

Barack Obama and the New Afrikan¹ “National Question”. Are We Free Yet?

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***In Honor of the 83rd Birthday of Malcolm X and the clarity he brought to the New Afrikan revolutionary movement**

Since the stunning Iowa victory of Senator Barack Obama in January, a great deal has been said and written about the declining or ongoing significance of “race” and “racial prejudice” in US society and the prospect of a person of Afrikan descent being its President as proof of its substantive social transformation. While this discussion must be regarded as an advance over the conservative moralistic and race-coded discussions that have dominated political debate in the US since the 1980’s, we must acknowledge its critical limitations.

In the main, these discussions individualize the issues and only engage the behavioral and subjective aspects of inequality and oppression. What is fundamentally missing is a critical discussion of the structural and systemic nature of oppression and exploitation within the US and how the Obama campaign “phenomenon” relates to these structures and dynamics.

This paper seeks to investigate the strategic relationship of the Obama campaign to the structural dynamics of oppression and exploitation within the US. In particular, it will focus on the question of New Afrikan or Black national oppression within the US and how the Obama campaign addresses this oppression. It also seeks to address certain strategic questions that progressive forces within the national liberation and multi-national working class movements must struggle with over the course of the next six months in order to ensure that our demands and interests are advanced – regardless of whether Obama wins or loses the Presidential election in November.

Some of the strategic questions this paper seeks to address are:

1. What is Obama’s organic relationship to the New Afrikan or Black nation?
2. What class position, alignment and program does Obama represent?
3. How does Obama’s campaign strategy and program relate to the historic interests and demands of the Black nation?

What is the “National Question”?

¹ A New Afrikan is a person of Afrikan descent, particularly those historically enslaved and colonized in the Southeastern portion of the North American continent, that presently live under the colonial subjugation of the United States government. New Afrikan is the connotation of the national identity of this Afrikan people that recognizes their political aspirations for self-determination and independence.

In summary, from a dialectical materialist framework, the “national question” refers to a) the unequal structural relationship of colonized and oppressed peoples to international capital, oppressor nations, imperialism, and white supremacy and b) to the historic struggles of colonized and oppressed peoples to liberate themselves from these oppressive systems and forces, either in whole or in part (as not all of these “peoples” or “national liberation” struggles have sought to remove themselves from capitalist relations of production).

The inequalities between peoples produced by capitalism are historic. They are rooted in the development of the capitalist world system through the colonization and/or subjugation of the globe and its non-European peoples by the ruling classes of the western European states (i.e. Portugal, Spain, France, England, the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, and Italy) beginning in the 15th century.

In order to facilitate the process of capital accumulation they initiated on a world scale, the ruling classes of Europe developed a social system and ideology that divided world production along several lines, some of which predated capitalism, some of which developed specifically to suite capitals historic needs. The pre-capitalist social divisions that were exploited were religion, ethnicity, nationality and patriarchy. The new and fundamentally principal divisions developed by and with capitalism are race and state-bound nationality.

The purpose of exploiting and/or developing these inequalities is a) to facilitate the control of the land, labor, and (material and immaterial) resources of the subject and oppressed peoples and b) to foster competition between and amongst these peoples for the material and social rewards conferred by this exploitative and alienating system.

In the United States the “national question” specifically addresses the structural relationship of colonized, oppressed, and subject peoples to the European settler-colonial project and the imperial national-state apparatus that reinforces it. This project is premised on the genocide and dispossession of indigenous peoples (the First Nations); the enslavement and colonial subjugation of Afrikan peoples and their descendents; and the dispossession and colonial subjugation of Xicanas/os.

The New Afrikan National Question

Throughout the history of the US settler-colonial project New Afrikans have fundamentally been concentrated in the southeastern portion of the projects possessions. The foundation of this concentration was historically premised on the utilization of enslaved Afrikan labor to produce cash-crops like tobacco, cotton, rice, dyes, and sugar, for international consumption. During the early mercantile stages of capitalist development the climatic conditions, soil quality, and strategic location of these possessions facilitated them being incorporated into the world-capitalist system as a zone of mono-crop commodity production. This population concentration and the relations of production exercised in this zone facilitated the formation of the New Afrikan people as a colonized diasporic Afrikan nation subject to will of the European settler-colonial project and its capitalist-imperialist regime between 1619 and 1865.

