

COMMENT/CRITIQUE

Barack Obama, the Tea Party, and the Threat of Race: On Racial Neoliberalism and Born Again Racism

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This essay engages the racist rhetoric of the U.S. Tea Party and President Barack Obama's (non)response as both emblematic of what David Theo Goldberg and others call racial neoliberalism. While Obama's detractors certainly deserve attention for their invective discourse, Obama also warrants critique for operating within a racially neoliberal discursive field binding him to antiracial (not antiracist) responses to racist discourses. This essay first stakes out the conceptual terrain of racial neoliberalism and addresses the relationship between racial neoliberalism, antiracialism, and racial threat to elucidate its significance for discourse about race. How the Tea Party's racist rhetoric functions and how Obama's reaction further reinforce the hegemony of racial neoliberalism are explained using this critical analytic.

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When former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, in 2009, attributed the vitriolic attacks on President Barack Obama and his health proposal at town hall meetings nationwide to an underlying racism, he gave credible voice to what many people were seeing and saying since the so-called "Tea Parties" began in April 2009 (Kornblut & Thompson, 2009). Caliendo and McIlwain's (2009) piece on the *This Week in Race* blog similarly makes the argument that the Right's response to Obama's "back to school" address worked "to erode Obama's image as part of a larger push to portray him as 'other.'" As the attacks on Obama have continued well into 2010 and the Tea Party has grown stronger (even having its first national convention in February 2010), other public faces from across the political spectrum have advanced the position that the Tea Party's discourse is racist. Perhaps Deis (2010), from the online news magazine *AlterNet*, summarized the issue most pointedly in arguing, "The deep ugliness and bigotry on display here is centered on a basic idea: Obama is not really one of 'us.' He, because of his race, his personhood, and his color can never be a 'real American.'"

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For the Tea Party and right-wing populists, Obama is not fit to rule because as a person of color he is a perpetual outsider and racial Other.”

In this critical commentary, I want to engage this problem from two angles: While Obama’s detractors certainly deserve critical attention for their invective, Obama also deserves critical attention for operating within a racially neoliberal discursive field that binds him to antiracial (as opposed to antiracist) responses to subtly (and not so subtly) racist discourses. In what follows, I first introduce the Tea Party and its rhetoric of race. Second, I stake out the conceptual terrain of racial neoliberalism, particularly as laid out by Goldberg (2009) and other scholars of race and racism (Omi & Winant, 1994; Schueller, 2009; Semati, 2010; Singh, 2004), and address the relationship between racial neoliberalism, antiracialism, and racial threat in a manner that elucidates its significance for discourse about race. Finally, by adopting a critical rhetorical stance (McKerrow, 1989, 1991; Ono & Sloop, 1992) that advances a nominalist rhetoric (McKerrow, 1989; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995) focused on racial neoliberalism, I explain how the Tea Party’s racist discourse functions and how Obama’s (non)response further reinforces the hegemony of racial neoliberalism in U.S. public culture.

The Tea Party represents a significant and vocal example of a particular kind of racist rhetoric circulating in the United States today. Spurred by CNBC commentator Rick Santelli’s February 2009 call for a “tea party” to protest the Obama Administration’s economic recovery plans, conservative organizations such as Americans for Prosperity and FreedomWorks helped fuel a movement numbering in the millions and garnering the support of up to one in five adult Americans (Von Drehle et al., 2010). Explicitly organized around libertarian claims for smaller government and lower taxes, the Tea Party’s seeming ignorance of current tax policy (Hendin, 2010) and history (Rosenbaum, 2010) may belie other motivations. While journalist Drum (2010) rightly argues that the Tea Party is an extension and reformulation of earlier right-wing backlashes against Democratic presidents, the added racial dimension of Tea Party rhetoric makes it unique. Thus, argues Stan (2010), “While economic insecurity gave the Tea Party movement its *raison d’être*, its ferocity derives from the complicating factors of race and culture.” For example, Tom Tancredo’s celebrated remarks at the Tea Party convention calling for literacy tests as a prerequisite for voting demonstrate the group’s lack of historical awareness and antiracialism’s drive to forget (“Tea Party Condone,” 2010). Just as, if not more, prominent as its policy messages are the ways in which Tea Party discourses are specifically geared toward an Othering of President Obama as a socialist foreigner threatening America. The construction of Obama as threat, far from being supplemental to neoliberalism, is at the heart of a born again racism—“it is threat that has assumed overriding contemporary significance in racial matters” (Goldberg, 2009, p. 29). That said, racial neoliberalism is grounded on more subtle and spacious terrain.

