



An Analysis of Race and Class Relationship in Barack Obama's "A More Perfect Union" Speech and Infomercial

Barack Obama'nın "A More Perfect Union" Konuşması ve Infomercial'ında Irk ve Sınıf İlişkisinin Analizi

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ÖZET

Bu makalede Barack Obama'nın ırk sorununu nasıl ele aldığı incelenmeye çalışılmıştır. Obama'nın cilt rengi, ırk sorununu ele alış biçimini de ayrıca ilgi çekici hale getirmektedir. Obama, ırk sorununa açıkça değindiği A More Perfect Union konuşmasında ve televizyonlarda gösterilen Infomercial'ında bu sorunun sınıf sorunu ile bağlantılı olduğunu savunur. Ona göre, ekonomik problemlerin çözümü bu sorunun Amerika'daki çözümüne de yardımcı olacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Barack Obama, race and class, A More Perfect Union speech

ABSTRACT

This article examines how Barack Obama discusses the race issue in his election campaign. Obama's skin colour makes his approach to race issues interesting. Obama argues that race issues are related to class issues in his A More Perfect Union speech and his infomercial where he deliberately deals with this issue. To Obama, solving the economic problems will also help to solve the race problem in America.

Keywords: Barack Obama, ırk ve sınıf, mükemmel birlik konuşması

Oabama's skin color is one of the most significant features in his election campaign as everybody is curious about how he takes on the "race" issue, but Obama, being cautious, develops and uses the idea that "race" is class throughout his campaign, and especially in his infomercial and his "a more perfect union" speech.

Obama's race approach is not a new one, but for Obama it is the best approach that he can easily apply as he does not want to offend both people who are classified as white and black as he needs the votes of both sides in order to win the election. During his campaign, Obama does not reject the race problem in America, but he attributes this issue to economic reasons which ignore all possible negative and unwanted causes of race problems but those dealing with class. Simply economic

problems are the underlying factors that triggered the race issue in America. Thus, for Obama solving the economic problems will solve the race problem in America.

“Race” and “class” have different meanings and usages in different parts of the world at different times. It is not the aim of this study to show all the details related to the meanings and the usages of these words, but it will be useful to explain some meanings and usages in order to explain the relationship among these words that provide the idea that race is class.

Class may refer to different meanings, but “in its most conventional and persistent sense, class refers to ‘a division or order... or rank or grade of society,’ common in the phrases ‘higher (upper), middle, lower classes” (Clarke, 2005: 39). In this sense class is used to define the positions of people in society. The class to which a person belongs may be one of the most significant determiner of his or her actions in the society. He or she should behave and act according to his or her class requirements. For example, people take their seats in the theater based on their class. Such class distinction creates a kind of hierarchical taxonomy among people. There is a fixed class in society. “It is this sense of a class system of privilege and deference that is evoked in the claim that the USA is a classless society” (39).

In The United States it is almost impossible to see this kind of classification of people. On the other hand The United States is proud to provide opportunities for all people. If an individual works hard, he or she can achieve American Dream regardless of his or her class or position in the society. In The United States people as well as presidents believe in American Exceptionalism: “the idea that the United States, uniquely among the globe’s nations assigned its citizens no fixed class definition and afforded boundless opportunity to those who would only work hard and look beyond the next horizon”(Lott, 2007: 49). To realize the American Dream is the responsibility of the individual and not the responsibility of his or her class if there is any class system in this society in this sense. Success depends on the power and the intellect of individual. In this process class cannot be an obstacle that prevents the individual from achieving his or her success.

Although there is no fixed class system in the USA, it is reasonable to argue that the country has used a kind of class system in its history. That is, The United States has “‘class,’ related to the unequal distribution of

wealth, income, and power..."(Clarke, 2005: 39). In this sense it is easy to assert that The US has a class system. Throughout its history some groups claim that they should have privileges.

"Some form of class consciousness has existed in North America at least since white settlers arrived; John Winthrop's well-known sermon aboard the Arbella in 1630, "A model of Christian Charity," in part justifies the existence of class differences by making them crucial to God's plan of binding through charity the socially stratified community of Puritan believers" (Lott, 2007: 49).

In The US it is claimed that some people have benefited from privileges more than any other people, and these people can be gathered under the group called Whites. These white people have formed the majority in the United States after the industrial revolution mostly created the working class and employers.