The mechanization of agriculture in the Southeastern portion of the settler-colonial state in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, combined with an intense program of labor control and repression during this period, displaced millions of New Afrikans. In the search for refuge and jobs, displaced New Afrikans re-concentrated in the urban industrial centers of the East Coast, Mid-West, and West Coast between the 1910's – 1960's. In the process of this resettlement, millions of New Afrikans joined the ranks of the industrial working class. However, they did so fundamentally on an unequal structural basis. Exploiting the subject status of New Afrikan people, capital, the labor bureaucracy, and the various European settler communities relegated New Afrikans to the lowest strata's of the working class, where they were concentrated in the lowest paid and most hazardous occupations that restricted their ability to earn and accumulate. This process of development established the social and economic terms of New Afrikan national oppression throughout the entire expanse of the US settler-colonial project.

Simultaneously, the vast majority of New Afrikans who remained in the New Afrikan national territory (i.e. the Southeastern portion of the settler-colonial project) became subject to a new regime of accumulation and distorted national development. Reacting to the gains made in the industrial "north" by the multi-national working class movement between the 1930's – 50's, industrial capital "outsourced" production to New Afrika to exploit the subjugated status of the New Afrikan working class. Although the New Afrikan working class was kept from effectively organizing itself into labor unions, this development did expand the overall circuit of capital within the New Afrikan nation, which helped stimulate the rise of the civil rights movement and its petit bourgeois program of civil inclusion within the legalistic confines of the settler-colonial project.

The limited social and economic gains of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements set the present terms of national development for the New Afrikan nation. New Afrika, like all nations and nationalities, is a class stratified social formation. Like all the peoples and nations subjugated and colonized by the European colonial powers, capital and capitalist social relations have articulated New Afrika's social development. Throughout its nearly 400 years of development, the overwhelming majority of New Afrikans have been and are members of the working classes (either as chattel slaves, peasants, or proletarians). However, a very limited New Afrikan bourgeoisie has existed since at least the mid-19th century. Throughout much of New Afrikan history, this extremely small, typically service based petit-bourgeoisie has tended politically to be more progressive than reactionary in its political outlook and program. In the main this bourgeois class has provided leadership to and support for the primary historical demands of the New Afrikan national liberation movement. In summary these demands have been and are:

1. Land for self-determining or autonomous development and accumulation.
2. Equal treatment before the law of the settler-colonial state.
3. Equitable distribution of the social surplus distributed throughout the settler-colonial state.
4. Self-determining political power.
5. Self-reliant and self-sustaining economic development.
6. Reparations.

However, the accumulation gains (meager as they were) of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements combined with major shifts in the relations of

production on a worldwide scale, transformed the relationship of the New Afrikan bourgeoisie to the whole of the New Afrikan nation from the 1970's to the present. The two dominant features of this process of transformation are a) the phenomenal rise of the comprador bourgeoisie in the 1970's and 80's, and b) the rapid transformation of this comprador bourgeoisie into a trans-national bourgeoisie from the 1980's to the present. As will be argued throughout this paper, this transformation not only changed the overall structural composition of the New Afrikan bourgeoisie, it has forever altered its political worldview and program.

Part 1 – The Interrogations

Interrogating the “National” Question

Barack Obama has asserted on several occasions a) that race doesn't matter and b) that there is only “one” America.

The implication of these statements, even if only stated for strategic affect, is that the national contradictions within the US settler-colonial project have been negated and resolved. Even a cursory glance at the socio-economic inequalities between the various nationalities in the US reveals that these assertions are blatantly false. However, the unprecedented success of Obama's campaign and the ground it has broken as it relates to a “Black” candidate appealing to white voters on a national level reveals that something qualitative has changed in this country. The question is what is it?

