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Ferguson, Obama and American Democracy What's Going On?

by ARNOLD AUGUST

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A few days after the killing of Michael Brown, which occurred on August 9, 2014, Obama stated that “there are going to be different accounts” and “differences in terms of what needs to happen,” but “that’s part of democracy.” In an ABC Television interview on November 23, after the grand jury non-indictment of Brown’s killer, Obama responded to a question about the actual improvements in race relations by indicating that “in a democracy, progress is incremental.” Obama’s praising of American democracy and its political and judicial systems in relation to race relations is nothing new. For example, in the wake of the July 2013 court decision to exonerate Trayvon Martin’s killer, George Zimmerman, the President congratulated the prosecution and the defence, concluding that “once the jury has spoken, that’s how our system works.”

In his 2004 keynote speech to the Democratic National Convention, to become known as the “post-racial speech,” the then Senate candidate Obama proclaimed, “There’s not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there’s the United States of America.”

What was the purpose of this message? In the Bush years, the U.S. was facing a major credibility gap in both the international and domestic arenas. In the latter, the fear of revolt by the traditionally revolutionary and progressive blacks has always been, and continues to be, in the

consciousness of the ruling circles. From the days of open slavery to date, the U.S. establishment has dreaded the nightmare of revolt by blacks not to mention the impact of their influence elsewhere, as demonstrated in the broad-based activities carried out this November on Thanksgiving weekend and in the walkouts in schools across the country on December 1. Obama's statements, such as in his "post-racial" speech cited above, have indicated clearly to the economic power elites that he is the one who can create the necessary illusions to defend two interrelated issues. One is the credibility of democracy based on the two-party system and its ability to offer a real choice to the people. The second is the capacity to deal with the worsening situation of racial discrimination, accompanied by deepening economic deterioration, escalation of police violence and mass incarceration. The majority of the ruling circles thus backed Obama both in 2008 and again in 2012.

Obama continues to use the race card to further foster illusions that the two-party system has indeed brought about change for blacks. After the assassination of Trayvon Martin, the President said that the young black "could have been my son." In the context of an interview touching on the Michael Brown killing, he said in relation to racial discrimination that "as an African-American male, there have been times where I experienced discrimination as a young man." The day of the grand jury non-indictment, Obama stated, "We have made enormous progress in race relations over the course of the past several decades. I've witnessed that in my own life." However, his personal rise to power as the "first African-American president" has taken place by anesthetizing much of the black population. The growing reluctance to rely on the two-party system as a hallmark of American democracy was to a certain extent pushed to the background with faith in it temporarily restored. After all, it was asserted, this would be the first African-American president in the White House.

Based on his faltering position as an instrument of "change" thanks to American democracy, after the grand jury decision, Obama repeatedly said that he favours "peaceful protest" to allow people's "voices to be heard" and promotes the need to reform police forces, to work with other political instances to bring about "some real change." The first African-American Attorney General, Eric Holder, indicated right after the August 9, 2014 shooting of Brown that the FBI and the Department of Justice (DOJ), of which the FBI is part, would investigate the shooting. This role of the DOJ was seconded by Obama the next day, when he also reiterated calls for "reflection and understanding." However, can blacks have confidence in the DOJ and the FBI as part of the American democratic structure? Since 1919, police at all levels, the DOJ and the FBI have been active in suppressing progressive people by means of violence, including the murder of Black Panthers in 1969 and other black activists in 1985. In the St. Louis area of Missouri, from the beginning of 2014, the local police killed at least 16 people, majority black, before Brown was murdered in August of the same year. This is part of a nationwide problem, as indicated in a report in 2012, when, in that year alone, 313 blacks were assassinated in extrajudicial killings (i.e., police and racist vigilantes such as Zimmerman), which is one every 28 hours. The U.S. is at war against blacks.

What then is the role of the DOJ and FBI in Missouri? Attorney General Holder answered this question in the form of a statement on November 25, 2014: "I have instructed department officials to continue to make contact with leaders of the peaceful protesters and to seek their assistance in isolating those individuals who are inclined towards violence. We've had a good

ongoing dialogue with peaceful demonstrators in Ferguson.” In other words, the FBI is to play the role for which it is best known, not only in the U.S., but globally: spying on the people’s movements and striving to find snitches and collaborators under the very broad banner of opposing those who are *inclined* – not committing or about to commit – but *inclined* toward violence. This can include, on an arbitrary basis, just about any militant demonstration or protest. When Obama and Holder speak of peaceful demonstrations only, what does that mean and what type of activity does it preclude?

Robin D. G. Kelley, Distinguished Professor of History at University of California at Los Angeles and a prolific author, wrote on November 25 after the grand jury decision:

“The young organizers in Ferguson from Hands Up United, Lost Voices, Organization for Black Struggle, Don’t Shoot Coalition, Millennial Activists United, and the like, understand they are at war.... many other young Black activists in the St. Louis area have not been waiting around for an indictment. Nor are they waiting for the much vaunted Federal probe, for they have no illusions about a federal government that provides military hardware to local police, builds prisons, kills tens of thousands by manned and unmanned planes without due process, and arms Israel in its illegal wars and occupation. They have been organizing.... They remind us, not only that Black lives matter – that should be self-evident – but that resistance matters.... The young people of Ferguson continue to struggle with ferocity, not just to get justice for Mike Brown or to end police misconduct but to dismantle racism once and for all, to bring down the Empire, to ultimately end war.”

