

The Obama “mistake”: Breaking the taboo on discussing class in America

By Patrick Martin
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Over the past five days, media commentary on the US presidential election campaign has focused on the supposedly disastrous “gaffe” made by Democrat Barack Obama in his comments earlier this month at a San Francisco fundraiser, where he remarked on the mood of anger and bitterness in small-town and rural America, and how this was expressed in various political and ideological forms.

It is worth restating again the offending words, since they have provoked an outpouring of denunciation, distortion and (in the case of Obama’s liberal supporters) lamentation:

“You go into these small towns in Pennsylvania and, like a lot of small towns in the Midwest, the jobs have been gone now for 25 years and nothing’s replaced them. And they fell through the Clinton administration, and the Bush administration, and each successive administration has said that somehow these communities are going to regenerate and they have not. And it’s not surprising then they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.”

It should be noted that Obama made these frank observations at a private meeting with presumably well-off potential contributors, not in a public forum. They came to light only when they were published by the *Huffington Post* some days later. Obama was attempting to answer a participant at the gathering who asked why his opponent, Hillary Clinton, retained a lead in the polls leading up to the April 22 Democratic primary in Pennsylvania.

Nevertheless, the candidate—more intelligent and observant than the average bourgeois politician—said a mouthful, and perhaps more than he intended. He violated the conventional rules of big business politics in the United States on at least three counts.

First, he touched on the reality of class alienation, noting that millions of working people face increasingly difficult economic circumstances and are bitter over the refusal of the political establishment, in both Democratic and Republican administrations, to help them.

Second, he suggested that working people are not only materially distressed, but also ideologically misled. Popular anger over vanishing jobs and falling wages has been diverted into various blind alleys by right-wing political campaigns over guns, abortion, immigration and trade (the first three mainly from Republicans, the last mainly from Democrats, including Obama himself).

Third (and worst, as far as Obama and his liberal supporters are concerned), he implicitly equated religion with the other nostrums used to misinform and confuse workers.

For this he has been denounced by the Republican presidential candidate John McCain and, even more vociferously, by his Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton.

Right-wing and pro-Republican pundits have savaged Obama for the alleged slur on religion, while trying as much as possible to ignore the substance of his observations about the economic conditions facing the working class. Commentators like the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page and *New York Times* columnist William Kristol denounced Obama as a closet Marxist.

“As political psychoanalysis, this is what they believe in Cambridge and Hyde Park,” the *Journal* declared. “Guns and God are the opiate of the masses, who are being gulled by Karl Rove and rich Republicans. If only they embraced their true economic self-interest, these pure [presumably the editors meant “poor”] saps wouldn’t need religion and they wouldn’t dislike non-white immigrants.”

The liberal commentators are typified by E. J. Dionne of the *Washington Post*. They regard what Obama said as true, indeed almost a truism, but believe that to say it is a political blunder. Dionne bemoaned “Obama’s mistake,” but then devoted his column to criticizing Hillary Clinton for her attacks on Obama. “Something doesn’t parse when a Wellesley and Yale Law School graduate whose family made \$109 million since 2001 relentlessly assails a former community organizer on the grounds that he is an elitist,” he wrote.

“It has been sickening over the years to watch

Republicans, who always rally to the aid of the country's wealthiest citizens, successfully cast themselves as pork-rind-eating, NASCAR-watching, gun-toting populists," he concluded." He did not, however, address the most important question—how this political burlesque has been enabled by the Democratic Party's drastic shift to the right and abandonment of any program of social reform and wealth redistribution.

An alternate liberal perspective, if anything more reactionary, came from *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert, who wrote Tuesday, "Senator Obama fouled up when he linked frustration and bitterness over economic hard times with America's romance with guns and embrace of religion. But, please, let's get a grip. What we ought to be worked up about is the racism that still prevents some people from giving a candidate a fair chance because of his skin color."

Herbert, who is black, faulted Obama for ducking what the columnist regards as the central issue: the endemic racism of the white working class. In his view, racism, not religion, guns, immigration or trade, is the main means of diverting working-class anger and the main obstacle to the success of Obama's candidacy.

What none of these commentators care to confront is the extraordinary scale of the economic disaster facing millions of working people, not only in the de-industrialized towns of Pennsylvania, Indiana and North Carolina, a focus of the current stage of the presidential campaign, but throughout the country, in large cities and their suburbs as well as rural and small-town America.

It is worth citing in this context the figures reported April 12 by a *New York Times* economics columnist, Floyd Norris, on the growth of unemployment. Norris examines the contrast between the official unemployment rate and other measures of joblessness, which show a far more difficult position facing working people.

For men aged 25 to 54, the prime working years, the official unemployment rate is 4.1 percent. This figure is artificially low since it does not count people who have given up looking for work. The US Labor Department reported that in March the actual proportion of men 25 to 54 without jobs stood at 13.1 percent. Norris observes, "Only once during a post-World War II recession did the rate ever get that high. It hit 13.3 percent in June 1982, the 12th month of the brutal 1981-82 recession."

Norris cites another series of Labor Department statistics which calculate jobs lost based on a three-month moving average, a method that evens out fluctuations and suggests the longer-term trend. He notes: "The government breaks down the figures by race, and those figures show that over the last year almost all the jobs lost by men in the 25 to 54

age group have been lost by whites, with most of those losses affecting men ages 35 to 44."

These figures suggest that while unemployment for black men has been and remains high, the biggest *change* in the past year has been a sharp increase in jobs lost by white men in the prime working years—precisely those who were the focus of Obama's remarks in San Francisco.

There is thus a close connection between the semi-hysterical response in the political establishment and the corporate-controlled media to Obama's statement, and the rapidly deepening economic crisis. The Democratic candidate's too-candid comment is seen as dangerous, akin to throwing a lighted match on the social power keg that is 2008 America.

It is notable that while the "bitter" flap has roiled the Washington punditry, it has caused little stir in Pennsylvania itself. It has been difficult for bourgeois journalists to find workers who were outraged over being described as "bitter."

USA Today, reporting from conservative York County, Pennsylvania, found that, "in more than a dozen interviews here, even conservative Republicans couldn't muster the sort of outrage over Obama's remarks that Clinton backers were expressing Sunday... nearly everyone allowed that, in fact, many small-town residents are indeed bitter" over the state of the economy. A retired telephone worker told the newspaper, "Hell, yeah, they're bitter."

When Clinton sought to use the issue at a forum in Pittsburgh attended by steelworkers, many audience members shouted, "No!" as she declared, referring to Obama, "Many of you, like me, were disappointed by recent remarks he made." When she continued, saying that voters in Pennsylvania might find these remarks "offensive," there were further shouts of "No!" according to press accounts.

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