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Decolonizing Obama

What happened to the third-world left?

Published in: Issue 27: Deep End

Publication date: Winter 2017



Pete Souza, 2015.

ON ELECTION NIGHT in 2008, Barack Obama declared to a crowd of nearly a quarter million people in Chicago, “This is your victory.” That was how countless Americans experienced his election. For those who were old enough to recall the era of Jim Crow, the elevation of a black man to the Presidency appeared to be the culmination of generations of arduous organizing and struggle. For students and young people newly activated by his campaign, it was an ecstatic entrance into political adulthood. The campaign itself had produced the feeling of a mass movement. At the time, Obama represented the cutting edge of American progressive politics—the very horizon of what seemed thinkable after three decades of triangulation, hawkishness, and conservative political dominance.

Now, as Obama prepares for the “peaceful transfer of power” to a white nationalist who came to prominence by questioning the legitimacy of Obama’s birth certificate, that night seems to belong to an alternate universe. Obama remains perhaps the most popular and respected politician in the country—certainly far more respected than those poised to control virtually every level and branch of government. But the failure of the Obama coalition to produce a durable Democratic majority suggests that night in 2008 was something of a mirage. Rather than a decisive victory for new progressive ideas, the Obama era feels increasingly like the last days of a now moribund centrism.

Even before Trump’s ascendancy, esteem for Obama existed alongside real uncertainties about his ideology. A key warning sign came from the left, where a gulf emerged between him and many of the very people he’d mobilized. While Obama extolled the “free-enterprise system” but called for “corporate responsibility,” young activists began to decry neoliberalism and to demand full employment, a guaranteed income, and the dismantling of the banks. Obama expressed outrage at police violence and proposed criminal-justice reform; insurgent social movements called for the end of the prison system itself. The fact that Obama criticized the invasion of Iraq but went on to expand the war on terror, traveling the world to champion the goodness of American hegemony, was not lost on this younger generation. For them, the national-security apparatus created instability and fostered authoritarianism in the Global South. *Imperialism* became a word with renewed meaning.

This divide between the President and everything from Occupy and the Fight for \$15 to the Bernie Sanders campaign and the Movement for Black Lives was more than a matter of pragmatism, the difference between what one could demand in the streets and what could be passed in a Republican-controlled Congress. It marked a fundamental disagreement over what the United States was and what it ought to be.

One can see the stakes in the rhetorical moves that made Obama such a charismatic political figure a decade ago: the way he wove together his biography with the story of the nation. In speech after speech, Obama reminded us that to witness his rise—that of an interracial child of a single mother from a middle-class background—was to know something profound about the United States, that “in no other country on earth is [this] story even possible.” He tapped deeply into what the Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal famously called the “American Creed”: the belief that from its founding the United States has been committed to equal opportunity for all, and that the collective project of the nation has been the steady fulfillment of this promise. Obama’s skill as a politician was bound to how perfectly he embodied that creed, even as more Americans grew suspicious of the story—from its presumptions about class mobility and inevitable racial accord to those concerning the basic justness of existing institutions.

Nothing about this political vision was new. It was the power of Obama’s biography that gave the rhetoric new appeal.

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As I listened to Obama retell this narrative over the years, I found myself struck by the singularity of the tale, its growing disconnect from the experiences of many. I also kept returning to what he seemed to leave out. In part, this was because I, too, am half-Kenyan, and it was hard not to hear the story of Obama and his parents without thinking of my own. The comparison underscored the variety of meanings in the experiences that shaped Obama; it also revealed how the most archetypal version of his story served specific political ends. Obama, we knew—because he told us so many times—was at once the promise of the immigrant nation (open even to the son of an African goatherd), the black fulfillment of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “dream,” and the success story of the hardworking white middle class. He was the living proof of American exceptionalism, an embodiment of self-advancement through meritocracy.

