

Ajamu Baraka, “Uncle Tom,” and the Pathology of White Liberal Racism

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I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail", April 16, 1963

When Martin Luther King wrote of the white moderate, he wrote of the enemy of progress, the foe of social justice, the obstacle to the defining social movement of his time. He understood, perhaps better than many of his contemporaries, that the white moderate was the single most pernicious influence in the broader sociopolitical landscape. For it was the white moderate who opposed the essential and necessary radicalism, who blocked attempts at widening the Civil Rights Movement, who enjoined that demands be tempered, grievances be blunted; all while posing as a friend of the movement, a defender of the marginalized and oppressed.



Such was the essence of the white moderate in King's day. Such is the essence of the white liberal today. For it is the white liberal who finds any excuse to slander and attack radical people of color who challenge the ruling class; who justifies support for white supremacy, imperialism, and neocolonialism; and who does so with the palliative opiate of self-satisfaction - the genuine, though entirely wrongheaded, belief in his/her own essential goodness.

This phenomenon has been on full display in the ongoing attacks on Green Party Vice Presidential candidate Ajamu Baraka, a man who has dedicated more than four decades to resistance against racism and oppression of African-Americans and other African diaspora communities. To watch accusations and implications of racism and bigotry lobbed at him like so many arrows from the crossbowmen of corporate media is to receive a crash course in white liberal racism - that undeniable phenomenon whose name must not be spoken.

Perhaps the best example of this sickening tactic came on CNN's Town Hall with Jill Stein

and Ajamu Baraka. The host, CNN anchor Chris Cuomo – brother of Democratic New York governor Andrew Cuomo – deliberately decontextualized Baraka’s use of the phrase “Uncle Tom” to describe President Obama. An obvious smear intended to discredit the Green Party ticket in the eyes of Black (and liberal white) voters, Cuomo smugly implied that Baraka’s usage of Uncle Tom was, in itself, racist.

But even a cursory analysis of the term, the context in which it was used, and Cuomo’s intent in raising the issue, not only vindicates Baraka’s usage of Uncle Tom, it reveals the deep-seated racism of Democratic party shills, and American liberals in general.

Interrogating Uncle Tom

The term itself is generally accepted to mean a person, usually a black man, who is overly eager to please white people, and is quick to betray his own race in pursuit of acceptance among whites. Thus the term is less a superficial racial epithet than it is a psychological and sociological critique, particularly when used by a black man against a fellow black man. To be sure, racially charged language takes on varying levels of meaning and emotional gravitas depending on who uses it. In this case, however, a black leftist uses it to deconstruct the mythology surrounding the first black president.

Does anyone doubt that, from a purely objective perspective, President Obama has indeed abdicated his responsibility to improve the political, economic, and social lives of Black Americans? A quick look at the statistics for Black America reveals that, if anything, the lives of black people have gotten considerably worse under Obama: life expectancy, per capita wealth, employment levels, infant mortality, children in poverty, etc. all point to a deterioration of the living conditions for Blacks under Obama. Do these facts constitute betrayal of black people in the pursuit of serving the white establishment? Certainly, Ajamu Baraka argued that they do. It is hard to counter his assertion.

And how about Obama’s merciless slaughter of black and brown people around the world? From the lynchings, rapes, and murders of black Libyans carried out by Obama’s proxy terrorist forces during the regime change operation against the Libyan Government of Muammar Gaddafi, to the drone bombings of black and brown people all over the world, to the continued militarization of the African continent under the auspices of Obama’s AFRICOM: Do these policies and actions taken by the first black president constitute a betrayal of people of color in the service of the white ruling class and the Empire? Baraka has argued that they do.

So the question then becomes: Is Baraka’s use of the term Uncle Tom truly unwarranted? Or is it rather that liberals, especially white liberals, choose to ignore the material reality of Obama’s presidency in favor of the mythos of the kind-hearted and cool black president with the big smile swooping down on the wings of hope and change like an angel come down from heaven? Perhaps Ajamu Baraka has simply intruded into the dream and, like temperamental children, white liberals shed their crocodile tears in hopes of crying themselves back to sleep.

Liberal White Supremacy

But there is another, even more insidious, aspect to this CNN Uncle Tom moment that must be reckoned with; namely, what the subtext of the question tells us about the pathology of 21st Century American liberalism.

When the white liberal Cuomo implied that the black radical Baraka was somehow engaging in racism or bigotry by referring to Obama as “Uncle Tom,” Cuomo was actually betraying the deeply rooted, almost unconscious, racism at the heart of American liberalism. For, you see, a white man can accuse a black man of racism when said black man critiques another black man who has been anointed by the white establishment. In other words, it’s not Obama’s skin color that makes Baraka’s use of the term unacceptable to Cuomo, it is Obama’s position.

Cuomo here plays the role of sentinel of the establishment, guarding the gates of discourse, dictating to blacks and whites alike what is or is not appropriate when it comes to critiquing the first black president.

Obama is the right kind of black man, while Baraka is the wrong kind. Obama the liberal is deserving of respect, while Baraka the radical is deserving of scorn. Sorry Ajamu, you’re just not the right kind of black man.

And while black men are murdered seemingly every single day by law enforcement, Obama pens [op-ed pieces](#) arguing that “Every day, [police] confront danger so it does not find our families ... We recognize it, we respect it, we appreciate it, and we depend on you.” This is the right kind of black man, one who is passive and subservient in the face of ongoing, brutal oppression and violence. Baraka on the other hand, a man who has repeatedly lent his vocal support to the Movement for Black Lives among many other pro-black social movements, is caricatured as a bigot and racist.

The white liberal sees no contradiction here. He/she is blind to the irony of utilizing anti-racist verbiage to uphold an inherently racist and white supremacist argument which stealthily justifies the institutions of oppression and coercion while demeaning and slandering those who seek to dismantle them.

This is the white moderate to which Dr. King referred: the liberal more devoted to “order” than to justice. This is the cultural pathology of liberalism, an ideological disease which afflicts millions of people who, in their own self-deception, see themselves as healthy and righteous.

But diseased they remain, in utter denial of their own mental illness. And, instead, they choose to scapegoat those few men and women of the radical cloth who attempt to minister to the sick, to nurse them back to health. For you see, it is not the disease that must be fought, but rather the foul-tasting medicine. That is why Ajamu Baraka is made into the villain while Barack Obama is the cure. Such is the upside-down reality of the liberal.

White supremacy and racism are not mere discursive constructs to be woven into elaborate, but mostly empty, rhetorical flourishes. They are real phenomena existing in the real world of political life. And they are not simply the collective hatred expressed by hooded klansmen or bareheaded neo-nazis, but rather are the underlying assumptions, ideas, and values at the root of American political, economic, and social life – expressed by the police officer, the politician, and the news anchor in the finely tailored suit.

But to say it, and to do so publicly, is to transgress against the social norm. And to do so when speaking of the first black president is to commit the gravest sin against the god of liberalism.

Ajamu Baraka is not vilified for calling Obama an Uncle Tom. He is vilified for refusing not to.

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