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USA

Pushing Back Civil Rights

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“If, in 2014, we’re still making ‘white savior movies’ then it’s just lazy and unfortunate. We’ve grown up as a country and cinema should be able to reflect what’s true. And what’s true is that black people are the center of their own lives and should tell their own stories from their own perspectives.” — Ava DuVernay speaking to the *Boston Globe* (January 3, 2015) in response to criticism of her treatment of President Johnson in her film, *Selma*.

“In spite of Obama’s debt to the civil-rights movement, the ideal of American exceptionalism is only as valid as the standing of people who have just as often been seen as exceptions to America.” — Jelani Cobb in his column for the *New Yorker* (January 26, 2015), “A president and a King.”

When President Obama gave his sixth State of the Union speech on January 20, the mass media focused on its rhetoric and the likelihood that few if any of his proposals would be adopted by the Republican-controlled Congress.

What the Black media noted, at least, was on target — Obama’s failure to lambaste the violence of the police across the country directed at Black men and boys. Obama’s only reference to police killings:

We may have different takes on the events of Ferguson and New York. But surely we can understand a father who fears his son can’t walk home without being harassed. Surely we can understand the wife who won’t rest until the police officer she married walks through the front door at the end of his shift.

No mention was made of the killings of Black boys and men every 28 hours by cops. No mention of the racism of the far right and its reflection in mainstream policies. No mention of the new “Black Lives Matter” movement demanding justice now.

Selma and Civil Rights

Every gain won by the civil rights revolution in the 1960s and 1970s is now under assault. As *Selma* eloquently portrays, it was the self-organization and mobilization of working-class and poor African Americans that defeated Jim Crow segregation. Without Blacks leading the struggle, putting their lives on the line, significant support from whites would not have occurred.

Yet *Selma* has been criticized by many “establishment” white defenders of president Johnson, who in their view was the primary reason for the civil rights legal victories. The direct actions led by Martin Luther King, and what millions of former slaves, sharecroppers and workers did to fight centuries of racial domination and exploitation, are relegated to second chair.

How could an African-American director (a woman at that!) have the audacity to place the victory on the shoulders of genuine Black Power and agitation and its leaders and not the white president?

DuVernay does not deny Johnson’s legislative role, but correctly focuses on the raw power of the streets. It is a common trademark of liberals to believe that elections are decisive to fundamental changes, not mass action. This is

an old narrative of American history — the leading role given to white liberals instead of the independent actions of the oppressed themselves.

What's striking since Obama became president in 2008 is how far the various institutions of the state (city, state, Congress and Supreme Court) have stepped up attacks on and moved to roll back the civil rights revolution. Every gain has been weakened beyond what almost anyone thought possible when Obama took office.

Major civil rights decisions have been targeted — the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the 1968 Fair Housing Act. While the overturn of the legal justification of Jim Crow segregation is not on the table — it is not necessary to return to “whites only” signs — voter suppression legislation and moves to justify housing discrimination are big steps toward limiting the gains for working-class African Americans.

Obama has been transformational — but not for African Americans. The winners are the powerful white supremacist politicians based in the South who found his presidency (and his failure to fight against racist forces) a useful cover to lead the rollbacks of laws that stood for some 50 years.

Supreme Court

The Supreme Court under Chief Justice Roberts has led the way in overturning or eroding the laws of the civil rights revolution. By a narrow majority it gutted the Voting Rights Act in 2013. It is posed to roll back the 1968 Fair Housing Act this year.

That law states that the fact of discrimination is proof to seek remedy; it is not necessary to prove conscious “intent” by the landlord or employer.

The self-serving argument of Chief Justice Roberts that “the only way to end discrimination is to end discrimination” means in practice pretending that discrimination does not exist — a denial of 400 years of history — to justify the real-life everyday status quo of white advantages.

As Ferguson and Cleveland have shown, the lives of young Black men and boys are seen differently than white lives. How many whites are shot down carrying a toy gun or holding an air gun in a WalMart store in an open-carry state (Ohio)?