I have no doubt that affirming these narratives was the only way for a person of color, in the period Obama arrived on the national stage, to achieve leadership in this majority-white country. In the Clinton and Bush years, for someone like Obama to cast his or her

life story in more radical terms—in the anticolonial framing, for instance, that I grew up with—would have meant abandoning mass electoral success within the two-party system. But once in office, this affirmation came at the price of rejecting a broader left imagination that had long overflowed the bounds of a staid Americanism. And it had profound costs at a time of national reckoning. At a moment when the country faced convulsive social crises, and more and more of his supporters called for a fundamental reconstruction of American institutions, Obama marshaled his personal story and oratorical gifts to defend hollow tenets: the righteousness of American primacy, the legitimacy of global market liberalism, the need for incremental reform, the danger of large-scale structural overhaul. The consequence—intensified by a virulent right—was that fundamental problems continued to fester and became harder to ignore: mass incarceration and structural racism, dramatic class disparities in power and opportunity, interventionism abroad, and national-security abuses at home. Obama was, in a sense, the most that was possible in 2008. But his limitations, which were really the limitations of a broad generation of center-left politicians shaped by the fallout of the 1960s, point to what is now needed for radical liberation movements to reach the political center and defeat the forces of reaction.

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OBAMA'S INVOCATION of the Creed was the most persistent feature of his rhetoric. In the conclusion to *Dreams from My Father*, Obama implied that his individual journey had taught him the truth behind the Declaration of Independence's claim that "all men are created equal." The principle may have been compromised from the outset by the violent expropriation of indigenous people and the existence of slavery, to say nothing of the countless forms of targeting, exclusion, and prejudice to come, but the project of America had been the steady effort to overcome these sins. "*We hold these truths to be self-evident*," Obama wrote. "In those words I hear the spirit of Douglass and Delaney, as well as Jefferson and Lincoln; the struggles of Martin and Malcolm and unheralded marchers to bring these words to life." He saw himself following in the same tradition: the Declaration was not a past accomplishment that had to be honored but a spur to greater efforts. The goal of his career—as a lawyer, a constitutional scholar, and a political activist—became to help Americans "choose our better history."

This creedal nationalism, a central ideological legacy of the cold war, has always had a dual quality. When used by Reaganite conservatives to laud America as “the greatest nation in the history of the earth” — Mitt Romney’s phrase of choice — it became a language of self-congratulation, a way to excuse ongoing injustice. When claimed by King to describe America as “a dream as yet unfulfilled,” it meant a reformist mission to overcome legal barriers to full citizenship, to finally make that dream real. Obama’s accomplishment was to fuse these two sides of the Creed. The fact that he could become President reminded us of both the persistence of racism *and* the perfectibility of the American project. Nothing about this political vision was new. It was the power of Obama’s biography that gave the rhetoric new appeal.

But this story is not the only conclusion one can draw from Obama’s life experience, and it is not the conclusion I draw when I think about the parallels between my family background and his. My father, too, is a black man — half African, half Indian — who was raised in a small town in western Kenya. He also came to the United States as a foreign student, and in the mid-1970s met my mother, the daughter of an assimilated Lebanese family that was coded as “white” and lived through the Depression and World War II. The echoes don’t end there. One of the main speakers at Obama’s first act of political engagement, when he helped organize an antiapartheid divestment protest at Occidental College, was my godfather, a South African activist and one of my parents’ closest friends.

In my own life, these elements formed a very particular identity, one I shared with many other children of color born in the ’60s and ’70s. I was a “third world” American. I grew up in a household that did not see the history of the United States as a long, exceptional national drama about the fulfillment of founding ideals. Instead, I was raised to view the US through the struggles against colonialism that were engulfing Asia and Africa. The United States was divided between racially privileged insiders and nonwhite peoples, whose land and labor served as the basis for elite wealth and power. As in apartheid South Africa, the fact that American society was founded on oppression meant that liberation would require more than inclusion in the existing social order. It would require a full-scale transformation of the country, on terms of real material equality for those subordinated. The goal was not civil rights but *decolonization*. I was thoroughly American, but of a specific kind: in my family, Malcolm and Martin were linked not to Jefferson and Washington but to Lumumba and Cabral.

