the social significance of barack obama

moderated by doug hartmann
with assistance from the contexts graduate student editorial board

This summer, Contexts convened a panel of esteemed sociologists at contexts.org and asked them to discuss the social significance of Barack Obama’s campaign for President of the United States and what it might mean, sociologically speaking, were he to win the office.

Here we provide an abridged version of that discussion (you can read each commentator’s prepared opening statement online). To continue the conversation online—especially now that you know the outcome of the election, which none of us did when this issue went to press—go to contexts.org/obama.

Doug Hartmann, Contexts co-editor: When we first put out the call for this roundtable, we got a number of responses to the Obama candidacy that were quite critical and pessimistic, far more so than we might have expected, given both the popular and intellectual enthusiasm for the Obama campaign. Why do you think this is? And what does it suggest about sociologists and their orientation to politics, American society, and/or social change more broadly?

Josh Pacewicz: I think there’s ... something particular about the Obama campaign that draws out cynicism [for us]. Thirty years ago, I’m sure nearly everyone in the United States would have understood Obama’s success similarly to his more progressive supporters today (i.e., as a victory for historically marginalized groups). But that is not how many of Obama’s other supporters seemed to understand his campaign, nor do I think Obama would have been as successful if he had been universally understood this way. I think this says something fundamental about our time: if we chalk Obama’s success up to a progressive shift in the electorate (i.e., in the way many of us and our colleagues understand progressivism) we might miss an important piece of a developing story.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva: My reaction to Obama reflects my background as a sociologist of color from the Caribbean as well as a person who has been involved in left-wing politics for almost 30 years. I have seen many black politicians in the Caribbean not deliver on their promises once they reach the post of premier, governor, or president. The best predictors for this outcome, in my view, are leaders who are wishy-washy, not clearly connected to social movements, and who in the course of their electoral campaign “compromise” on almost anything to get elected. That has helped me, as most folks in the Caribbean, to develop a healthy skepticism on all mainstream politicians and realize that leaders must be, paraphrasing Dr. King, “judged by the content of their politics and not by the color of their skin.” But I realize that for Americans, Obama and his promise seems like a unique moment in their history. Hence, few dare break the spell and question things.

Joe Feagin: The real question is about Obama’s electability. It is not so easily dismissed as some suggest. First, keep in mind that of all whites who have voted so far in all Republican and
Democratic primaries, only 25 percent have voted for Obama. Some 75 percent of all whites who have so far voted only for whites. In addition, The New York Times July poll that asked whites about whether most acquaintances would vote for a black man found that 19 percent said no. The figure was this high for white independents and Republicans and fairly near that for Democrats.

Assuming this is a sizable group of white acquaintances, then this is a chilling finding. The 19 percent is higher than the percentage of young people who are voters, or the percentage of blacks who are voters. Candidates win presidential elections by a few percentage points, and how can Obama win in a situation of white racist thinking and framing? Whites lie in polls, and yet almost everything we think we “know” about this election comes from polls.

The data are why I am pessimistic about his chances, and no other reason. I remain amazed that the social science data on whites’ racist views are largely ignored in almost all commentary, left and right, on this election. The coming attacks, I predict, will successfully play into the old white racial frame and peel off numerous whites who now “support” or “lean to” Obama.

**Jeff Manza:** Obama’s electability speaks to other questions about race and political change in America. I think Joe is right to point out that there are good reasons to think that enough white Democratic voters may end up voting for McCain to tip the election his way. But, we would have to think that the swing based on “race” is very large indeed to permit a McCain victory. If Joe is right, it would require that Obama would “underperform” by something like 5 percent to 7 percent to lose this election. That is an awful lot of old-fashioned racism among normal Democratic and independent voters (noting that old fashioned racists who always vote Republican anyway are irrelevant).

