

[Article copies available for a fee from The Transformative Studies Institute. E-mail address: journal@transformativestudies.org Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2010 by The Transformative Studies Institute. All rights reserved.]

Introduction: Imagining America Corey Dolgon¹

Southern New Jersey is remarkably flat for what seems like a million miles. From the 8th floor of the Cherry Hill Crowne Plaza you can see Philadelphia and Camden in front of you to the right, a tree-lined Cooper River winding towards the Delaware in front to the left, and further to the left, beyond the foliage and ribbon of highway, you get hints of the vast agricultural plains that make the state's farms some of the most productive on the east coast. Jersey's rich soil gets obscured by its gas tanks and turnpikes, but Vineland tomatoes and Hammonton blueberries are legendary for their sweetness and multitude.

My wife and daughters and I were in Cherry Hill for a family event and had gotten to the hotel late in the evening on July 3rd. We turned out the lights and prepared for bed when we noticed we could see fireworks out the window, off in the distance. Within minutes, we counted 10 separate fireworks displays from left to right across the panoramic view. The most spectacular was over the city of Philadelphia where the cascading stars and streaks of light danced among the neon and white glimmering skyline. For almost 30 minutes we watched as city after county after township after hamlet celebrated our nation's birthday by recreating the red glare of rockets and bombs bursting at twilight's last gleaming.

I must admit to having an uneasy relationship with our nation's birthday. For obvious reasons, celebrating a country whose history is at best a mixed bag of human achievement and foible, whose visions of liberty and freedom were inexorably shaped by genocide and slavery, and whose calls for blind patriotism all require a certain numbing of one's critical intellect and moral sensibilities. For me such nationalism has always been akin to religious holidays where my sociological imagination finds the solidarity and intimacy derived from being part of "a people"

¹ **Corey Dolgon**, Ph.D., Assistant Editor of *Theory in Action*, is Director of Community based Learning and professor of sociology at Stonehill College; e-mail: cdolgon@stonehill.edu.

Corey Dolgon

soothing and inspiring, if not also disquieting. As with good liquor, one gets drunk with the taste of *oneness*—a creative collectivity of time and space and family and friends and strangers that can all agree on something: being *good*, being *right*, being *us*. Standing at the window with “my girls” I could be intoxicated momentarily by the aerial display, like the fife and drums that stoked the almost primal urge of patriotic fervor from French prisoners of war in Jean Renoir’s *Grand Illusion*. As Jean Gabin’s Marechal reminds us in the film, “It’s not the music that gets to you, its’ the marching feet.”

I was sobered and somewhat cheered the next morning to read Julianne Malveaux’s July 4th tribute to Frederick Douglass. (Malveaux 2010) Expressing a similar hesitancy about the holiday, Malveaux quoted Douglass asking, “What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July?...I answer, a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity ... your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery.” Despite slavery’s ending and Jim Crow’s eventual demise, Malveaux notes that from unemployment and housing to education and health care, inequality between whites and people of color (especially African Americans) remains significant and sad.

Last year, amidst the hopeful frenzy that Obama’s election inspired, Malveaux said she gave up her annual custom of reading Douglass’s speech on the 4th. This year, as much of that optimism has dimmed in the wake of weak health care and financial reform bills, continued quagmires in the Middle East and Afghanistan, and right-wing Tea-Party saberrattling at home, she has returned to it. Malveaux admits that, “There are those who will tell me that, despite inequality, African Americans are better off in these United States than black people are anywhere else. Others will say that if I don’t like these United States, I can leave. But I am as staunch a patriot as the love-it-or-leave-it crowd. My mantra, though, is that we must improve it or lose it. We improve it when we fight to close racial economic gaps, when we struggle to make the words of the Pledge of Allegiance, one nation under God, more reality than fiction.” Like Douglass, Malveaux concludes that she does not “despair of this country,” but its progress remains so slow that reading Douglass must remain “a reminder that the struggle for justice and equality must continue.”