After the Industrial Revolution it is easy to remember that when class is articulated it mainly refers to two distinctive groups: working class and employer in society.

"It (class) articulates something distinctive about the experience of inequality and the potential for collective organization (on the part of both capital and labor). While capitalism's social, economic, and political dynamics produce, reproduce, and legitimate inequalities of wealth, income, life chances, and power, the talk will turn to class" (Clarke, 2005: 41-42).

Class is also used for defining the conflicts between groups of people. Sometimes it will be used to refer to little more than the gap between rich and poor. Sometimes it will be used to challenge concentrations of power and privilege; and sometimes it will be used to rally the poor, excluded, or oppressed against the power of capital (and its owners and representatives). Thus, class is mainly used to describe conflicts in society. Conflicts between groups can express differences in different countries. In the United States of America these conflicts such as poverty, exclusion, oppression, privilege, power, and inequalities occur between groups of people who are classified as white and black according to their skin colors.

"Race" also has different meanings and usages throughout history. It will be useful to give some definitions of the term and explain how it has

become a problematic issue mainly in the United States of America in the limits of this essay. "Derived in English from F *race* and It *razza*, it has meant a tribe or people of common stock, such as the German race, and denoted a sensibility, like the notion of the British people as an island race"(Murji, 2005: 290). In this context "race" has one of the most naïve meaning. It mainly refers to nation or the citizens of the same state etc. This does not give much trouble for many countries such as nation states.

The United States of America is known as one of the most powerful nation states in the world, but "race" has a different meaning and usage which create problems in this country.

"Problems arose when it was used to identify supposedly natural divisions within human populations. The idea of "race" in this sense has had wide and damaging consequences due to the view that groups possess fixed traits and particular intellectual and physical characteristics. This led to a belief in racial purity, innate racial difference, and natural hierarchies, and informed projects of slavery, apartheid, colonialism, empire, and genocide"(Murji, 2005: 290).

In this context "race" has formed many significant problems in the United States of America. Mainly all the good behaviors are easily attributed to the white race while all the bad qualities are attributed to black race. "White often connotes qualities that are the converse of "blackness," such as purity, cleanliness, virginity, and innocence" (294). This kind of approach indicates that race is the basic factor or determiner that forms and shapes the qualities of an individual ignoring all other possibilities. The skin color of an individual is more significant than the individual himself.

Race is considered in almost all classifications such as identity, nationhood, community, morality etc. When a person asserts a view on identity, he or she should consider the race. This can make race a problematic issue. "Race matters because it is seen and treated as a key marker of identity, nationhood, and community. Race can determine or influence how people see themselves, how others define them, and the groups they are seen to belong to" (292). The consideration of race as a key element in basic concepts of social life forces it to be a problematic as well as an important issue in the United States of America.

Then race can be used as a key feature in the segregation process. Race can either include or exclude people within certain organizations. "As postcolonial and post-structuralist theorists have illustrated, race is more than a way of identifying and organizing political coalitions against forms of state repression and capitalist exploitation; it is also a category that sets the terms of belonging and exclusion within modern institutions" (Ferguson, 2007: 192). In this context people can be segregated or discriminated from certain organizations and institutions due to their race.

Race sometimes plays a key role for being a citizen of the United States of America. "With regard to economic and political formations, race has shaped the meaning and profile of citizenship and labor" (191-192). Thus, race can affect people for many areas of life by creating many problems in the United States of America. It has economical, social, political problems. This is one of the facts that American people have been facing since the 18th century.

Obama asserts that the race problem is a consequence of economic problems; in other words race is a class problem in his "A More Perfect Union" speech and his television advertisement. He does not deny that there is a race problem in the United States of America. Although he is a black man, he has the chance to run for presidency. It is possible to read this event as a testimony that there is no race problem in America in terms of having equal chances for all people. But he accepts the problem and underlines the privileges that the white middle class has in his country. He is enough American and he still believes in his country and argues that if the economic problems of the middle class can be solved, the race problem in the United States of America will disappear.

