

Against Diversity

THE IMPORTANCE OF RACE and gender in the current US presidential campaign has, of course, been a function of the salience of racism and sexism—which is to say, discrimination—in American society; a fact that was emphasized by post-primary stories like the *New York Times*'s 'Age Becomes the New Race and Gender'.¹ It is no doubt difficult to see ageism as a precise equivalent—after all, part of what is wrong with racism and sexism is that they supposedly perpetuate false stereotypes whereas, as someone who has just turned 60, I can attest that a certain number of the stereotypes that constitute ageism are true. But the very implausibility of the idea that the main problem with being old is the *prejudice* against your infirmities, rather than the infirmities themselves, suggests just how powerful discrimination has become as the model of injustice in America; and so how central overcoming it is to our model of justice.

From this standpoint, the contest between Obama and Clinton was a triumph, displaying, as it did, both the great strides made toward the goal of overcoming racism and sexism, and the great distance still to go towards that goal. It made it possible, in other words, to conceive of America as a society headed in the right direction but with a long road to travel. The attraction of this vision—not only to Americans but around the world—is obvious. The problem is that it is false. The US today is certainly a less discriminatory society than it was before the Civil Rights movement and the rise of feminism; but it is not a more just, open and equal society. On the contrary: it is no more just, it is less open and it is much less equal.

In 1947—seven years before the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, sixteen years before the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*—the top fifth of American wage-earners made 43 per cent of the money earned in the US. Today that same quintile gets 50.5 per cent. In 1947, the bottom fifth of wage-earners got 5 per cent of total income; today it gets 3.4 per cent. After half a century of anti-racism and feminism, the US today is a less equal society than was the racist, sexist society of Jim Crow. Furthermore, virtually all the growth in inequality has taken place since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1965—which means not only that the successes of the struggle against discrimination have failed to alleviate inequality, but that they have been compatible with

a radical expansion of it. Indeed, they have helped to enable the increasing gulf between rich and poor.

Why? Because it is exploitation, not discrimination, that is the primary producer of inequality today. It is neoliberalism, not racism or sexism (or homophobia or ageism) that creates the inequalities that matter most in American society; racism and sexism are just sorting devices. In fact, one of the great discoveries of neoliberalism is that they are not very efficient sorting devices, economically speaking. If, for example, you are looking to promote someone as Head of Sales in your company and you are choosing between a straight white male and a black lesbian, and the latter is in fact a better salesperson than the former, racism, sexism and homophobia may tell you to choose the straight white male but capitalism tells you to go with the black lesbian. Which is to say that, even though some capitalists may be racist, sexist and homophobic, capitalism itself is not.

This is also why the real (albeit very partial) victories over racism and sexism represented by the Clinton and Obama campaigns are not victories *over* neoliberalism but victories *for* neoliberalism: victories for a commitment to justice that has no argument with inequality as long as its beneficiaries are as racially and sexually diverse as its victims. That is the meaning of phrases like the 'glass ceiling' and of every statistic showing how women make less than men or African-Americans less than whites. It is not that the statistics are false; it is that making these markers the privileged object of grievance entails thinking that, if only more women could crash through the glass ceiling and earn the kind of money rich men make, or if only blacks were as well paid as whites, America would be closer to a just society.

It is the increasing gap between rich and poor that constitutes the inequality, and rearranging the race and gender of those who succeed leaves that gap untouched. In actually existing neoliberalism, blacks and women are still disproportionately represented both in the bottom quintile—too many—and in the top quintile—too few—of American incomes. In the neoliberal utopia that the Obama campaign embodies, blacks would be 13.2 per cent of the (numerous) poor and 13.2 per cent of the (far fewer) rich; women would be 50.3 per cent of both. For neoliberals, what makes this a utopia is that discrimination would play no role in administering the inequality; what makes the utopia neoliberal is that the inequality would remain intact.