Racial neoliberalism is marked, first and foremost, by an active suppression of “race” as a legitimate topic or term of public discourse and public policy. Race, according to Singh (2004), becomes “the provenance of an unjust, irrational

ascription and prejudice” (p. 11). It is within this conceptual terrain that programs designed to remedy racism (affirmative action, social services, desegregation, etc.) become the objects of critique, drawing cries of “reverse racism.” In this post civil rights era, Mukherjee (2006) argues, “The destabilizing potential of racialized critique against the structural injustices of the racial order was consequently de-fanged, and a raceless universe [was] discursively delineated to call out the deviance of race-based social justice” (p. 220). Such an understanding of deviance authorized the rollback of affirmative action programs and the gutting of social services across the United States.

Beyond the clear policy implications of racial neoliberalism, there are broader discursive and social ramifications. First and foremost, the significance and relevance of race and racism are rejected as antiquated concepts in the post civil rights era. As a consequence, “race” becomes so taboo that, through an ironic act of metonymic transfer, use of the term stands in for racism itself. Goldberg (2009) argues, “Here racism is reduced in its supposed singularity to *invoking* race, not to its debilitating structural effects or the legacy of its ongoing unfair impacts” (p. 360). As such, calls for state-based remedies for racism and attempts to draw attention to the public functionality of race are met with resistance, ridicule, and reactionary politics. Glenn Beck’s Tea Party-approved “Restoring Honor” rally (on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, on the anniversary of Martin Luther King’s famed “I Have a Dream” speech) extended this discursive formation in an effort to “reclaim the civil-rights movement” for an audience that is predominantly white and holds negative views of African Americans (Adler, 2010).

As Beck’s rally helps illustrate, in such a world as ours, *antiracist* politics have been replaced by *antiracialism*. Where antiracism “requires historical memory, recalling the conditions of racial degradation and relating contemporary to historical and local to global conditions. . . , antiracialism suggests forgetting, getting over, moving on, wiping away the terms of reference” (Goldberg, 2009, p. 21). Nevertheless, one cannot deny the exceptional antiracist voices and leadership offered by people like NAACP President Benjamin Todd Jealous, who asked the Tea Party to “repudiate racist acts and bigotry in their ranks or accept responsibility” (Seifert, 2010). Such voices, however, are exceptional not only for their remarkable qualities, but also for the fact that they are atypical. In our neoliberal world, antiracism is the exception rather than the rule. Omi and Winant (1994) would agree when they argue, “But in its quest to avoid the potentially divisive aspects of racial politics by rearticulation, by learning from the enemy, neoliberalism has quite deliberately fostered neglect of issues of race. It has, in effect, buried race as a significant dimension of its politics.” (p. 152). Burying race and rebuffing racisms (except by those who invoke race, of course) become the *modus operandi* of contemporary public discourse.

In this neoliberal world, then, racism as a public *topos* is driven underground, privatized, and born again as something different. “Born again racism,” according to Goldberg (2009), “is racism without race, racism gone private, racism without the categories to name it as such. It is racism shorn of the charge, a racism that cannot be named because nothing abounds with which to name it” (p. 23). Even in our popular

cultural representations, racism is “shorn of the charge” and the structural irrelevance of race is underscored through the neoliberal fantasy of personal responsibility (Hasi-noff, 2008). Born again and refashioned, racism still thrives and circulates in our public culture, which underscores the need for an active and vibrant antiracist activism, including scholarship. Schueller (2009) would agree when she suggests that the “object of race studies’ analysis is not a universalized idea of racism but rather race as a systemic form of oppression, legislated through juridical apparatuses of the nation-state and normalized through social institutions” (p. 17) such as the contemporary Tea Party, which functions as a political party and decentralized civic institution.

