Under these circumstances a hierarchy will appear in which different strata of the underclasses vie to escape the indignity of their lot by pushing those below them into subhumanity (usually by giving them animalistic form). In this way a stream of toxic fantasies enters the subterranean regions of society according to the passage of history and resurfaces as later crises supervene. Societies work out the subjective side of their histories of domination by the ebb and flow of their racism, in proportion to the violence of their founding and national legends, with settler-colonial nations such as Australia, South Africa, Israel, and to be sure, the United States, leading the racist pack.

Elites enter the process in various ways. They may be racist themselves as a way of buttressing their class superiority; or they may become, or more likely support, demagogues like the villainous media personalities who stir up racism among the populace. In a larger sense, however, nobody can evade responsibility for instilling racism unless he or she actively fights it. This obligation increases with one's power and leadership. No leader has had close to the opportunity afforded Barack Obama to fight racism. The racist storm, in this sense, is not so much about the President as the object of racism, as its enabler—in the present instance, by abandoning "aliens" to their alienation, and overall, by failing to use his matchless opportunity to lead.

The extent of Obama's failure is measured by the distance between his policies and actions so far, and the hopes and desires aroused by his momentous achievement of becoming the first black to inhabit the White House. The previous occupant, George W. Bush, was certifiably the worst President in United States history, a war criminal whose pathological lying led to the laying waste of Iraq, with more than a million dead and some 4 million torn from their homes, along with the deaths of thousands of U.S. soldiers and other crimes too numerous to mention here. But the liar Bush was also truthful in making plain his allegiance to his class. As he put it in a speech to a meeting of supporters during his 2004 presidential race, he was happy to be "here with my base, the Haves and the Have Mores."

Bush's lies developed from the false unification of classes through jingoism and American redemptive ideology into the tried—and untrue—crusade of the American nation against its external enemies, now designated “terroristic” Muslims. None of this required the vision of a new and better world requiring basic institutional change. The existing system could do the job just fine, argued Bush and Cheney, if we only got back to its roots.

Meanwhile the man of integrity, Obama, expressed the contrary intention with his slogans of “Change you can believe in” and “the audacity of hope.” Because no one could fail to be impressed by the spectacle of seeing so profound a taboo about to be overturned with his election, Obama was anointed with the mantle of being, as Colin Powell put it when he gave Obama his endorsement, a “transformative figure.” Who could doubt the audacity of a black man succeeding to the most powerful office in the world? Never mind that Obama gave ample indication that he was a compromiser thoroughly at home in the ways of elites. The fact that the man had *done* something so radical seemed to make him *be* a radical, one, moreover, who had touched upon the deepest strata of the national identity.

However, transformation requires opening dangerous ground, and he who awakens utopian dreams without pressing for their realization will awaken the demons. In times like these—unprecedented for the tottering of the reigning mode of production along with its ecological foundation, and with great waves of legitimate anxiety surging through society—the prospects become calamitous. For the fact is, our situation is objectively desperate and demands a change in the basics of society. The notion of transformation is no longer a slogan but an objective requirement.

The 44th President no doubt knew this, allowed himself to stand for it, yet has failed to meet it . . . and the demons have awoken. To witness this putative Messiah dither while being pushed around by the same financiers, lobbyists, and warmongers as have driven us toward the abyss is indeed maddening. In fact, the mad extremists, detestable and deluded as they may be, are in this one way saner than the officialdom that issues the daily reassurances and tightens the blinders. At least, they announce the seriousness of our condition.

Obama's most dismal failure has been in health reform. There are arguably more deep-seated morbid features of the United States, notably, its militarism and domination by finance capital. But there is also an argument to be made that confrontation with these spheres should be soft-pedalled until the mass-mobilization necessary for the job can be secured. Militarism in the United States, horrific as it is, has no more than a potential community of protest; the opposition to finance capital, meanwhile, is inchoate and diffuse. By contrast, Obama had at his disposal when he entered office powerful organized groups within the community of doctors and nurses, and a citizenry the great majority of which could bear witness to the horrors imposed by the medical-industrial complex. Thus the building of an effective movement for the overhaul of the health system was much more readily at hand, and victory here could have created the confidence and base for victory elsewhere.

The minimally decent health system of “single payer” insurance could have been gained at the outset of his presidency had Obama simply called for hearings into the ways of the health insurance and pharmaceutical companies. A few months of exposure coupled with the “bully pulpit” granted to Presidents would have mobilized his base into an

unstoppable force. It would have brought the bandits of the health empire to their knees, and made it impossible for all but the most extreme reactionaries in Congress to march to their orders. Single-payer, remember, is far less than “socialized medicine”—indeed, it is merely the successful Medicare system extended to everyone (at great savings of funds). It could have been passed with relative ease on the wave of mass arousal. And with its passage, the way would have been cleared for further transformation.

Of course, this eminently practicable goal did require a bit of leadership from our transformative President, or not to put it too finely, the modicum of courage and vision needed to stand up to capitalist power. So much for that. What could have been a turning point has been reduced to disillusionment-as-usual: lies to a Joe Wilson, and lies to the rest of us. It matters not that the lies differ from one case to the other. What matters is that Obama, however truthful at one level, becomes the greater liar at another level, and the one that really counts: fidelity to transformative change. His failings have betrayed those who trusted him and left them without the élan and will to either fight for real change or to stand up to the savage demagogues who fill the vacuum left by his weakness. And so the failure of a man who promised so much can unleash the dogs of reactionary racist violence. It is ever thus with populism, the politics of personalization. Populism is the door to transformative politics, but also to the hell of racism and even fascism. The opening phase of Obama’s presidency has opened the wrong door and been a grievous setback for humanity and nature.

—Joel Kovel