I think the Democratic campaign is going to benefit from a number of things that polls do not always pick up, some of which might offset whites lying to pollsters about their Obama preference. There is a huge reserve of anger and high motivation among activists and rank-and-file Democrats that will push up turnout among likely Democratic voters. I see nothing like that among Republicans; indeed, the religious right is divided and the Republican “base” is not excited about McCain, only fearing a large Democratic sweep, and that is a much weaker motivation for action. Cell phone-only users are out of the sample in polls, and are likely to be Obama voters. And, we have every reason to expect significantly increased turnout among minority voters that is, again, not necessarily being picked up.

**Gianpaolo Baiocchi:** When we talk about optimism and excitement surrounding Obama, let’s also consider the international context. There is a joke that if Barack Obama loses the general election he should run for President of Brazil, given the fascination with his campaign there, as in many other nations around the world.

U.S. racial structures are often the subject of discussion in the public sphere in a surprising number of places around the world; traditionally in Brazil, the discussion had to do with the visible aspects of racism in the United States (lynching, Jim Crow, ghettoes) to reaffirm that Brazil’s supposedly fluid system of racial categories is less racist and more democratic. More recently it has had to do with affirmative action tentatively implemented in some universities: in the absence of U.S.-style racism, the argument goes, Brazil should not need U.S.-style solutions. But now the discussion, not always polite, has turned indignant. “How can it be that a more racist country like the United States can have a black presidential candidate?”

**the panel**

**Gianpaolo Baiocchi** is in the sociology department at Brown University and is the director of development studies at the Watson Institute. He studies social movements, race relations, and urban governance in Brazil.

**Eduardo Bonilla-Silva** is in the sociology department at Duke University. His interests include race and ethnic relations in the United States, Latin America, and the Caribbean as well as social theory and social movements.

**Joe Feagin** is in the sociology department at University of Florida. He studies racism, sexism, and human liberation movements.

**Enid Logan** is in the sociology department at University of Minnesota. She is writing a book about the racial politics of Barack Obama's presidential candidacy.

**Jeff Manza** is in the sociology department at New York University. He studies political sociology and social inequality.

**Josh Pacewicz** is completing his Ph.D. in the sociology department at University of Chicago. He studies political preference formation in the United States, primarily with ethnographic methods.
His very presence on the national stage in the United States seems to speak to the successes of U.S.-style multiculturalism and affirmative policies (strategies that are racially explicit but work within structures) to publics around the world, despite his actual biography.

Certainly some of the social significance of Obama’s campaign and eventual presidency has to do with these types of global implications.

**Hartmann:** Where do you stand on the sources of enthusiasm and support for Obama, what they reveal about his significance, and what they might suggest about his ability to lead and govern?

**Enid Logan:** My reading of the situation is that the progressive coalition that is backing, or potentially backing, Obama is in fact quite fractured. Though my initial comments focused primarily on conflicts among women, Obama’s recent movement to the right has also vexed many of his lefty/liberal white male supporters, who had formerly endorsed him almost uncritically. While there is much enthusiasm for Obama among different sectors of the electorate, I am not at all sure there is a great deal of consensus about the direction he should take the country, or the significance of his candidacy. As Obama has not emerged from a social movement, there are many serious questions arising from his candidacy—concerning racial justice, gender equality, poverty, elitism, religion, patriotism, and nation—that progressives have not had the chance to hash out together collectively. And there is much work to be done by those of us who care passionately about these issues to make sure the kind of change Obama might bring about is, in fact, change we can live with.

**Bonilla-Silva:** Doug is right about the huge level of enthusiasm for Obama. Americans are truly sick and tired of “politics and usual” and this national mood opened the door for Obama to emerge and tell Americans what they longed to hear—a message of unity, hope, the end of partisanship, and “change.” But enthusiasm for a candidate does not a social movement make. John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy generated a lot of enthusiasm, but we would not say they created a social movement. We should keep in mind that worrying about how “progressive” Obama will be once in office—if he wins—based on what happens or is said during the campaign is off-base. You run for office to win, and doing so sometimes requires rhetoric that narrows the perceived differences between you and your opponent in areas where the other party is historically stronger. This is exactly what the Obama campaign has done. It makes him look a good deal less progressive than in late 2007 when he was speaking to progressive Democratic voters. We should keep in mind that the disconnect between campaign rhetoric and policy initiatives once in office can be enormous.