In engaging the Tea Party’s discourse, I turn now to the way Obama is articulated as a racial threat in the posters and signs that circulate at Tea Party gatherings, are posted on walls in our cities, and are distributed through electronic means (e-mail, Facebook, etc.). Visuals such as (a) the “ObamaCare” poster featuring a dark “witch doctor” with Obama’s face digitally sutured to the image, (b) the “Barack the Barbarian” cartoon featuring Obama as a hard-bodied barbarian wielding a Bronze Age axe directed at a scantily clad white woman with long blonde hair, and (c) the iconic “Socialism” poster featuring Obama in Joker makeup, all serve to mark Obama as a threatening, uncivilized, racialized Other without invoking the term “race” and while hiding behind the justification of “policy disagreements.” Signs from rallies further mark Obama not merely as a *racial* threat, but as a *racist* threat, reading “Obama’s Plan: White Slavery” and “The American Taxpayers are the Jews for Obama’s Ovens,” thus placing Tea Partiers within narratives of “reverse racism.” One remake of the iconic Obama campaign “HOPE” poster retains the image but replaces “hope” with “R@CIST.” Other signs visually figure Obama as a terrorist (e.g., one sign that shows Obama waving at armed Arab men standing on a backdrop of New York City with two airplanes in flight and the caption “Don’t worry guys, I’ll take it from here”), invoke the claims of the Birthers (who argue Obama is not a “natural born citizen”), reference so-called “death panels,” or simply and unsubtly read “Save White America.”¹ Despite attempts in late 2010 to rebut claims of racism by drawing attention to 13 “diverse” Tea Party members (the FreedomWorks “Diverse Tea” campaign), the highly suggestive and clearly racist signage continues with references to white slavery, “Imam” Obama, Obama as Kenyan, and more (Drum, 2010; Phillips, 2010).

As U.S. political commentators (such as liberal MSNBC commentators Keith Olbermann and Rachel Maddow, and conservative activist Meghan McCain), comedians (such as *The Daily Show*’s Jon Stewart and HBO’s Bill Maher), and African American leaders (such as Benjamin Todd Jealous) all make clear, it is almost too easy to point out the ways in which the Tea Party enacts a kind of racism in its public discourse. The Tea Partiers seem to oscillate between the overt racism of a bygone era and neoliberal racism-without-race, and, in doing so, they embody a tension between underground diffused racism and overt racism.² The key, however, is not that such overt and subtle examples are racist, but that they articulate Obama to *racial threat*, which has significant consequences in the neoliberal fantasy and imagining the U.S. body politic. After all, Goldberg (2009) notes, “the threat is conjured to the very being

of the patria, circulated broadly across the population easily turning the differentiation into enmity, the differentiated into enemies” (p. 101). Construction of enmity is, of course, highly problematic. “[W]hen opponents are defined not in political but in moral terms. . . ,” argues Mouffe (2005), “no agonistic debate is possible, they must be eradicated” (p. 76). Therefore, aside from the standard animosity and general feelings of ill will evoked by the Tea Party’s discourse, there are broader political implications as its anti-Obama racist populism gets articulated to mainstream Republican politics.

One such consequence of the articulation of racial threat and the moralist construction of enmity is sociopolitical distancing. Goldberg (2009) argues, “In short, threat for the most part seeks distantiating of one sort or another, not engagement, whether spatially or symbolically, materially or rhetorically enacted” (p. 29). We see such spatial and rhetorical distancing take at least two forms. First, Obama is distanced through Tea Party constructions of him as foreign—including as an uncivilized barbarian or medicine man, as a Kenyan, and as a Muslim (all very common in the signs and slogans of Tea Partiers as well as the conspiratorial fantasies of so-called Birthers within the movement).³ Second, Obama is distanced politically to such an extent that “moral condemnation replaces a proper political analysis” and the “moral disease” is quarantined to avoid spreading the infection (Mouffe, 2005, p. 76). In practical terms, this means that both the Tea Partiers and elected officials in the Republican Party refuse to associate themselves with Obama, even when he proposes their own policies—a trend that gridlocked the U.S. legislature throughout the 111th Congress and promises to do so well into 2011 (Drucker & Brady, 2010).

At the GOP House Issues Conference in January 2010, Obama even joked about his stigmatization: “One of our former colleagues is right now running for governor, on the Republican side, in Illinois. In the Republican primary, of course, they’re running ads of him saying nice things about me. Poor guy. (Laughter).” This, without a doubt, is part of the problem: As when former President Carter raised the specter of race, Obama and his administration refuse to publicly engage what amounts to a coordinated and prolonged racist attack against him and the presidency.⁴ Instead, Obama (2010) jokes and mistakenly excuses such racism saying, “They [the public] don’t know sometimes this is just politics what you guys—or folks on my side do sometimes.” But it is not “just politics”; rather, it is a manifestation of racial threat endemic to racial neoliberalism. And in the case of attacks on Obama, it is a specific fear that Obama is an “Indonesian Muslim and a welfare thug” (Graham, 2009) that drives the opposition. “Whatever this is meant to mean literally,” argues Goldberg (2010), “it is intended to resonate racially while denying any racial invocation” (p. 96). Intention aside, such resonances serve to enunciate Obama as fundamentally illegitimate and determined to destroy (white) America.⁵ Goldberg (2009) would agree, arguing, “Fear of a black state is linked to worries about a black planet, of alien invasion and *alienation*, of a loss of the sort of local and global control and privilege long associated with whiteness” (p. 337).

