

From the Editor

By Jesse Clarke

The election of Barack Obama represents a turning point in the role of race in United States politics. It proves conclusively that the United States electorate has moved past simple prejudice based on the color of a person's skin. And it demonstrates that there is a majority coalition in favor of progressive change. This is a milestone, and it offers an outstanding opportunity to advance a new national agenda.

Unfortunately, the election in itself does very little to challenge the economic and social system that inflicts racism on vast segments of the people in this country. To make change, our movements will need to maintain consistent grassroots pressure on the new leadership. But we also need to deepen our understanding of how racial inequality is maintained. Furthermore, we need a solid theory of how and where we can redistribute opportunity so that communities of color and low-income people can gain their fair share of benefits and remedy past wrongs.

Toward the goal of providing a clear understanding of our current starting point, in this issue, we examine the indicators of racism across a broad range of measures: health outcomes, incarceration rates, education levels, equal access to housing, income levels, and wealth accumulation. Contributions from Julian Bond, Sheryll Cashin, Manning Marable, Myron Orfield, and Jonathan Kozol clearly demonstrate that by every indicator racism has a powerful grip on this country. People of color, particularly African Americans, have higher mortality rates, shorter life spans, and more health problems; people of color are more frequently in jail, prison and on parole; are graduating at lower rates from high school, college, and post secondary programs; inherit less, earn less, and retain less money; get offered bad loans, are foreclosed on, evicted and are still restricted to certain areas for housing. It's clear that we must make deep structural changes in our economic and social practices to remedy these wrongs.

One hopeful avenue for structural change is the integration of divergent streams of thought, including the civil rights movement, smart growth urbanism, and environmental justice into a growing movement for regional equity. By breaking the segregating restrictions of separate and unequal municipal and county governments, this brand of regionalism analyzes the metropolitan area in terms of who gains and loses from public policy decisions ranging from arcane zoning procedures to racist real estate lending practices. In this issue we share the views of leading practitioners from organizations such as Policy Link, the Partnership for Working Families, and the Gamaliel Foundation, as well as theoreticians such as John Powell, and Robert Bullard. And in an insightful inter-generational dialogue with Carl Anthony, Juliet Ellis, Nathaniel Smith, Cecil Corbin-Mark, Leslie Moody, and Dwayne Marsh, we consider just how strong this movement is and where it can lead us.

Over coffee a couple of weeks before the election, a colleague said to me: "Sure, they will let a black man be president just like they let all those black men become mayors of cities in the 70s." At that point, cities were bankrupt, the productive sectors had fled to the suburbs, and the tax base wouldn't recover for at least 20 years—who better to preside over the declining urban shell than someone who could be discredited, then discarded after the dirty work was done.

In the waning days of the Bush regime, the powers that be have added \$2 trillion to the national debt with not a peep of protest from the loyal "opposition." This piñata* for the disgraced allies of the regime is truly amazing work: a \$634 billion installment on a bloated war budget; the well advertised \$700 billion bankers bail out fund; a half-dozen smaller tax schemes netting another \$200 billion; and a running deficit of \$400 billion.

Our progressive coalitions will be up against this economic reality, as will Barack Obama and the renewed Democratic majorities in the House and Senate. But the partial nationalization of the financial system offers us an opportunity to demand far more than we have lost. Reparations and affirmative action are not popular terms in the lexicon of today's politics, but the truth is both are strategies that have been proven to work.

As we articulate and advance progressive "new majority" solutions to centuries old problems, it's our responsibility to put the destruction of structural racism on the front burner, and to keep it there. ■

* *Piñata*: A paper mâché figure stuffed with candies and toys broken open by children in Latin American fiestas. The term acquired a political meaning in the waning days of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua 1990. Government officials, surprised by their election defeat, used their last few months in office to legally expropriate just about everything that wasn't nailed down, and quite a few things that were (such as Daniel Ortega's mansion). While the measures were in part justified by the fact that the agrarian reform and peasant expropriations of the land had not yet been legalized, the rank favoritism and personal gain displayed still stand as a high point in transparent corruption.

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