The stakes of this difference are evident when Obama's creedal narrative is juxtaposed with that of the third world left. Obama often spoke of his father's coming to the United States ("a magical place" of "freedom and opportunity"). He said much less about why his father did not stay. For my father and his independence heroes, the point of getting an education in the West was gaining the technical tools to contest empire at home. He planned to go back to Kenya, to take what he had learned to help shape a postcolonial Africa on independent terms. He thought of himself as more a sojourner than an immigrant.

When Obama described his mother, it was as a single white parent who instilled in him durable all-American values. He played down just how unconventional her life decisions were. For my own mother, there were reasons why she married an African man, chose to move back with him to Kenya, and devoted herself to the problems of public health in the rural countryside. In the '70s, she identified with the self-determination movements in Asia and Africa and chose to cast her lot with those communities and their struggles. As a woman who had been fully assimilated into American culture as a child, her decisions were incomprehensible to family and friends. Her politics and her self-conception as an Arab person broke with the conformity that shaped towns like Whittier, California (her birthplace, where Richard Nixon spent his childhood)—towns where, in the postwar years, having a parent who spoke another language at home was something to hide.

My parents met through the antiapartheid and anticolonial protests that swept American campuses in the '70s and early '80s. This was how they came to know my godfather. When Obama wrote about those protests in *Dreams from My Father*, he focused on his discomfort with the theatrics and playacting of student activism ("The whole thing was a farce") and more or less avoided discussing the actual politics. What the reader might conclude is that the antiapartheid struggle was a rather straightforward extension of the traditional civil rights movement, with its focus on legal equality (a matter of "dignity" and "fairness," as Obama remembered declaring to a crowd). My parents and godfather, with their commitment to black internationalism, instead saw university campuses as a significant battleground over not only formal rights but the fate of capitalism and empire. Whatever the occasional youthful theatrics of campus politics, when the University of California divested \$1.7 billion from South Africa in the mid-1980s, it was experienced by the apartheid state's white rulers as a profound challenge.

Even my parents' decision to give me an "ethnic" name expressed their commitments. Obama described his own name as the product of a belief that "in a tolerant America your name is no barrier to success." For Obama, it was a multicultural marker that exemplified the country's pluralism, in which one could as easily be Kenyan American as Irish American. For my parents, the Arabic name Aziz was not a mark of ethnic or religious pride, a way to affirm the American mythos. The name was a statement of affinity—an effort to locate their child culturally in the world of the Global South—and so an act of solidarity with liberation movements abroad.

THERE ARE REASONS why Obama may never have seen himself in these terms, whether the early separation from his African father or the centrality of his white grandparents to his upbringing. More interesting to me is how Obama's ideological turn became the only one a person of color interested in national office could take. This may seem obvious today, given how the right has built a cottage industry around accusing Obama of being a third worldist. Even though his entire political identity was premised on embracing American exceptionalism, he was still to them a Kenyan-born Manchurian candidate, as if to be anticolonial were somehow a crime. The conspiracy talk nonetheless recalls a moment when, in the 1970s, third worldism wasn't simply a racist accusation or a demeaning put-down of nonwhite societies.

When Obama came of age politically, a vibrant American left still existed. Arriving in the United States in 1973, my father found himself surrounded by people like my mother: students, white and nonwhite, radicalized by growing economic uncertainty, the failures of civil rights liberalism to transform the everyday experience of poor minorities, and the ongoing abuses of the national-security state, which spied on citizens, infiltrated and violently suppressed social movements, and prosecuted illegal wars abroad. Despite the factionalism on the left, virtually every constituency my father interacted with—from Panther offshoots to antiwar activists to more traditional democratic socialists—shared a basic critique of American capitalism and global power.