Aside from merely being present as a black man in the Oval Office, however, Obama is doing little (politically or rhetorically) to challenge hegemonic whiteness or

racial neoliberalism. Of course, Obama is in a bit of a double-bind and he probably knows it. On the one hand, failure to acknowledge race leaves him open to critiques like the one I advance here and criticism from African American leaders nationwide for failing to be proactive on policy issues relevant to racial minorities (Stolberg, 2010; Thompson, 2010). On the other hand, if he acknowledges race or claims racism, he (a) risks the charge of racism by violating the rhetorical norms of neoliberalism and (b) risks marking himself further as “different” in the eyes of many voters. In point of fact, the one time Obama “did ‘step out of bounds’ as determined by the criteria of White America” in the case of Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates’s troubling arrest, argue Teasley and Ikard (2010), “his comments were partly responsible for his summer 2009 national approval ratings decline” (p. 421).

Regardless, Obama’s own refusal (“Obama: Race,” 2009) to acknowledge race or racism as a factor in the Tea Party and Republican attacks places him squarely within the neoliberal racial project. Obama’s embrace of antiracism—which “seeks to wipe out the terms of reference, to wipe away the very vocabulary necessary to recall and recollect, to make a case, to make a claim” (Goldberg, 2009, p. 21)—is evident in his dealings with the Tea Party, his call for a “More Perfect Union” during the campaign (Obama, 2008), his rebukes of Justice Sotomayor during her confirmation (Gerstein & Lee, 2009) and Attorney General Eric Holder after his remarks on race (Cooper, 2009), his willingness to speak privately with Shirley Sherrod but not publicly about the racist attacks leading to her resignation from the Agriculture Department (Jalonick, 2010), and in his continued refusal to articulate clearly a black agenda (Stolberg, 2010). Indeed, Obama has drawn increasing criticism from African American leaders for failing to “overtly address issues of race” (Thompson, 2010)—criticism that underscores the difference between the antiracist politics advanced by those leaders and the antiracist stance adopted by Obama. In all of these cases, Obama has deflected attention from or denied the operation of racism, and rejected race as a significant dimension of politics or society. In so doing, Obama bolsters racial neoliberalism, which is the very political project that underwrites the continued attacks against him and his administration.

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Notes

- 1 Many of these signs can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S38VioxnBaI>.
- 2 I am indebted to Mehdi Semati for this astute observation.
- 3 Two texts help illustrate this point: first, a photo slideshow of signs from Tea Party rallies available on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S38VioxnBaI>; second, the website of the Birthers at <http://www.birthers.org/>

- 4 Leading into the midterm elections, at the time of this writing, Obama is being more vigorous in his attacks on Republicans; but his attacks are focused on policy and Beltway politics, rather than on underlying racism.
- 5 Let us also not forget that some of the first attempts to Otherize Obama as foreign came from presidential candidate Hillary Clinton's advisor Mark Penn (Nicholas, 2008); and former president Bill Clinton was one of the first to engage in race-baiting after the South Carolina primary (Kornblut, 2008).

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巴拉克·奥巴马、茶党和种族威胁：种族新自由主义和种族主义的回光返照

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【摘要】

本文讨论美国茶党的种族主义言论和奥巴马总统的不作回应令 *David Theo Goldberg* 等认为是种族新自由主义的象征。尽管奥巴马的反对者应为其谩骂的话语受到关注，而奥巴马也因其其在种族自由主义的话语中的作用而受到审视。皆因他的立场只能允许他对种族主义的论述作反种族（而非反种族主义者）的回应。本文首先提出种族新自由主义的概念并阐述种族新自由主义、反种族主义以及种族威胁之间的关系来阐明其对种族话语的意义。本文运用这种批评的分析解释了茶党的种族话语如何起作用以及奥巴马的回应如何进一步加强种族新自由主义的霸权。

Barack Obama, le Tea Party et la menace raciale : du néolibéralisme racial et du racisme régénéré