**Baiocchi:** Obama is no social movement candidate—that is, he does not come from social movements and his candidacy (energizing as it is to many) is not a social movement. However, there is much in his campaign that alludes to the rhetoric and style of social movements. “Si se puede,” etc. And I think some of the appeal of his candidacy has to do with that. There is a profound asymmetry between the Republicans and Democrats when it comes to their relationships to their putative “bases.” Maybe it is because, as Domhoff and others have suggested, liberals lost the post-WWII war of ideas in the United States.

**Pacewicz:** I feel part of the issue with progressive politics is also related to the “institutionalization/integration into the political realm” aspects of political power, in addition to “civil society/voluntary mobilization.” Based on what I have seen, the Democratic Party still gets a rush of volunteers around election time or in connection with a particularly contentious issue; many of these folks are spillovers from other local and national movements. What has really declined is long-term organizational capacity. I think this has almost everything to do with the decline of organized labor.
Hartmann: One question that has been talked about a lot: Is Obama black enough?

Bonilla-Silva: The question of Obama’s blackness makes sense if we understand that historically there has always been a “black majority” that has shared a similar set of life chances. By this standard, Obama is not Jesse, or Al, or Farrakhan, or Maxine Waters, or any other black leader with roots in the poor and working class segment of the black community. The question of his blackness then is not about his skin color, but about his life experiences and how his different experiences and background may affect his politics. Obama is black lite not because he is half-white, but because he has taken an almost raceless political stand and persona. This said, the legitimacy of Obama’s blackness should be judged by his politics and, in my view, his are “neo-mulatto” politics.

Baiocchi: I think it is telling that we as a group have hesitated to get to the question of Obama’s blackness. It’s almost as if we played by the rules of acceptable discourse around his post-racial candidacy.

Obama himself, as we’ve all noted, avoids the language of racial injustice and doesn’t dwell on the question of his own blackness. It’s almost left largely to others to identify him. Post-racial politeness, though, calls for us to not to speak of the thorny issue.

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But Obama’s post-racial discourse is almost like a fiction that no one buys but everyone is supposed to pretend is believable. African-Americans don’t, and whites don’t either. But decorum calls for avoidance of the issue, especially by the candidate himself. His campaign has tried to avoid leaking to the press the stories of threats and burnings of campaign offices in the heartland. And remember how everyone pounced on Obama for “playing the race card from the bottom of the deck” for the innocent statement that he didn’t look like the presidents on dollar bills?

These rules speak profoundly to how things work in the current juncture of race relations, as discussed by both Eduardo and Joe. One way to interpret it is that the price a candidate of color must pay for mainstream respectability is the abandonment of racial discourse. Certainly something else going on is the “generational” effect that has had play in the media as well. I think it is correct to say there is a newer generation of African-American leadership that has come of age after the civil rights movement, with a different relationship to racial discourse, having lived much or most of their lives in the era of polite racism as opposed to overt Jim Crow. I think it is also a generation that has seen the erosion of civil rights victories but had in some way a different horizon of possibilities because every civil rights era victory reversed (busing, affirmative action, and so on) has been justified as no longer being necessary since racism officially became “a thing of the past.”

Logan: On the issue of racial identity, I believe Obama is opening...
up the space for new, expanded notions of blackness. The more time he spends in the national spotlight, the choices will, hopefully, no longer only be to be seen as either a) “authentically black,” i.e., in all ways identified with “the hood,” poor blacks, and the “urban experience,” or as b) “not really black,” “honorary white,” “black lite” (to use Eduardo’s phrase), or “not black enough.”

While I realize a number of progressive scholars and activists (from Jesse Jackson to Ralph Nader) disagree, for many members of the black professional classes I have interviewed, Barack Obama is not simply a “whitewashed” black man. He is, rather, someone who represents the increasing diversity of the black community. Not all of us are from the hood. Some of us are biracial. Increasing numbers have parents from the Caribbean or Africa.