I argue that the source of the qualitative change lies in the changing composition of class throughout the US settler-colonial project. The advance of global capital and its transformation of production and accumulation throughout the capitalist world-system generated this compositional shift. I posit that the process of transformation popularly called “globalization” has created a trans-national bourgeoisie and growing multi-national or “cosmopolitan” trans-national service and working classes. It is my position that Barack Obama is a member of and represents the political and economic interests of the trans-national bourgeoisie and the social interests of the growing trans-national classes. More specifically, Barack Obama is a product of the New Afrikan trans-national bourgeoisie, which emerged in the main from the comprador or neo-colonial sector of the New Afrikan bourgeois class between the 1970's to the present.

The fundamental question regarding this new class composition for progressive and revolutionary forces within the New Afrikan national liberation movement is how to strategically relate to Barack Obama and this trans-national bourgeois class? Is this class (or class fraction) a friend or a foe of the New Afrikan national liberation movement? I argue three things:

1. That the material basis for the traditional class collaboration theory of the united and/or national liberation front strategy of oppressed peoples and nations in general, and of its historic application to the New Afrikan national liberation movement in particular, no longer applies.
2. That the left has not developed a general or particular theory of how to strategically relate to these new class forces.
3. As a result, we are presently ill equipped theoretically and programmatically to address the Obama phenomenon and seize the

historic opportunities it presents to advance the interests of the national liberation and multi-national working class movements.

How does the trans-national bourgeoisie differ from other bourgeoisie classes, particularly amongst oppressed nations like the New Afrikan nation? The general theory of national liberation maintains that there are two primary fractions of the capitalist or bourgeois class (that is the class that owns and controls the means of production). These are 1) the national, progressive, or "anti-imperialist" bourgeoisie and 2) the comprador or "sell-out", "Uncle Tom", or neo-colonial bourgeoisie.

The national or anti-imperialist bourgeoisie is theoretically a progressive force drawn from the organic, inner driven life of the oppressed nation that is materially compelled to promote the development of the productive forces of the nation for its own self-interests and to resist the incursion of imperialism and its suppression of this autonomous national development for these self-same interests.

The comprador or sell-out bourgeoisie is theoretically a reactionary force also drawn from the organic, inner driven life of the oppressed nation, which is conversely compelled to collaborate with imperialism to retard the autonomous or self-determining development of the oppressed nation.

The fundamental difference between these two bourgeois fractions and the transnational fraction is their organic relationship to the oppressed nation. The national and comprador bourgeoisies are dependent upon relations of production within the social and political life of the oppressed nation. Meaning they are both dependent on the working masses of the oppressed nation for their very existence, and hence can be held accountable to the working classes within it in various ways. The trans-national bourgeoisie on the other hand, even though it emerged primarily from the comprador fraction in New Afrika and elsewhere, is not dependent for its existence upon the oppressed nation and its relations of production. The trans-national bourgeoisie, as its name implies, is not a national or national-state bound entity. Its basis for existence lies in exploiting the peoples and working classes of the globe, and it is generally only accountable to or held in check by its fractional partners and rivals (largely through their financial control of various capital markets as exhibited by their deflation of various national-state markets like Mexico in the early-1990's; Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and South Korea in the late 1990's; and Brazil and Argentina at the turn of this century).

Now, while I posit that this understanding of Obama's positioning helps us to understand his relationship with the New Afrikan nation and its historic demands, I argue that we still do not completely understand at this point, how it relates to his mass appeal to white voters in many instances who are not part of this trans-national formation. This I argue, we as progressives and revolutionaries, have to interrogate further to gain a deeper understanding of its strategic potential.

Interrogating the Campaign

Despite what one may personally think of Obama and the principle merits of his campaign, what we have to acknowledge is that his actions and his campaign are

deeply rooted in a particular analysis of how to address national oppression in the US. This analysis is rooted in the “integrationist” and “beloved community” narratives of the New Afrikan petit bourgeois leadership of the Civil Rights Movement and its white liberal bourgeois patrons. The strategy behind this narrative appeal is to highlight the commonalities between the oppressor and oppressed peoples, rather than address their contradictions and differences.

This strategy is rooted in the reality that the road to victory goes through the white electorate and its sheer numerical strength. Based on this reality, I argue there are two historical dynamics that have fundamentally shaped the Obama campaign and its strategy.