This critique identified capitalism, white supremacy, and the national-security state as the three pillars that sustained economic and racial hierarchy in the United States. At home, it required imagining the black freedom struggle as a poor people's campaign for

all who were excluded: African Americans, immigrants, indigenous peoples, and the white working class. The goal was to replace capitalism with a more equitable economic order, one in which wealth would be redistributed to abolish poverty and increase the actual social power of ordinary individuals. The overarching demand from the left was for *self-determination*.

As for foreign affairs, the problem was not simply the Vietnam War — which anyway had formally come to an end in 1973 — but the cold-war mentality and national-security infrastructure that enabled continuous intervention abroad and the sabotage of dissidents at home. Left activists called for a new internationalism built on the self-determination of communities in the Global South. With these twin demands — self-determination at home and abroad — activists rejected the liberal assumption that had come to define cold-war politics: that an easy transition to racial and class harmony in the US was possible, and could be accomplished alongside the establishment of a global *Pax Americana*.

The problem for the left was how exactly to bring political efforts against foreign injustice together with a broad-based poor people's movement. The central enigma was the growing conservatism of the white working class, who given their sheer numbers would be necessary for any successful mass mobilization. Falling union density created an unorganized white constituency increasingly susceptible to right-wing rhetoric, while even the unions themselves — now part of a postwar compromise between labor and management — bore less and less resemblance to the creative and insurgent labor-movement radicalism of the 1930s and '40s. Leftists tended to take separate approaches to these developments. The first was to argue for the need to take over and reconstruct the classic New Deal institutions. Some veterans of the student and civil rights movements hoped to build an interracial class-based identity organized around work. This required reshaping unions like the AFL-CIO from within — eliminating the final internal vestiges of discrimination — and pushing for the Democratic Party to use the levers of the state to transform the economy.

The competing approach remained skeptical of the New Deal establishment. It focused instead on building alternatives at the local level, from the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movements in auto manufacturing to the Black Panthers in political life. The idea was to generate a comprehensive and parallel institutional apparatus, a government outside the government. It could educate its members, provide basic services, and embody a continuous source of dissent from structures of corporate and state power.

The third-world left in the United States generally embraced the second approach. They highlighted the costs of working within both the Democratic Party and traditional unions. For them, the AFL-CIO often colluded with employers to undermine worker safety, preserve institutional racism, and defeat shop-level radicalism. The Democratic Party establishment—especially after George McGovern’s massive defeat—remained deeply invested in anticommunist interventions. To ally with the existing state would require cleaving the domestic and the foreign, making common cause with a security apparatus that fought independence movements abroad and repressed social movements at home. Third worldists envisioned new political communities and institutions that cut across national lines and that linked autonomous, often black-led political efforts at the local level with anticolonial movements internationally. For my parents, the consequence was participation not just in protests but also in the plethora of grassroots institutions that emerged at the time—in particular, the new liberation schools and alternative educational projects aimed at both adults and children.

This third-world alternative faced its own weaknesses. Black militant organizing failed to win union elections, often alienating older and more moderate African American workers and working-class whites. By focusing on community development and cultural pride, third-world localism could at times devolve into a new brand of ethnic politics, at its worst deemphasizing class radicalism and appearing to mirror elements of the white localism it opposed. Toward the end of the ’70s, both left approaches had proved incapable of creating a durable progressive base and had failed to stem the tide of working-class white backlash.