I agree with Malveaux for the most part. Our progress has been slow. Even if we experience moments where spikes of advancement seem obvious (such as Obama’s election), we also recognize how much he had to

distance himself from race to win. As my friend and sociologist extraordinaire, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, has pointed out:

[Obama's election culminated a] forty year old transition from the Jim Crow racial regime to the post-civil rights order I have called 'the new racism'.... [I]n this racial order a new type of minority politician emerged that is no longer connected to social movements and whose politics are, if Republican, conservative, and if Democrat, center to center-right. Post-civil rights minority politicians have been receiving support from *both* parties for some time which explains why Obama became the Democratic Party presidential nominee. He was not pushed onto the political platform by the black and progressive masses but was vetted by elites in the Democratic Party years *before* he was a serious contender for the nomination. (Bonilla-Silva 2010)

Essentially, Obama had to portray himself as "post-racial" to win the election. During the campaign and since his victory he has distanced himself from most conversations about race and especially racism. Bonilla-Silva contends that Obama could have used the Henry Louis Gates incident "to spark a discussion on racial profiling and, by extension, given that "profiling" by the police is but another version of discriminatory behavior, on the salience of race in America. Instead, by changing his stand from his initial accurate and strong view that 'the police acted stupidly,' to his 'I could've calibrated those words differently,' to his final 'resolution' of the matter with the infamous 'beer summit' at the White House, Obama showed how limited the possibilities are that a post-racial minority politician can deepen our national discussions on race and carry out enlightened racial policy." (Bonilla-Silva 2010)

Most of the 1960's civil rights folks I know and have heard from or read recently all point towards Obama's presidency as something they never expected to see in their lifetime. Its significance cannot be overstated. But the vitriol to which Obama has been met; the degree that his legitimacy as President, and even as an American citizen, has been challenged; and his own inability even to address the overt and covert structural nature of racial inequality in this country, all stand as signs of how intransigent the forces of racial inequality and oppression remain in this nation. The face of the Presidency has changed, but fundamental progress is slow and with spikes of change come new forms of discrimination and powerful forces of reactionary backlash.

Corey Dolgon

Unlike Malveaux, however, I am less concerned with pledges of allegiance to my nation or any other nation. Douglass's optimism came from a historical analysis that recognized progress, or what he called the "tendencies of the age." He predicted that the diminished capacity for nations to hide their oppressive acts and ignorant persecutions would give way as, "Walled cities and empires" became unfashionable. He continued:

The arm of commerce has borne away the gates of the strong city. Intelligence is penetrating the darkest corners of the globe. It makes its pathway over and under the sea, as well as on the earth. Wind, steam, and lightning are its chartered agents. Oceans no longer divide, but link nations together. From Boston to London is now a holiday excursion. Space is comparatively annihilated. -- Thoughts expressed on one side of the Atlantic are distinctly heard on the other...No abuse, no outrage whether in taste, sport or avarice, can now hide itself from the all-pervading light.

Retrieved at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2927t.html>

He envisioned an illuminated world where the darkness of human oppression would be met by the glare of global witness and shame. It was the ultimate sense of worldliness that would overcome provincialism and make it impossible to oppress and alienate out of the moral purview of the rest of the world.

Douglass's vision may someday come true. More pervasive now, however, seems to be the ability of market capitalism and its minions of racial and ethnic discrimination to paint global exploitation with a kind of triumphalism that obscures the base nature of new economic and social relations. What we refer to as globalization more often describes the return of sweatshops, the rise of a new human slave trade, and the rebirth of imperialistic instincts than it foretells the liberating power of knowledge. Again, there is progress in the expansion of global travel and global communication and the possibilities for people around the world to talk with each other, learn from one another, struggle for peace and justice together, and envision the possibilities of a more humane and sustainable "other world." Such progress faces great challenges, though, ranging from neo-liberalism to neo-fundamentalism. On the one hand, "the arm of commerce" has trampled democracy and human dignity more often than it has shed light on human suffering and want. On the other hand, the backlash of provincialism builds new walls along the West Bank and the Rio Grande. We seem to be undermining Douglass's vision at every turn.