1. No Democratic candidate has won a majority of white voters since 1964. For a Democratic candidate to win, they are going to have to win a sizeable portion of, if not the majority of, the white settler vote.
2. The Jesse Jackson campaigns of 1984 and 1988. These two campaigns serve as the primary negative examples for the Obama campaign. They illustrate what NOT to do as an Afrikan candidate running for President, which has determined key aspects of his strategy, particularly his methods of appeal to white and Jewish voters in particular.

Based on these realities, the Obama campaign made a deliberate and strategic choice NOT to base his candidacy in the institutions (like the Black church, civic organizations, unions, and the media) or historic demands (see demands) of the New Afrikan nation. In order to give himself the opportunity to win, Obama must avoid being viewed as a “Black” candidate by any and all means. This explains in part, why he has distanced himself from the likes of Jesse Jackson, Louis Farrakhan, and Jeremiah Wright – the “traditional” representatives of the “progressive” New Afrikan bourgeoisie.

However, his campaign has also relied upon the staunch support of the Democratic Party by New Afrikan people. New Afrikans have been the most consistent base of support for the Democratic Party since the 1964 election of Lydon B. Johnson. In fact, New Afrikans have voted consistently for Democratic Presidential candidates in the range of 80 – 90% since 1956. This fact however, should not be surprising. Democratic candidates can and do take the New Afrikan vote for granted because in the main, New Afrikans have no other genuine political option to represent their interests. Knowing this, Obama and his campaign know that they have to make few special appeals to New Afrikans and most of the other oppressed peoples within the “traditional” Democratic Party coalition to garner their votes (certain “Latino” populations it can be argued might constitute exceptions).

Interrogating the Popular Forces

Regardless of how marginalized New Afrikan demands and institutions are to the Obama campaign, the fact is that since Obama’s Iowa victory in January, New Afrikans have turned out in near record numbers to support his campaign for the Democratic nomination. How do we explain this outpouring of support despite his lack of engagement with New Afrikan demands and institutions?

Further, how do we explain his victories in states like Iowa, Kansas, Oregon, Colorado, Connecticut, Nebraska, Vermont, and Wyoming where the vast

majority of the electorate are white settlers who are not substantively incorporated into the trans-national nexus of production?

Part of the answer I believe lies in the trans-national class developments spoken of earlier. The other part of the answer I believe lies in the popular response to the last 7 years of the Bush regime. As a direct result of the failed occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, the accumulation of unprecedented debt, the partisan management of the economy, the exposed lies and deceit, and the hostile, belligerent, and dictatorial "style" of management, this election is in many ways serving as a popular anti-Bush referendum.

The popular, multi-national, multi-class forces engaging the Obama campaign are clearly clamoring for a change of management. This was first evidenced in the elections of 2006 and has been further illustrated in several off-term Congressional elections in Illinois, Louisiana, and Mississippi where Democrats took elections in long-held Republican districts. Barack Obama, for reasons of personal history (including his newness to Capital Hill), style (particularly his cultivated charisma and flair for the optimal, however programmatically empty it may be), and strategy (including a tacit exploitation of cultural stereotypes about New Afrikan people being good listeners and empathizers) has thus far demonstrated that he would be a profoundly different manager than either of his remaining Democrat or Republican rivals.

What I think progressives and revolutionaries have to be clear on in relating to these popular forces is that a clamoring for a change of management does not equate to a clamoring for a fundamental change of program. It is on the question of program that I would argue that the national question strongly reenters the fry and could perhaps fracture the broad multi-national, multi-class alliance thus far mobilized by the Obama campaign.

For instance, the historic demands of New Afrikan people are not going to go away without a revolutionary transformation of the US settler-colonial state. In fact, as the mortgage crisis deepens over the course of the next 2 to 4 years, some of the demands, like economic development and reparations perhaps, are only going to become stronger.

Likewise, the trans-national capital interests supporting Obama's campaign have no intentions of stopping their accumulation mission. Rather, they are trying to expand it through the application of a friendlier management approach of their primary regulating instruments – namely the US military, treasury, and Federal Reserve Bank. And further, many of the white service and working class voters who are supporting Obama are not demanding an end to imperialism and globalization, but a return to the high standards of living they are accustomed and feel entitled to as settlers, i.e. "Americans".