In attempting to explain this backlash, Democratic Party elites and some past movement activists obsessed over the alienating effects of black militancy, as well as its embrace by white radicals (“radical chic”). Third worldism was singled out for blame. Its revolutionary rhetoric scared off white allies, so the story went, and in the process fatally compromised interracial solidarity. As Richard Rorty later argued, the only way to “mobiliz[e] Americans as political agents” was to mimic cold-war patriotism and its creedal myths, to “share in a national hope” of exceptionalism. To fight against the deeply ingrained cultural identity of most white citizens was to be marginalized and veer between “self-disgust” and “self-mockery.” The center-left needed to connect Nixon’s rhetoric of individual opportunity and national greatness to the social-welfare achievements of the New Deal, as well as to the civil rights advances of the Warren Court and the Johnson Administration. These arguments began as critique of the left’s messaging: doubts that white Americans—with their presumed faith in the Constitution and the Creed—could be organized through either socialist strategies of

class “warfare” or black radical arguments about colonialism and white supremacy. But increasingly, messaging and substance merged. For some post-Sixties Democrats, avoiding class and race came to mean defending market ethics and turning the page on racial reconstruction. It required rejecting the left’s diagnosis of American society as well its agenda for liberation.

This was the fight between the center and the left when Obama arrived at a college campus in 1979. As much as any politician of the past thirty years, Obama internalized the centrist narrative of the good 1960s versus the bad 1960s. It recurs in his speechmaking and throughout the early pages of *Dreams from My Father*. In the latter, he charts the disintegration of the left through the political trajectory of his white grandparents. He tells how their love of their interracial grandchild and deep-seated antiracism had come out of the optimism of the era between Kennedy’s inauguration in 1961, the year he was born, and the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. This was the time, he writes, when it seemed “universalism” would “triumph” over “parochialism and narrow-mindedness.”

But by 1968, Obama’s grandparents had voted for Nixon and fallen prey to “law and order” rhetoric. With left radicalism displacing the traditional civil rights movement and its discourse of national pride and American exceptionalism, Obama witnessed the optimism of his grandparents dissipate. “They saw no more destinations to hope for,” he recalled, and settled for “hanging on” rather than social change. His own brushes with the left struck him as a dead end, even dangerous. In the early ’80s, he went to see Kwame Ture, formerly Stokely Carmichael, speak at Columbia and thought it was “a bad dream.” Ture’s movement “had died years ago,” Obama wrote. Far “removed from the struggles” he “purported to serve,” Ture was also “just plain crazy.”

Dreams from My Father begins with youthful anger and collegiate dabbling with radical chic (“We smoked cigarettes and wore leather jackets. At night, in the dorms, we discussed neocolonialism, Frantz Fanon, Eurocentrism, and patriarchy”). It ends with a mature and full embrace of the Constitution and the Creed as the only true paths to collective improvement. The book is an account of how, through disillusionment with the left, Obama learned to see his life history as a quintessential example of the American story.

WHAT DID ALL THIS MEAN as a matter of policy during these past years of growing social unrest and discontent? Obama's substantive actions as President weren't far removed from the approaches taken in the 1990s: a mix of cold-war foreign policy—marked by a presumptive right to intervene wherever the state deems fit—and post-cold-war domestic incrementalism. By 2008, in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq and amid the run-up to the financial crisis, this was already a tired tradition, exhausted by a basic inability to come to grips with persistent structural failures on matters of the economy, race, and peace. Obama's most remarkable accomplishment therefore was not the achievement of any specific policy objective—the passage of the Affordable Care Act, the killing of Osama bin Laden—but the way he infused an exhausted American centrism with new energy and attractiveness, coating a familiar brand of American liberalism with the sanctity and power of his own personal biography. There are many tragedies embedded in this success. For one, it meant that Democrats held the reins of power when the Party's leaders had the least to offer the country's most vulnerable members.

This is not to say the Obama Administration made no material improvements. Millions gained health care who did not previously have it, albeit within a convoluted market structure that cut against the basic principle of health as a universal public good and a guaranteed social right. The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, however hamstrung by the right, provided a mechanism for safeguarding citizens from financial fraud. Obama's executive actions and agencies protected Dreamers and LGBTQ persons from discrimination and added countless regulations to protect the environment, consumers, and employees. These were worthy developments, and many people now find themselves wondering what the future might bring, since they made choices—from what job to take to whether to live out in the open—based on the belief that Obama-era practices marked a real turning point.