I remember one year returning to my birthplace in Brooklyn, New York, with my father. Reminiscing with one of his old friends' mothers, she recalled that "Freddy (my dad) was the one who hated America." But my dad never hated America, only the awful things it had done. His heroes were the great activists and writers who challenged the nation to live up to the same great principles" that Douglass himself found inspiring. My Dad was a *Communism is Americanism* kind of guy who was born a decade too late for the Popular Front. But he relished Woody Guthrie, campaigned for Henry Wallace, and found his own poetic voice in an urban naturalism that drew on Whitman as much as Ginsburg. But mostly he lived and worked and thought and wrote with a kind of radical angst best characterized by Langston Hughes. "America never was America" for my dad, but he shared the belief that:

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft,
and stealth, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land,
the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless
plain--
All, all the stretch of these great green states--
And make
America again!

Retrieved at <http://www.americanpoems.com/poets/Langston-Hughes/2385>

Me? I am probably more like Ferlinghetti and am "waiting for someone to discover America and wail."

And so I stood watching and waiting at the hotel window with my wife and daughters. I stood waiting for the illuminated landscape to bear witness to the ways we continue to undermine the possibilities that international cooperation and global citizenry might bring. I stood waiting for one of the glorious red or green sparks to come spiraling down and set ablaze a movement of millions demanding free health care and education, living wage jobs and housing for all. I stood waiting, imagining that one could not celebrate a nation or pledge allegiance to a flag whose history is so contradictory at best. But I stood waiting, wondering if one couldn't recognize the contradictions for what they were—the outcomes of complex struggles where each stream of light was another shot across the bow of ignorance and oppression, hatred and greed. I imagined I was celebrating *that* history of struggle to discover, to make, to build America and wail. Oh how proudly we might stand.

As usual, our editors have put together an issue that allows us to stand proudly and see the works of colleagues who view their intellectual engagements as part of that struggle. Benjamin Shepard's article examines the life and work of Gay Liberation leader Eric Rofes. Rofes focus on

social relationships as both process and product of radial organizing resulted in a powerful set of strategies and tactics for organizing. Friendships and intimacies represent the nexus between individuals and social formations. Shepard argues such ground breaking work remains an important influence not only on Gay liberation politics but on much of the contemporary organizing landscape.

Also focusing on the impact of the “micro” on the “macro,” Robert Lewis Clark suggests that scholars of and practitioners in the criminal justice system too often ignore gender in general and masculinity in particular. Instead, most focus on recidivism rates and program opportunities. But Clark argues that constructions of masculinity often debilitate inmates’ abilities to rehabilitate. While programs and institutions are important, it’s the everyday lives of inmates and how they understand their lives and experiences and identities that affect much of their eventual success. Clark’s article goes a long way towards a more critical understanding of what might work for prison re-entry programs.

John Asimakopoulos provides a clarion call for contemporary social justice movements by debunking what has become an all too common mythology about the civil rights movement: that non-violence was the key to success. Asimakopoulos counters that it was direct action and progressive alternative education that stirred the passion and imagination of the movement. Various forms of rebellion, including using violence as a means of defense against police and the F.B.I., also added to the arsenal of different tactics and activities. In other words, non-violence was only one part of the organizing philosophy for some groups and was far from definitive in its dominance or success. Instead, Asimakopoulos advises that contemporary movements recall the legacy of militancy and rebellion to inform today’s organizing.

Finally, Margaret LeCompte and Ken Bonetti describe the ways in which Colorado’s corporatization of higher education is changing both the economic and political landscape of colleges and universities in the state. They effectively deconstruct the ideological and institutional mechanisms used to shift the nature and function of universities to benefit the needs of contemporary power elite. But they conclude by describing the efforts of students and faculty to challenge these trends.

REFERENCES

- Eduardo Bonilla Silva. 2010. “The hangover is still not over: Obamerica a Year Later.” *Humanity and Society*, Volume 34, Number 3.
- Julianne Malveaux, 2010. “On July 4, hopes for a better nation.” *USA Today*, July 1.