Interrogating the Moment

This is an extremely unique moment in human history, one that should not be slept on by progressives and revolutionaries anywhere, let alone in the US.

There are three general things that make this moment particularly unique:

1. The rapid collapse of the ecological systems that support human civilization as a direct consequence of the capitalist world-systems need

- for constant growth and expansion and its dependence on a petro-chemical driven system of mass industrial production to stimulate and sustain this growth.
2. The declining hegemony (in both its geo-political and Gramscian connotations) of the US imperial state and the shift to a multi-polar geo-political world order.
 3. The comparative weakening of the US national economy and the deepening of trans-national production and accumulation.

In order to be properly contextualized, the Obama campaign and corresponding “phenomenon” must be situated as a direct response to this unique moment in history. As has been argued earlier, his campaign is clearly a factional response, one fundamentally serving the interests of the trans-national bourgeoisie and its means and instruments of accumulation and rule. The two fundamental questions stemming from this assessment are, 1) is this class and the alliance of forces it has amassed strong enough to contain the contradictions it has unleashed and 2) can it continue its accumulation program and political project without a major transformation away from petro-chemical dependent production?

I argue that the answer to both questions is emphatically, NO. Returning to our focus of analyzing the Obama campaign in relation to the New Afrikan national question, there are several examples that clearly illustrate why.

The trans-national program of accumulation is fundamentally driven by a finance driven post-Fordist, intelligence dominated system of production. The intense mechanization of this production regime is rapidly dislocating millions, if not billions, of workers, worldwide. The New Afrikan working class was one of the first and most devastated sectors of the international proletariat hit by this accumulation regime. Since the 1970’s, millions of New Afrikans have been economically dislocated and physically displaced by this transformation, which is only set to worsen with the crisis of finance (witnessed with the mortgage crisis that robbed millions of New Afrikans of their merge capital equity) and the deepening of global production. What is also clear is that the options of absorbing this surplus labor into the low-wage service economy or warehousing (i.e. incarcerating) it, is reaching its political and financial limits. The likely outcomes of the escalating crisis are:

1. More intense economic dislocation
2. More intense physical displacement and forced relocation (New Orleans being a clear precedent)
3. More intense and concentrated New Afrikan resistance
4. An escalation of the demands made on the state and capital by New Afrikans

As a representative of the trans-national bourgeoisie, its production regime, and the US imperial state, how would Obama be compelled to address these contradictions? I argue that he would fundamentally have to exercise the Nixon option as it related to the New Afrikan nation (and other oppressed nations within and beyond US national-state borders). Plainly stated the Nixon option is the calculated employment of “carrot and the stick” stratagems. Obama’s carrot would be to ameliorate or buy off a sectors of the New Afrikan bourgeoisie and working class by offering a set of concessions, primarily in the realm of loan forgiveness (for the mortgage crisis) and job training programs (more than likely for “Green Jobs” and the like). The stick would be the strategic

application of state repression against resistant and non-compliant forces within the New Afrikan working class. The purpose of the Nixon option now, as during his Presidency in the late 60's and early 70's, would be to fracture the political unity of the New Afrikan nation against the trans-national bourgeoisie and its program.

Staying with our analysis, it is also clear that the Green transformation option is a dead end for the trans-national bourgeoisie and its program. Although elements of the trans-national bourgeoisie are clearly leading the charge for the development of "green" capitalism, it is not, and in fact cannot, advocate for the transformation of scale needed to curb the production of greenhouse gases to stall or reverse climate change without bankrupting itself. As a result, it cannot and will not generate enough "Green Jobs" to reincorporate the millions of New Afrikans that have been economically dislocated by trans-national production.

Yet in still, what we can posit with confidence at this moment is that capital is going to go to extreme lengths to extend its life and barbaric domination over human civilization. Conversely, as the events of the last 7 years have illustrated, we should also expect to see an escalation and diversification of resistance.

Part 2 - Outlining a Framework to Seize the Moment

So, how should the New Afrikan and multi-national liberation and working class movements strategically engage this historic campaign and critical moment?