Worse: it is not just that the inequality remains intact but also—since it is no longer produced by discrimination—that it gets legitimated. Apparently American liberals feel a lot better about a world in which the top 20 per cent are getting richer at the expense of everyone else, as long as that top 20 per

¹ *New York Times*, 15 June 2008. This is the text of a talk given at the Einstein Forum in Potsdam on 26 June 2008.

cent includes a proportionate number of women and African-Americans. In this respect, the ability of the Obama campaign to make us feel pretty good about ourselves while at the same time leaving our wealth untouched, is striking—as emblemized in his tax proposals which are designed to ask more of the ‘well-off’, but not of ‘the middle class’. Who are the well-off? ‘I generally define well-off’, says Obama’s website, ‘as people who are making \$250,000 a year or more’. Which means that people making, say, \$225,000 (who are in the 97th percentile of American incomes) are middle class; and that they deserve to be taxed in the same way as those in the 50th percentile, making \$49,000. The headline of the website on which this appears is ‘I’m Asking You to Believe’. But asking the 40 per cent of Americans who live on under \$42,000 to believe that they belong to the same middle class as the approximately 15 per cent who make \$100,000–\$250,000 may be asking too much. It is, however, what the Democratic Party has been asking them to believe for the last twenty years. Economic inequality did not grow as fast under the Clinton Administrations as it did under both the Bushes, but it grew. In 1992, when Clinton was elected, the bottom quintile made 3.8 per cent, the top quintile 46.9 per cent of all money earned; in 2000, at the end of his second term, the bottom quintile made 3.6 per cent, the top quintile 49.8 per cent.

The point, then, is that the nomination of Obama is great news for American liberals, who love equality when it comes to race and gender, but are not so keen when it comes to money. Liberals are the people who believe that American universities and colleges have become more open because, although they are increasingly and almost exclusively populated by rich kids, more of these today are rich kids of colour. (Obama’s popularity on college campuses is no accident—he is diversity’s pin-up.) And having helped keep the poor out of college and thus made sure they remain poor, liberals are now eager to point out that white voters with only a high-school education (the very people who do not go to Harvard) are disproportionately sceptical of Obama; they are happy to deplore the ignorant racism of people whom they have kept ignorant, and whose racism they have thus enforced. The Obama candidacy is great news, in other words, for a liberalism that is every bit as elitist as its conservative critics say—although not, of course, quite as elitist as the conservative critics themselves.

There is a real difference between Obama and McCain. But it is the difference between a neoliberalism of the centre and a neoliberalism of the right. Whoever wins, American inequality will be left essentially untouched. It is important to remember just how great that inequality is. A standard measure of economic inequality is through the Gini coefficient, where 0 represents perfect equality (everybody makes the same), and 1 perfect inequality (one person makes everything). The Gini coefficient for the us in 2006 was 0.470 (back in 1968 it was 0.386). That of Germany today is

0.283, that of France, 0.327. Americans still love to talk about the American Dream—as, in fact, do Europeans. But the Dream has never been less of a reality than it is today. Not just because inequality is so high, but also because social mobility is so low; indeed, lower than in both France and Germany. Anyone born poor in Chicago has a better chance of achieving the American Dream by learning German and moving to Berlin than by staying at home.

Whether debates about race and gender in American politics involve self-congratulation, for all the progress the us has made, or self-flagellation over the journey still to go, or for that matter arguing over whether racism or sexism is worse, the main point is that the debate itself is essentially empty. Of course discrimination is wrong: no one in mainstream American politics today will defend it, and no neoliberal who understands the entailments of neoliberalism will do so either. But it is not discrimination that has produced the almost unprecedented levels of inequality Americans face today; it is capitalism.

Put that way, however, it is clear that the characterization of the race–gender debate as ‘empty’ needs to be qualified. For the answer to the question, ‘Why do American liberals carry on about racism and sexism when they should be carrying on about capitalism?’, is pretty obvious: they carry on about racism and sexism in order to avoid doing so about capitalism. Either because they genuinely do think that inequality is fine as long as it is not a function of discrimination (in which case, they are neoliberals of the right). Or because they think that fighting against racial and sexual inequality is at least a step in the direction of real equality (in which case, they are neoliberals of the left). Given these options, perhaps the neoliberals of the right are in a stronger position—the economic history of the last thirty years suggests that diversified elites do even better than undiversified ones. But of course, these are not the only possible choices.