Obama is not first person who asserts the idea that there is an obvious relationship between economy and racism in the United States of America. Both lynching and black face minstrelsy are the easiest ways of supporting this argument. Orlando Petterson, in her book *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries*, mentions that when the cotton production and cotton prices are getting low, the rate of lynchings increase (Petterson, 1999: 47). This argument links economy and race problems. It is quite right to indicate that economic problems trigger the race problem in the United States of America. This means that if economic problems are solved, the race problem may be solved too. It is certain that there is some relationship between economy and race problem.

Obama emphasizes that white Americans have economic privileges in his speech. He mentions that “most working-and middle- class white Americans don’t feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race” ([http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/his ownwords](http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/his_ownwords)). He is sure that white Americans have benefited from the economic advantages throughout the history of the United States of America.

“Race is a cultural construct, but one sinister structural causes and consequences. Conscious and deliberate actions have institutionalized group identity in the United States, not just through the dissemination of cultural stories, but also through systematic efforts from colonial times to the present to create economic advantages through a possessive investments in whiteness for European Americans” (Lipsitz, 2002: 2).

As mentioned above there have been possessive investments in whiteness since the colonial period and this has created a gap between black people and white people in America. It can be claimed that it is still possible to see this attitude in The United States of America.

For Obama this growing gap between black and white Americans has been legalized by laws which have created explicit discrimination.

“Legalized discrimination-where blacks were prevented, often through violence, from owning property, or loans were not granted to African-American business owners, or black homeowners could not access FHA mortgages, or blacks were excluded from unions, or the police force, or fire departments-meant that black families could not amass any meaningful wealth to bequeath to future generations. That history helps explain the wealth and income gap between black and white, and the concentrated pockets of poverty that persists in so many of today’s urban and rural communities” ([http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/his own words](http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/his_own_words)).

This kind of legalized discrimination has created economic disadvantages for black people. In his article “The Possessive Investment in Whiteness” George Lipsitz claims that FHA had discriminatory financing policies. “...whites have access to broader housing choices than blacks, white pay 15 percent less than blacks for similar housing in the same neighborhoods and typically experience housing costs 25 percent lower than would be the case if the residents

were black” (Lipsitz, 2002: 13). Obama argues that, faced with these economic disparities, blacks have had reasons for anger.

For Obama black anger comes from economic disparities. Blacks have produced kind of violence, anger, and crime. These negative aspects have been the products of the economy.

“A lack of economic opportunity among black man, and the shame and frustration that came from not being able to provide for one’s family, contributed to the erosion of black families -a problem that welfare policies for many years may have worsened. And the lack of basic services in so many urban black neighborhoods- parks for kids to play in, police walking the beat, regular garbage pick-up and building code enforcement- all helped create a cycle of violence, blight and neglect that continue to haunt us.” (<http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/his own words>).

It is clear that Obama accepts kinds of violence and anger that exist in black community. He also argues that this is one consequence of economic problems for black Americans.

Anger does not only exist in black communities, it also exists in white communities. Some White, specifically middle class white Americans, think that immigrants and especially black Americans steal the future of white Americans. The investments for blacks or immigrants and the endeavors for equality among black, immigrant, and white Americans have been realized at the expense of white Americans. This is the idea which still may exist in the mind of most white Americans in the United States of America. Obama explains this idea in his speech as follows: “They (white Americans) are anxious about their futures, and feel their dreams slipping away; in an era of stagnant wages and global competition, opportunity comes to be seen as a zero sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense” (<http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/his own words>). This makes some of them anxious about their future and their children. They believe that they have never committed an injustice although their previous generations may have committed injustices. They think that blacks and whites are equal and there must not be any privileges for any groups.

The majority of White Americans think that blacks and whites have equal opportunities, but blacks’ laziness and their other characteristic qualifications make them poor. Blacks are poor due to their own choices.

“Seventy percent of whites in one poll said that African Americans ‘have the same opportunities to live a middle-class life as whites,’...it indicates that many whites believe that blacks suffer deservedly, because they do not take advantage of the opportunities offered them. In opinion polls, favorable assessments of black chances for success often accompanied extremely negative judgments about the abilities, work habits, and character of black people” (Lipsitz, 2002: 13).

This quote which shows the data of a pole and its evaluation make it clear that whites believe that blacks have suffered due to their own characteristics although they have had the same opportunities. They believe that there has been no discrimination against blacks. White Americans also believe that they founded the country by themselves. They had many difficulties, but they worked hard and managed to solve these hard problems. They finally won. “Most working- and middle-class white Americans don’t feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race. Their experience is the immigrant experience – as far as they’re concerned, no one’s handed them anything, they have built it from scratch” (<http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/hisownwords>).