But the Obama Administration's reforms all fell within the same philosophy that long informed the "American century": faith in markets and in technocratic and national security experts (despite the repeated and catastrophic failures of all three), and suspicion of politics formed through mass democratic mobilization. We can see the consequences across numerous policy arenas. Obama's signature educational program was the aptly titled Race to the Top. The program encouraged states to give teachers whose students got higher test scores bonuses and to fire those whose students tested poorly. This focus on teacher evaluation and student test-taking deemphasized the central driver of unequal educational achievement: poverty and the structural

conditions that reproduced it. Without a sustained attempt to link poverty to the classroom, tests, accountability, and assessments served mostly to create a competitive setting for a small number of individuals to excel and for many to fail. For all the talk of boosting outcomes for all, Race to the Top, in keeping with its name, was an educational vision for the “gifted” — making sure that school was a meritocratic mechanism, tied to market ethics, that functioned to make the cream rise.

As for the economy, Obama more than anyone else was the central force behind the now widely derided Trans-Pacific Partnership. As activists have tirelessly contended, TPP should not be understood as a trade deal (of its thirty sections, fewer than ten deal with tariffs). It was an attempt to protect transnational corporations’ property rights. Stated commitments to union rights and anti-discrimination norms came at the cost of constraining the larger capacity of the state to pursue social-democratic interventions in labor, health, and safety. TPP was premised on open borders for capital, while for labor the default remains a system of limited bargaining power and restricted movement. The agreement was not only a direct repudiation of the left imagination but an unambiguous embrace of the consensus market liberalism that emerged toward the end of the cold war and flourished after it.

We see the same tendency at play in national security. In his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Obama infamously took the opportunity to defend not simply the idea of just war but the justness of American conduct in the cold war and the nation’s post-cold-war dominance. “The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms,” he declared. These dozens of military interventions and proxy wars were a necessary “burden,” according to Obama, the product of a national mission and an exceptional embrace of global freedom and democracy, rather than any desire “to impose our will.” For Obama, American interests as defined by the national-security state were coterminous with the world’s interests. It was hardly a surprise that the administration’s foreign-policy practices and domestic counterterrorism actions followed the path laid down by George W. Bush and Dick Cheney.

Regarding race, Obama again seemed unwilling to confront the structural nature of the problem. Obama’s central initiatives, grounded in the creedal imagination of color-blind inclusion, focused on police training in a way that amounted to a more professionalized “law and order.” So, too, did his turn to programs like My Brother’s Keeper, which sought to give, as one White House official put it, “every young man of color who is willing to work hard and lift himself up an opportunity to get ahead and reach his full potential.”

Even if the American justice system were to become truly race-neutral, the prison and the police officer's gun would still remain the primary way the American state manages and controls the poor. White House initiatives aiming to create pathways out of poor neighborhoods for select black male teenagers not only reproduced a gendered framing of black precarity but also did little to address the fact that growing up in poverty is a losing proposition for the vast majority of those very teenagers. This was why even centrist white liberals—some of Obama's strongest supporters—started to consider it a joke, well before the Republicans' explicit mainstreaming of white nationalism, to say that the United States had entered a postracial stage.

BUT UP UNTIL our most recent and fateful Tuesday night in November, it is noteworthy that Obama and the Democratic Party's leadership had not had to face the limitations of their politics. Through a combination of auspicious historical timing and oratorical mastery, Obama's narratives of self and nation managed to repackage old wine in new bottles with real electoral success. While the administration's policies were not up to the country's problems, the Obama years were good for the Democratic Party. Midterm defeats seemed more like an anomaly than the foreshadowing of a future in the electoral wilderness.

