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"Kamala Harris and the Race for the American Presidency"

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Trump(ism) Threatens Liberal World Order, and US Constitutional-Democratic Norms

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"Race in America is more devastating than the San Andreas fault," where tectonic plates collide, earthquakes result, and thousands are injured or killed¹.

But race is not the only scar or divide in America: there's one that dare not speak its name – Class. Rich and poor, the wealthy and the poverty-stricken, the capitalist and the worker, those who own and those who have little or nothing to speak of. But class is un-American, a republic founded against monarchs and aristocrats and the ascriptions of status at birth. The country of the 'common man' where every man is king. A great deal of racism is the outer political skin of a political economy dominated by very rich White men who own America. Racism is the politics of divide and rule, long recognized by anti-racists.

Ultimately, the United States class system is racialised and gendered, a complex mix, and at times, a lethal blend that generates contradictions and conflicts on an endemic basis. In this complex structure, White men have privileges, but the very richest – regardless of colour or gender - have great power and make the big decisions and take the greatest benefits. And race proves beneficial in keeping the relatively poor and powerless – regardless of race – in eternal mutual suspicion, a quietly simmering war, while the richest reap the rewards. As Martin Luther King, jr., noted, "the segregation of the races was really a political stratagem employed by the emerging Bourbon interests in the South to keep the southern masses divided and southern labor the cheapest in the land." And he showed that as a system it could and would, someday, be altered by determined political will.

But identity politics rules the day in US electoral politics and is played by Democrats and Republicans alike. Divide and rule 2.0.

Kamala Harris – once more unto the breach...

US Vice President Kamala Harris's recent endorsement as the Democratic party's nominee for the White House in November 2024 has once again drawn attention to the scar of race and racialization that marks out American history from the beginning to the present. It has truly lit the touchpaper of an explosive issue in American history, society and politics. Yet, she's also caught in the 'tributaries' and tremors of the San Andreas fault: her heritage is Indian-American and Jamaican-American, and decidedly 'Black'. Whether she self-identifies as African-American or not. Trump and his allies are using this mixed heritage as a source of attacks on Harris's identity – not truly African-American because not descended from the enslaved².

"Is she Indian or is she Black?" Trump demands to know. His aim is to drive a wedge between Harris and African-American voters who overwhelmingly vote Democratic. Harris on the other hand seeks

¹ Manning Marable, "Manning Marable's "African-American Empowerment in the Face of Racism: The Political Aftermath of the Battle of Los Angeles", *VEROS*, 25/8/2014, accessed on 29/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/hbz72>

² "Trump questions whether Harris is 'Indian or Black' in heated interview," *AL Jazeera*, 31/7/04, accessed on 29/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/a4byda>

to leverage her identities to maximise votes, win election, and repay her corporate donors who provide the bulk of the Big Money behind her election machine³.

Hence, in their desperation to find a hook to diminish Harris and her election campaign, and fire up their own base, Trump and his running mate, Ohio Senator JD Vance, have placed the race question right into the heart of American politics in a stark way. Leading Republicans have called Harris a “DEI hire” (diversity, equality, inclusion) as Biden’s vice president. That is, Biden selected her because she’s Black and female, not because of any merits or qualifications⁴. Yet, that’s precisely the rational reason for selecting a VP running mate – to appeal to particular voting blocs across regions or key states or major issues. (Only Donald Trump appears to have broken that trend by selecting someone from a solid Red state who has almost exactly the same world-view as he does).

But there’s another complication: Vance’s wife is Indian-American and has already faced the unwanted attentions of white supremacists, a force unleashed behind Trump’s own racist worldview⁵. Racists like Nick Fuentes are using the fact of Usha Vance’s Indian heritage as part of their ‘great replacement’ theory – which says immigrants are replacing Whites as the dominant racial group in America – to go after JD himself as un-race conscious, and not a true patriot.

“What kind of man marries somebody named Usha?” Fuentes said. “JD Vance...has an Indian wife and a kid named Vivek....All his kids have Indian names, so it’s like, what exactly are we getting here?” Fuentes was a guest of Trump’s at his Mar-a-Lago estate in 2022, an invitation arranged by Kanye West, an African-American rapper who has praised Adolf Hitler.