One of the first priorities of engagement is theoretical development. One of the principle things the New Afrikan and multi-national left movements must figure out is how to engage the trans-national bourgeoisie. As stated earlier, as of now, our movements do not have a general, let alone united, perspective on this question. In fact, I would argue that most of our forces are still utilizing the traditional united or national liberation front theory to determine their positions and courses of action.

I argue that because the trans-national bourgeoisie cannot be easily pressured by the national liberation and working class movements within the US settler-colonial project, these movements should not invest the majority of their time and energy engaging an "inside" strategy of critical engagement with the Obama campaign. I argue that thinking strategically, these forces should concentrate their energy on building autonomous political movements and institutions (like the Reconstruction Party) within the US national-state that seek to build a broad multi-national united front of oppressed peoples and workers that makes a principle of building strategic links and alliances with the autonomous national liberation, international working class, global justice, and environmental movements throughout the world. As the trans-national bourgeoisie thinks and acts globally, we must also think and act globally to advance our own interests.

However, as the vast majority of our peoples and forces are going to support the Obama campaign and potential Presidency, in the short-term we tactically have to invest a critical degree of time and energy engaging them, if only to try and win a considerable portion of these forces to a left perspective and program. And it is here that we need theoretical clarity. How do we offer a radical critique of Obama, his class position, interests, and program without alienating ourselves from the popular masses? How do we move these forces to engage in

autonomous self-determining action outside of the Democratic Party? How do we educate and move the white settler forces mobilized by Obama to actively engage an anti-racist, anti-imperialist perspective and program?

To these ends, a hard-pressed counter campaign against Obama I would argue is not the most effective or productive way to engage these popular forces from this point forward. Rather, I think the multi-national left must seek to highlight the contradictions of Obama's campaign and program through a combined "outside-inside" strategy that seeks to advance a coherent set of principle demands and push him and the forces he has mobilized sharply to the left. Again, I think the formation of an autonomous "outside" political force should be primary. However, what is perhaps most tactically critical is that both the "outside" and "inside" forces aggressively promote and propagate these common demands; vigorously dialogue and debate in a principled, non-sectarian manner; and openly communicate and collaborate whenever and wherever possible.

Some of the primary strategic demands that must be raised are drawn from the historic demands of oppressed peoples, particularly New Afrikans, combined with the demands of the multi-national working class, women's, and environmental justice movements. The combination of these demands will expose not only the limits of the trans-national bourgeoisie and its production regime, but of US imperialism itself and its inability to make good on its democratic promises, either at "home" or abroad. Some of the most critical of these demands include²:

1. The full and immediately ending of the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.
2. The full and unqualified support for Palestinian self-determination and the Right to Return.
3. The full and immediate Right of Return for the more than 250,000 New Afrikans displaced from their homelands in New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast.
4. The repeal of the "war on drugs" and mandatory minimum sentencing that has resulted in the imprisonment of more than 2.5 million people, the vast majority of whom are New Afrikans.
5. The full support for the rights of women and the LGBTQ communities, including full support for initiatives like the Equal Rights Amendment and "gay" marriage.
6. The full and immediate repeal of the various Patriot Acts and other undemocratic anti-terror laws and Executive Orders.
7. The full, complete, and unconditional amnesty for the millions of migrant and displaced workers in the US.
8. The full and unqualified commitment to reduce the carbon imprint of the US by 80% or more by 2016 to stem the production of climate changing greenhouse gases.
9. The commitment to the public financing of alternative solar, wind, aquatic, and organic energy to sustain the economy, and the elimination of all nuclear energy and hard metal extraction.

² See also the demands articulated in the "*Draft Manifesto for a Reconstruction Party*" by the National Organizing Committee for a Reconstruction Party and "*Hillary and McCain: the White Block that must be stopped*" by Eric Mann.

10. Reparations for Indigenous, New Afrikan, Xicano, Puerto Rican, Hawaiian and other peoples and nations colonized by the US (including Guam, Alaskan natives, etc.).

By Way of Conclusion

Although the road ahead may not be clear, and the outcome of our actions far from certain, the New Afrikan national liberation movement, and the movements of all oppressed and exploited peoples, must seize this critical moment. The survival of humanity demands that we must act, and act in our own interests. Barack Obama nor any other bourgeois messiah is going to liberate us. We must liberate ourselves.

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