Obama seems to represent a blackness that is cosmopolitan, global, progressive, multifaceted, and forward-looking, rather than primarily referencing slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, and our glorious past as Kings and Queens in Africa. We are more diverse, complex, and dynamic than previously assumed, no longer so easily stereotyped or pigeonholed. We may not want to be asked to speak only about “black issues” or on behalf of the entire black community. We may sip a latte and shop at Whole Foods from time to time, but we can still drop a three-pointer on cue, listen to Jay-Z on our iPods, and give our significant others a fist-pound as they go off to face the day.

The problem with all this is that I’m not sure many of Obama’s black middle-class supporters are clear enough about the bargain Obama is implicitly making in our names. While they may differ on the ways and extent to which race shapes their lives, none of the people I have spoken to thinks of themselves as “post-racial,” believes the United States to be a “magical place,” or thinks racism in America is dead (to quote African-American commentator Tavis Smiley, “I love America ... but this ain’t Disneyland”).

We must listen carefully to what Obama is saying, and ask ourselves if he is agreeing to too much. For one, he has conceded that the children of the black professional classes should probably be excluded from affirmative action policies. And while robust debates about personal responsibility have been taking place among black people for years, there is a degree to which Obama sometimes seems to be airing dirty laundry in public and scolding black people in order to score points with whites (yes, I’m agreeing with Jesse here). That should make more of us uncomfortable. The undertones of the new politics of race that may come to characterize the Age of Obama thus sometimes seem rather sinister. The crux of the subtext I read is that it is time for us all to get past race, especially blacks.

Bonilla-Silva: I want to wrap up in a provocative fashion by daring to make some bold predictions. So as I look into my sociological crystal ball, here is what I see. Barring some John Edwards-like scandal or a tragedy, Obama will be elected President of the United States. After Obama is elected president, the United States will experience a brief “We shall overcome” period of euphoria, a “Yes we can” frenzy. However, we will soon return to the politics of “America the Brutiful.” On the home front, President Obama will talk about unity and about how we are one indivisible nation under (his) God, but most of his policies will do little to challenge the capitalist, gendered, and racial character of the polity. President Obama will not dare intervene with the “invisible hand of the market” that has been slapping all of us quite hard as of late. President Obama will not make a priority of crafting policies to reduce the 25 percent difference in earnings between men and women with similar qualifications. And, President Obama will take a middle-of-the-road, post-racial stand on race matters that will maintain the racial status quo. On the crucial symbolic issue of affirmative action, he will reaffirm Bubba’s mended but not ended stand.

America will remain Amerika, but will have a brown person in charge of keeping the White House white. Whites, whether they supported Obama or not, will rejoice and postulate a soto voce that Obama’s election demonstrates the nation has finally moved “beyond race” and, accordingly, will object more vociferously than ever before to anyone who dares speak about racism. Blacks and other racial minorities, after their little intoxication with Obama’s hope liquor, will sober up and realize having a black man in “charge” does not necessarily put food on their tables. And in a short time, we will all see the curious spectacle of white folks fanatically supporting a black president while black folks ask “their” president, “Damn, where did the change we could believe in go?”

Hartmann: Anybody else?

Logan: I think Obama’s probable election (I agree that support for him among black and under-25 cell phone-only users is likely greatly underestimated and very important) will accelerate certain trends in American racial politics that began to germinate long before he declared his candidacy last February.

One major trend I see coming ever more to the forefront is the importance, or visibility, of the class divide in the black community, both in terms of the discussions that take place among African Americans, and in terms of how blacks are seen by non-blacks in the wider world. As recent sociological research has emphasized, black experiences of race and racism in the United States today differ tremendously depending upon social class.

Hartmann: We’ve covered a lot of ground, more than we’ll be able to print. Any final thoughts? Things we’ve missed? Overwhelming points you need to bring home?