Cet article explore la rhétorique raciste du Tea Party américain et la (non)réponse du président Barack Obama comme étant toutes deux emblématiques de ce que David Theo Goldberg et d'autres appellent le néolibéralisme racial. Si les détracteurs d'Obama méritent certainement notre attention en raison de leur discours invectif, il est aussi justifié de critiquer Obama qui opère dans un champ discursif néolibéral et racial qui lui impose des réactions antiraciales (et non antiracistes) à des discours racistes. Cet article scrute d'abord le terrain conceptuel du néolibéralisme racial et aborde la relation entre le néolibéralisme racial, l'antiracisme et la menace raciale pour expliquer son importance dans les discours sur la race. Le fonctionnement de la rhétorique raciste du Tea Party et le renforcement par la réaction d'Obama de l'hégémonie du néolibéralisme racial sont expliqués par cette analyse critique.

Barack Obama, die Tea-Party-Bewegung und die Bedrohung durch die Rasse: Über rassistischen Neoliberalismus und wiedergeborenen Rassismus

Darrel Enck-Wanzer

Dieser Aufsatz befasst sich mit der rassistischen Rhetorik der U.S.-amerikanischen Tea-Party-Bewegung und der (ausbleibenden) Reaktion des Präsidenten Barack Obama als ein Beispiel dafür, was David Theo Goldberg und andere als rassistischen Neoliberalismus bezeichnen. Sollte man Obamas Kritikern für ihren schmähenden Diskurs Beachtung schenken, muss sich Obama Kritik dafür gefallen lassen, dass er in einem rassistisch neoliberalen Diskursfeld agiert, welches ihn an antirassistische (nicht antirassistische) Reaktionen auf rassistische Diskurse bindet. Dieser Aufsatz steckt erst das konzeptuelle Terrain von rassistischem Neoliberalismus ab und befasst sich dann mit der Beziehung zwischen rassistischen Neoliberalismus, Antirassismus und rassistischer Gefahr, um deren Bedeutung für den Diskurs über Rasse zu erklären. Unter Verwendung der kritischen Analyse wird erklärt, wie die rassistische Rhetorik der Tea-Party-Bewegung funktioniert und wie Obamas Reaktion die Hegemonie von rassistischem Neoliberalismus noch verstärkt.

버락 오바마, 티 파티, 그리고 인종위협: 인종적 신자유주의와 인종차별주의의 탄생

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본 에세이는 미국 티파티 (Tea Party)의 인종차별주의적 수사와 미국 오바마 대통령이 David Theo Goldberg 와 다른 사람들이 인종차별주의적 신자유주의라고 말한것에 대한 (무) 반응들에 관한 것이다. 오바마를 중상하는 사람들이 그들의 독설적인 담론에 대한 주의를 받을 가치가 있지만, 오바마 역시 인종차별주의자들의 담론에 대해 반인종차별주의적 반응에 참여했다는 점에서 주의를 받을만하다. 본 연구는 우선 인종차별주의적 신자유주의의 개념을 정립하고 인종차별적 신자유주의, 반 인종차별주의, 그리고 인종에 관한 담론의 중요성을 잘 나타내기 위하여 인종차별적 위협을 논의했다. 어떻게 티파티의 인종차별주의적 수사가 기능했는지, 그리고 어떻게 오바마의 반응이 인종차별주의적 신자유주의 패권주의를 더욱 강화하게 되었는가를 비판적으로 논의하였다.

Barack Obama, el Partido del Té, y la Amenaza de la Raza: Sobre el Neoliberalismo Racial y el
Racismo Renacido
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Resumen

Este ensayo compromete a la retórica racista del partido del Té de los Estados Unidos y la no respuesta del Presidente Barack Obama como emblemas de lo que David Theo Goldberg y otros llaman el neoliberalismo. Mientras que los detractores de Obama ciertamente merecen la atención por su discurso vindicativo, Obama justifica también la crítica por operar dentro del campo del discurso neoliberal racial uniéndolo a las respuestas anti-raciales (no racistas) a los discursos racistas. Este ensayo examina el terreno conceptual del neoliberalismo racial y trata la relación entre el neoliberalismo racial, el anti racismo, y la amenaza racial para elucidar su significancia para el discurso sobre la raza. Cómo la retórica racista del Partido del Té funciona y cómo la reacción de Obama refuerza aún más la hegemonía del neoliberalismo racial son explicados usando este análisis crítico.

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