Obama's view unfortunately emphasizes, as does his African-American Attorney General Eric Holder, that progress should be measured by the real gains of the educated talented tenth and the end of legal segregation in the South, more than the suffering of poor African Americans.

The vast majority of African Americans' lives under Obama have gotten worse rather than better on every socio-economic level. The reasons are clear, yet Obama presents a false reality by stating that the country is more united and non-racial than ever before.

The Police “Unions”

The so-called police unions are reactionary. These “unions” are at best associations (like employers’ groups) or cartels. The function of police is to “serve and protect” the ruling establishment. It is to protect big business, private property and uses force against striking workers and working people who march and rally for civil rights and civil liberties, and economic and social justice.

Their “union” is a tool to defend rogue and killer cops from prosecution, and to squeeze the public for more money and protection from prosecution. It is not an accident that the police are rarely arrested for crimes and prosecuted for what District Attorneys call “justifiable” killings of Blacks.

The social composition of the police is not decisive. New York City’s police force is now majority nonwhite. Black cops defended the murders in Cleveland and Staten Island.

Whites rarely face police brutality over petty issues. White youth are routinely given the benefit of the doubt. Blacks are assumed to be “thugs” or other expletives when police look for a suspect “even if on a college campus or driving a BMW. Most whites, including unionized white workers, don’t understand this since it is not their reality.

What’s called institutional racism is actually structural discrimination based on national oppression and class exploitation.

While many Obama supporters blame the obstructionism of the Republican Party for many of Obama’s failures to help African Americans, the reality is much simpler. Obama serves and defends the interests of the ruling class. That’s his job. In that sense he must be colorblind.

The key lesson of Martin Luther King, and of the more radical Malcolm X and Black Power advocates of the 1960s, is that mass struggle brings radical change.

King never waited for presidents Kennedy or Johnson to act on any issue “civil rights, the Vietnam War or economic justice for the working poor. It’s why he worked with James Bevel and Diane Nash on the Selma march in 1965, soon after winning the Noble Peace prize and the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964.

The Black Lives Matter Movement

The role of cops in killing African Americans is also not new. What’s new is the response by the Black community “something not seen since the 1970s.

The rise of the Black Lives Matter movement after the Ferguson, Missouri death of Michael Brown in 2014 is a significant rebuttal to those who rely on electoralism or believe in the nonracial myth.

These leaders are young Blacks who likely voted for Obama. Yet they see the lesson of the civil rights era as the government taking action only under mass pressure. The Black Lives Matter young leaders stand on King’s shoulders. They are the true descendants of the activist wing of the civil rights movement and the militancy of the 1960s.

This emerging young generation understands the why and the solution to police violence. They recognize that the cop unions are fraudulent and obstacles to justice and equality “a reality the official labor movement refuses to

grasp.

The 1965 and 2015 dates are important because each reflects the progress and failures in the fight for civil rights. It is clear that the Voting Rights Act and Selma march represented the power of Black-led street protests on the ruling class.

The year 1965 showed the contradictory realities of repression and reform in racial and class-based capitalism. The violence of the police state with the 1965 assassination of Malcolm X — the most far-sighted representative of the left wing of the movement — showed what the police, FBI, CIA and government through its COINTELPRO terror was prepared to do to stop what J. Edgar Hoover termed a “messiah” from leading the Black population.

King’s assassination in 1968 was the bookend of that terrorism against Black leaders. The legal victories of 1965-68, nevertheless, showed the fear of the ruling class of mass street protests and urban rebellions from Watts to Detroit. Reform came about because repression alone was failing to suppress rising Black anger and radicalization.

The same contradictions continue even with the first Black president and more Blacks in positions of authority. But the working-class Black majority that appears invisible has a hidden voice and potential power that one day will explode. That’s why the incipient Black Lives Matter movement and other forms of resistance to the status quo points the way forward.

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