Two corporate parties are now tied up in the contradictions of their favoured identitarian electoral strategies.

Trump fuelled anti-Obama ‘birtherism’ to channel Whites’ racial anxieties

It is estimated that the United States will be by 2045 a ‘majority-minority’ nation. By that date, Whites will be the largest single racial group but will be less than half of the total population⁶. In 2008, America witnessed the phenomenal rise of President Barack Obama, its first ever black or biracial president. The man who once styled himself as Barry Obama was sold to the American people and indeed the world as a force for change. But before and during the Obama reign the outward bigotry of White conservative Americans, in particular, was galvanized and articulated by Donald Trump,

³ “Wall Street’s billionaires and big-hitters are backing Kamala Harris: ‘This is a clarion call for democracy,’” *Fortune*, 22/7/2024, accessed on 29/8/2024, <https://n9.cl/das6r3>.

⁴ Helen Coster, Alexandra Ulmer and David Morgan, “As racist and sexist attacks fly, Republicans grapple with how to take on Harris,” *Reuters*, 27/7/2024, accessed on 29/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/o3oyw>

⁵ “JD Vance forced to defend wife Usha against white supremacists: ‘She’s out of your league,’” *Independent*, 12/8/2024, accessed on 29/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/28h0u>.

⁶ “Commentary The US will become ‘minority white’ in 2045, Census projects,” *Brookings*, 14/3/2018, accessed on 29/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/va0ny>



then a political outsider, who weighed in and pushed the 'birther' conspiracies⁷. On the night Obama won the presidency in 2008, White supremacist websites crashed due to the sheer weight of vitriol that night, as racist violence increased⁸.

And now, years later, Trump is facing a familiar challenge from Kamala Harris the latest Democratic candidate for the US Presidency. As with Obama, racialized terms are being deployed to undermine Harris's candidacy, 'dog-whistle', coded, racism to scare White America that their days are numbered as the 'master race', that they are being 'replaced' by the immigrant, refugee, minority.

Why race matters

What are we to make of this? How do we decode the language used against Obama and Harris? What does it tell us about how race in America actually works? The answers go to the heart of what America is and stands for. To be sure, race is not the only or even primary schism in US society and history – which after all waged a civil war on the issue of slavery. But race is implicated in every part of the history, politics, culture and political economy of the United States. It would not be out of place to suggest that the United States is effectively a racialised class structure⁹. There are classes in the so called classless society, but class is lived through the prism of race¹⁰.

American racial hegemony follows a binary pattern to define who is 'Black' and who is 'White' as the basis of White supremacy, specifically of the Anglo-Americans, White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (Wasps). Colonisers from the British Isles became the racial power-class in America that for the most part held sway over the wheels of US government, economy and culture. Those who traced their lineage to the 'Mayflower', the ship that landed at Plymouth Rock in 1621, were the elevated and elitist elect. They were later joined by 'inferior' Irish and southern European Catholics, eastern European Jews, who were socialised and recruited through the ideology of Whiteness into the ranks of the elect, but not quite into their uppermost echelons¹¹. Joseph Biden, who says he's Irish in his soul, is only the second Catholic American to occupy the White House, John F Kennedy was the first and failed to complete a full term.

7 "‘Birtherism,’ Trump and anti-Black racism: Conspiracy theorists twist evidence to maintain status quo," *The Conversation*, 16/2022/02/, accessed on 29/2024/8/, at: <https://n9.cl/d6fbf>

8 "Hate sites overloaded with vitriol after vote," *The National*, 13/11/2008, accessed on 29/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/gl28s>

9 Inderjeet Parmar & Mark Ledwidge, "Conceptualising and historicising the US foreign policy establishment in a racialised class structure," *International Politics*, vo.54 (2017), p: 306–321, at: <https://n9.cl/b3d5z>

10 Karim Murji, "An interventionist sociologist: Stuart Hall, public engagement and racism," *The Sociological Review*, Vo.70, no.5 (2022), at: <https://n9.cl/avq6b>

11 Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (Routledge, 2008).