(“Resisting the War Against the Black and Brown Underclass: Why We Won’t Wait,” by Robin D. G. Kelley)

The spirit expressed so eloquently above is combined with the organizing of protests and demonstrations on a daily basis. This is inspired by the conviction that Michael Brown was assassinated as part of the daily police repression and brutality against blacks. What is Obama’s position? He would like to convert the grass-roots actions into a conversation on “different accounts” of the killing and how to “improve” and “reform” the criminal justice system. These discussions are supposed to be, as Obama is cited above, “part of democracy.” “Healing the community,” “police reform” and “improving relationships between police and communities” are increasingly becoming fashionable buzzwords from the administration on down, as well as from the liberal media. Obama also hopes to have people believe that advances against racial discrimination are part of a “democracy where progress is incremental.” People have to be patient, it is said. However, the refusal of the people in Ferguson and the surrounding area to capitulate and thus give up their demands for justice has brought about a new situation. The very legitimacy of the entire state apparatus (national, state and local) is being challenged by people’s defiance against the state and its appendages. It is with this outlook, combined with a resurgence of people organizing at the base (even spreading throughout the U.S.), that the Obama administration and the liberal media such as CNN and NBC had to propagate the time-worn adage of the “right of people to protest peacefully” in order “to have their voices heard.” This way, they can ease their liberal conscience while at the same time restrain the struggle to the confines of American democracy. By limiting the growing and persistent movement from the bottom to merely allow “voices to be heard” implies that the people are mere spectators and

beggars for reforms, and cannot be protagonists in striving for their own political power. The picture vividly painted by Kelley indicates that people want to *impose* their voices on the system by resisting and looking for an alternative. This is what democracy looks like, from the bottom up: a participatory democracy that is not in collaboration with the elitist American democracy as we know it, but in *opposition* to it and its instrument, which is based on illusions surrounding the two-party system. Their audacious actions and defiant words challenge the authority not only of the local police forces, but of the entire police state, from Washington, D.C. to Missouri; the grass-roots' persistent deeds and slogans defy the system itself. Thus, Obama and his supporters are attempting to squeeze the last ounce out of any deception remaining from the presidential elections as a vehicle of change for blacks and others.

A recent attempt to employ the still existing fantasy by some about Obama having emerged out of the two-party system as an instrument of change, especially with regard to his ability to overcome the serious racial contradictions in America, was his White House statement on November 30. It called for a meeting of civil rights leaders, politicians and law enforcement officials with the President at the White House. The statement said, "Recent events in Ferguson, Missouri and around the country have shone a spotlight on the importance of strong, collaborative relationships between local police and the communities they protect and serve." In that one sentence, Obama strives to promote the illusion that police "protect and serve the community," in contradiction to the spreading movement across the country today that challenges not only the police, but the entire criminal justice system. Obama is also taking measures to involve people in their own oppression under the guise of "collaborative relationships" between police and the people. In another sentence in that statement, he expresses his concern about how the ongoing activities by the grass roots "undermine the legitimacy of the criminal justice system." Here we have to acknowledge that Obama gets to the heart of the matter. He tries to recuperate the legitimacy of not only the police and the judicial systems but of the capitalist system itself – for, in reality, it is the *system* that the criminal justice structure is geared to "protecting and serving," and not the "communities." At the very centre of this objective is "keeping blacks in check," as Malcolm X stated. Obama's attempt is to suffocate the movement and win people over to his side to beg for minor reforms of, for example, the police forces, taking into account, as he says, that on the issue of race, "in a democracy, progress is incremental." This is called "buying time." Obama is continuing in his attempt to buy time. On December 1, he announced "police reform" measures taken with his collaborators, in response to what he referred to as a "simmering distrust" between especially "minority communities" and police forces.

The objective of the ruling circles and those who create illusions in the two-party system of American democracy is to continuously delay people in taking destiny into their own hands. For example, in August 2014, after the Brown killing, in reference to the 2016 presidential elections and potential candidates for the Republicans and Democrats, Reverend Al Sharpton is quoted as having said, "Jeb Bush, Hillary Clinton, don't get laryngitis on this issue." He then added, "Nobody can go to the White House unless they stop by our house and talk about policing." Hillary Clinton got the message and soon declared: "Watching the recent funeral for Michael Brown, as a mother, as a human being, my heart just broke for his family." We can see it coming through the two-party system of American democracy and its appendix, the "lesser of two evils": from illusions about the first African-American president to the wishful thinking about the first

woman president, who will supposedly have the magic touch to assuage the grieving mothers and families of all those blacks assassinated by the system.

However, is there a breakthrough, especially among blacks of all ages and a wide spectrum of youth, regarding the illusions about the American democracy of the elites? CNN's Wolf Blitzer inadvertently let the cat out of the bag in a dialogue with a civil rights activist about the ongoing situation in Ferguson and its spreading to the rest of the U.S. Blitzer expressed the concern of the ruling circles, when, on November 26, 2014, he worriedly asked his guest, "And for six years, we have had an African-American president in the United States, and African-American attorney general and African-American secretary of homeland security, and this is not supposed to be going on like this right now, was it?"

No, this was not the ruling elite's game plan. However, thanks to the courageous people of Ferguson, especially those who refuse to prostrate themselves and instead are organizing to take their destiny into their own hands, and thus inspire others across the U.S., it is in fact "going on like this right now."