Obama benefited from shifting demographics that transformed the white working class from the American majority into a far narrower constituency. When Reagan's victory over Carter put the final nail in the coffin of the left dream of a class-rooted progressive political base, 65 percent of the voting public were whites without a college degree. In 2012 exit polls, that percentage was cut nearly in half, to 36 percent. As long as Obama's repackaged liberalism could hold minority voters, it seemed, a new Democratic majority would not need a majority or near majority of working-class whites at election time. And with the rise of white nationalism and ethnic xenophobia on the right, it was inconceivable that minorities would go anywhere else. The consequence was that Obama's rise appeared to coincide with a defining moment in American political history. For most of the period since the New Deal, the ability to win non-college-educated whites had been the central test of any electoral coalition. But, perhaps for the first time in the modern era, Democratic leaders imagined they could have a permanent electoral majority while losing decisively with such voters. It was hardly a surprise that just as

the party's vision of the economy aligned with the interests of global capital, its appeal to non-minorities emphasized meritocratic competence and focused on upper-middle-class and professional whites.

Whether consciously or not, Obama crafted a set of political narratives aimed at this new electoral coalition. His story beautifully embodied the aspirations of the upwardly mobile, white and black, who saw in themselves and their children the dream of educational achievement and professional success. To poor minorities and immigrants, not to mention white working-class union members who stayed true to the Democratic party, there were fewer tangible benefits. Yet Obama the living symbol held real power—and the centrality of Obama the person to that power was, ultimately, the problem. The sheer charisma of his story and personality captured just enough of the white voters to whom the Party no longer catered culturally or economically, and at the same time expanded the vote among minorities whose material conditions had not substantively improved. He succeeded in providing liberalism with a temporary vitality that Party leaders tragically mistook for a permanent one. Remove Obama, and the exhaustion of the old cold-war and creedal American center lay exposed.

Even before election night, when Clinton still seemed likely to win, I couldn't help but see the Obama coalition as a Faustian bargain. I found myself reflecting on the aspirations of the left and of the American third worldists I grew up with. The Obama presidency—and the Clinton one that might have followed—underscored the profound difference between the Democratic electoral majority as envisioned by its architects and a majority that would actually embrace a freedom struggle, reconceive American power, and demand liberation in terms that linked race and gender to political economy. In essence, to give up on the class politics that left activists hoped would bring poor whites and blacks together, as well as on the anti-imperial ideals that connected the “inner city” to the third world, was to abandon the conditions for real social change.

Where Obama once marked the horizon of political possibility, he now exits as the embodiment, albeit an honorable one, of an earlier and antiquated time. We seem to be shedding the last remnants of the cold war—with an ethno-nationalist (repeatedly accused of ties to Russia) and a self-described socialist as the new American personifications of the relevant political sides. With the center in greater disarray than at any point since before World War II, the options feel stark: liberation on anticapitalist and antiracist terms, or the deep entrenchment of racial and economic hierarchy. But as he leaves office, Obama's inadvertent legacy has been to help bring back the very American radicalism he once rejected. Representing the apotheosis of the creedal story,

Obama unintentionally encouraged his own youthful supporters to move beyond the terms that essentially marked American politics from the 1970s to the 2000s. These supporters today have much more in common with the left that Obama repudiated than with him. We can see this in the Movement for Black Lives vision statement and policy demands, which call to invest in an authentically democratic economy while divesting from the militarized police and security state—a state at work both in Baltimore and in North Africa. Such demands reclaim everything from the specifics of the Panthers' 1966 Ten-Point Program to the broader language of third worldism, decolonization, and divestment. The larger activist focus today is on capitalism and empire; it is a call for a revolutionary politics and not an incremental one. These activists are now the organized base of the opposition.

We may be witnessing the completion of a political cycle, one that brings us back to the left dilemma of forty years ago: how to create a truly transformative majority, at once cross-racial and class conscious? This majority will need to be built at a moment when the right is as ideologically and institutionally unconstrained as at any point in the postwar era. We are entering a period of real political struggle. How we answer will speak to the legacy not of Obama but of the freedom movements that have emerged in his wake. +