The one drop rule tells us all we need to know

The so called ‘one-drop rule’ has dominated America’s thinking about race¹². It basically means that even a single drop of ‘Black’ blood in any person’s body means they are defined as ‘Black’, regardless of appearance. It is a theory of White superiority and undiluted racial purity that was upheld by the US Supreme Court in 1896 in the infamous Plessy vs Ferguson decision which legitimised racial segregation¹³. Homer Plessy, who was seven-eighths White and one-eighth Black, was declared Black by the highest legal authority. During the long years of America’s enslavement, European Americans created a racial caste system whereby one drop of African blood placed one in the inferior class, limiting life chances. This was most definitely the case before the Civil Rights’ and Black Power struggles from the 1950s until the late 1960s. From the one-drop perspective, Kamala Harris’s racial identity would sit quite squarely within the Black category. However, is Kamala Harris ‘African-American’?

Race: It’s very complicated

Kamala Harris and her family stand as a testament to the American Dream, the melting pot that America claims to be. Blended and inter-racial and upwardly mobile. On her paternal side Kamala Harris’s father, Donald, was a child of enslaved Africans who originated in Brown Town, Jamaica, apparently related to the Hamilton Brown family. Hamilton Brown was an Irish enslaver, whose position of racial power – rape - inserted his DNA into the heart of an African-Jamaican family.

Harris’s father, a light complexioned man, was a successful academic who studied at the University College of the West Indies, and earned his Ph.D. from UC, Berkeley, in 1966. Herein lies a dilemma for Americans, Black and White. Jamaican Americans don’t quite fit either Black or White categories, and Donald did not exactly embrace ‘blackness’. Others laud him for his success, evidencing the successes of a multiracial America. Yet, it is notable that the American media seems more interested in the South Asian origins of Kamala’s mother, than her father’s Jamaican-ness: Could this be a subtle hint of America’s racial hierarchy or merely the overzealous enthusiasm of a writer? The problem is that race is so deeply embedded in the American psyche that one never fully knows the answer. It is a highly corrosive place to be.

Kamala’s Mother Dr. Shyamala Gopalan¹⁴, came from India from an educated and progressive family. She and Donald fought the good fight of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, for their own rights as minorities alongside historically-enslaved peoples. Kamala and her sister were raised as both

¹² Yolanda Moses, “Kamala Harris’ Refusal of the One-Drop Rule,” *Sapiens* 4/5/2021, accessed on 29/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/svs73>

¹³ Robert L. Reece, “Colorism Before and After the One Drop Rule,” *Research in Human Development*, 20(3–4) (2023), 87–105, at: <https://n9.cl/xjss1>

¹⁴ Jen Juneau, “Kamala Harris Says She’ll Be Thinking About Her Late Mother During Historic Swearing-In Moment,” *People*, 16/12/2020, accessed on 29/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/gvk7s>



South Asian and Black – the one drop rule again. “In America, we’re considered Black women. And that’s how our mothers raised us because that’s what they knew we would be seen as”¹⁵.

Race matters but class and big money politics provide the bigger picture

While conventional analyses of the American election look mostly at the personalities and daily slogans that serve as political discourse in a decaying political system, in which the media generate much enthusiasm among themselves, their corporate owners and political party candidates and bosses, a large swathe of Americans are unlikely to turnout to vote. The turnout in 2020 was historically high at around 66%; it’s usually around 50%. Big Money dominates elections. Of the billions spent during campaigns, most funding derives from a tiny proportion of the population – around 1% pour in most of the money¹⁶. They consider themselves investors in politics and look for a return.

And for the rest of the electorate, who pay the taxes that fund the state? Divide et impera.

¹⁵ Deepa Shivaram, “The Story Behind the Woman Who Inspired Harris to Break Barriers,” *KQED*, 31/7/2024, accessed on 29/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/1353o>

¹⁶ Molly Redden, “Just 50 Families Have Spent \$600 Million On The 2024 Elections So Far,” *HuffPost*, 15/5/2024, accessed on 29/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/ecscl>