Believing this idea white Americans have been very sensible when they see that black Americans and immigrants benefit from the given privileges thanks to just their race, color, or political positions.

Moreover, many white Americans sometimes become angry when they feel that blacks and immigrants receive these privileges at the expense of white Americans. This is the underlying insight of white anger which is explained by Obama. In the speech Obama mentions that

“they’ve worked hard all their lives, many times only to see their jobs shipped overseas or their pension dumped after a lifetime of labor...so when they are told to bus their children to a school across town; when they hear that an African American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed; when they are told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time”
(<http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/hisownwords>)

This is Obama’s reason for white anger. It too comes from economic problems. White Americans simply think that blacks and immigrants

steal their future by benefiting the privileges which have been created in order to provide equality for all groups. They simply think that if there were discrimination or segregation, these were the faults of previous generations not the present middle class white Americans. Thus, it is easy to claim that for Obama anger or so called racism in the United States of America come from economical problems.

Obama argues that people or politicians simply focus on these angers between black and white groups by ignoring their roots. If the root causes can be solved, the anger or so called racism will disappear easily as a consequence of this process.

“Just as black anger often proved counterproductive, so have these white resentments distracted attention from the real culprits of the middle class squeeze- a corporate culture rife with inside dealing, questionable accounting practices, and short-term greed; a Washington dominated by lobbyist and special interest; economic policies that favor the few over the many. And yet, to wish away the resentments of white Americans, to label them as misguided or even racist, without recognizing they are grounded in legitimate concerns-this too widens the racial divide, and blocks the path to understanding”

(<http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/hisownwords>)

Thus, all Americans should understand that one does not get advantages at the expense of the other. Anger, violence, discrimination, segregation, and so called racism are the consequences of economic problems. Everybody is right because everybody wants to survive or try to guarantee his or her future life. If he or she does not do it, he or she thinks that the other group is the reason for this failure.

Obama in his infomercial claims that the middle class (white, black, immigrant, etc.) is the most suffering group in America. Regardless of their race all middle class people are under very heavy and difficult conditions. Middle class people form the majority in the United States of America, and support for the idea that “economic policies favor the few over the many” needs to be changed. New economic policies should give priority to the major group which is the middle class ignoring their ethnicities and colors and political positions. Health, welfare, and education are the main problems of all middle class Americans.

In the infomercial Rebecca Johnson’s problems are more or less the

same for other Americans who are from New Mexico, Kentucky, and Ohio. It will be useful to analyze two couples from different races to make Obama's claim on race clearer. In the infomercial it is shown that one couple is from Sardinia, Ohio. They are black. They have worked for years to buy just a house. They are ill now. Although they are retired, the husband needs to work to meet the health expenses and to support the family. This is not the consequence of racism. Their skin color has no role in the creation of this difficult and unwanted situation. It is simply the problem of the middle class from which they come. White Americans have no role too in this process as they suffer too.

Another couple is from Louisville, Kentucky. They are white Americans with two children. Their welfare is not good. They face similar difficulties. They have not lost their good welfare thanks to black Americans. Black Americans do not get advantages at the expense of white Americans as white Americans do not get advantages at the expense of black Americans. These two couples from different race groups have similar economic problems as they are both from middle class. Thus, regardless their colors people in the American middle class have similar problems.

Obama' solution for race problems is to improve the economic conditions of middle class in order to end the anger that sometimes exists in both black and white communities against each other. Obama argues that "it requires all Americans to realize that your dreams do not have to come at the expense of my dreams; that investing in the health, welfare, and education of black and brown and white children will ultimately help all of America prosper" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GtREqAmLsoA>). Thus, in order to be a more perfect union all Americans should understand that other ethnicities or races are not barriers for success. The many (middle class) must be supported at the expense of the few (rich).

For Obama race simply means class. Economic improvements must be realized considering the middle class priorities rather than the few rich people. If the middle class gets more developed welfare, health, and education systems, the possible racist anger will hopefully come to an end soon. Obama's race approach tries to destroy the root causes of the race problems by arguing that race problems come from economical conditions.

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