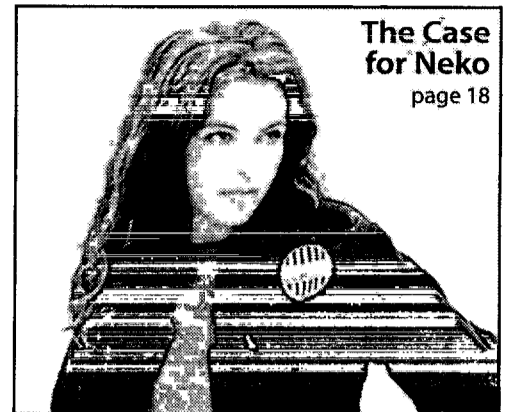


CUNY GRADUATE CENTER

Advocate



September 2009

<http://gcadvocate.org>

advocate@gc.cuny.edu



W.B. Ofuatey-Kodjoe (1937-2009)

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FROM THE **editor's desk**

A Riot of their Own

"White riot -I wanna riot
White riot—a riot of my own"
—*The Clash*

"Government...bullshit
Black and white... fight"
—*The Subhumans*

At first the talk was all about the prospects of a "post-racial" America. Obama's success among white voters (he received a larger percentage of the white vote than any democratic candidate since Carter) and the lack of any recordable "Bradley effect," caused many white (and a handful of black) commentators to ponder the possibility that America had perhaps finally transcended its bitter history of racial injustice. Today, after months of racially charged populist outrage, this talk seems not only hopelessly optimistic and naive, but just plain ignorant. Indeed, former president Jimmy Carter, himself no political cynic, recently found it necessary to point out and condemn the racialized rhetoric of the largely white anti-government movement that has sprung up since Obama's victory, and while we should all be extremely concerned about the potentially negative consequences of such rhetoric, it's causes and its sources seem to be a lot more complicated than just good old-fashioned Southern white-supremacy. Underneath the resentment and anger, the Nazi iconography, and the subtle and not so subtle racial slights, there is a real and justifiable sense of outrage that has been overlooked, and more often than not, cynically denigrated by the left, which is usually more sympathetic to anti-establishmentarian displays of public anger.

The organizers of these various protests are mostly neo-libertarian and conservative free-market groups who advocate an extreme federalist interpretation of the constitution, small government, and abolition of the income tax (some even going so far as to advocate for the elimination of public schools). However, the people showing up to these protests appear to be pretty ordinary working- and middle-class people who for the most part appear to be either oblivious, confused, or unsure about what exactly their movement is really about. Like the left, whose protests were sometimes rightfully criticized for not having a central agenda, these protests seem to be more about expressing a populist sense of fear and anger in solidarity with others who share those emotions. That this outrage has now taken a racial turn should come as no surprise to students of American history, for the white masses, easily manipulated by factious political and economic interests, have often tended to blame black and immigrant underclasses whenever things start to go wrong. The fact that a nominal member of that historical underclass has now proven that "even a black man" can be president, has only added to the sense of economic insecurity that has fueled such bouts of racial antagonism in the past, making people who before were very little of one or the other, at once both more racist and more political.

Incited by the idiot rantings and barely contained racial and xenophobic prejudices of Glenn Beck and Lou Dobbs, these protestors believe that Obama is the source of all of their suffering; and his skin color, his Arabic name, his activist background, and questions about his national origin, all make him an easy scapegoat for the fears and insecurities of middle America, as well as an irresistible magnet for those Brooks Brother's bigots and middle class nationalists already convinced by Dobbs and others that African Americans and immigrants are somehow the source of all their problems. This kind of scapegoating can be seen throughout American history, including the Jim Crow south, where fears of black retribution and congressional representation sent the white masses into paroxysms of social panic. But the subtle insinuations of violence and racial satire exhibited by many of these protestors is nothing compared to the outright murderous race riots of the nineteenth century. In New York alone there were two major race riots from 1834-5, which ended in the burning and destruction of black and abolitionist homes and establishments, and just like the Draft Riots of 1863, these events were more about economics than race; more about jobs than slavery. Now, as then, the general bigotry, distrust,

and fear exhibited toward Obama has a lot more to do with social and economic insecurity than with any actual belief that whites or Anglo-Saxons are somehow superior to Africans or Hispanics.

Although the protestors opposed to public healthcare and the stimulus package have been desperately misdirected and misinformed, the underlying anger that has made those protests possible is palpable and significant. Like Americans across the country many of these protestors, now living on unemployment for maybe the first time in their lives, have seen their jobs disappear almost overnight and have watched as their paychecks failed to keep pace with the cost of their healthcare or their rent. Many of them, no doubt, have seen their mortgage payments increase dramatically even as the value of their homes has continued to plummet. They've watched their sons and daughters, their grandchildren, and their neighbors shipped off to Afghanistan and Iraq, even as their school districts have scrambled to do more with a lot less. And all of them have suffered from the fallout of one of the biggest economic meltdowns in the last eighty years, and have watched in mostly silent anger as those responsible for that crisis have continued to prosper from a combination of corporate bonuses and government bailouts.

Simply put these people are angry and easily attracted to any movement that promises them a sense of control and a feeling of belonging. And for this the Left is not without blame. Instead of coming to their aid the Democratic Party and the bi-coastal academic left (obsessed with identity politics and oblivious to the suffering of ordinary working-class America) has been content to poke fun at the stupidity and ignorance of the middle and working classes that make up a good portion of the country's interior.

As factories closed and Wal-Mart began its anti-labor occupation of the Mid-West and the South, Democratic politicians did nothing to help and much to exacerbate the problem, while culturally enlightened liberals fled, as they always have, for the Hollywood hills and the towers of Manhattan. Safe in their glass cages they asked themselves "what's wrong with Kansas" even as they watched the rest of the nation sink first into a coma of post-consumption debt fueled by years of wage stagnation and lender greed, and then slowly into joblessness and eventual bankruptcy.

Instead of uniting working-class blacks and whites to fight together for greater representation of their shared interests, the left was content to spend its time talking about identity and equal opportunity, teaching college kids how to be nice and eventually how to use their new found skills and political correctness to get ahead of their less enlightened peers of all races from Iowa and Oklahoma, Georgia and South Carolina. The idea of social solidarity and class consciousness that was at the core of the left's historical agenda has been replaced with an ethos of technocratic equality and a vision of a multi-ethnic rainbow of ruling elites. Blacks like Obama who attended Harvard now have a greater chance of becoming a politician or corporate lawyer than ever, but the chance of a black man or a group of black workers joining or forming a union is as low as it's been in almost a century.

Clearly any party interested in its own future will at least recognize the political potential of this new group of left-behinds and seek to find better more suitable ways to channel that anger into more constructive protest. But this is unlikely. The Democratic Party's bungled health care bill (which is looking more and more like a boon for the health insurance companies) and its virtual abandonment of card check legislation (which would guarantee a significant increase in national union membership) shows all too well that it has neither the power or the inclination to push through the much needed social changes that in themselves would create greater equality and solidarity among all the working classes regardless of race or ethnicity. That so many could be so easily convinced to act against their own interests is indeed a testament to the power of racial and class identification. That middle class America has been largely abandoned by the same party that helped create it is symptomatic of the nature of political entropy, and the fact that the Democratic Party is now seeing such anger directed at its own president is no surprise. (A)