

“The Real Culprits . . . ”

April 2008

Kathy Emery

www.educationanddemocracy.org

. . . . 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 . . . short-term greed; . . . economic policies that favor the few over the many. . . .

. . . . [W]e cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together . . . we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; . . . we all want to move in the same direction – towards a better future for of children and our grandchildren.

--- Barack Obama, March 18, 2008

Obama’s speech was provoked by the hue and cry that went up when the media got a hold of videos of Reverend Jeremiah Wright’s sermons and launched a continuous feedback loop of “God D*mn America” the “U. S. of KKKK.” So Obama tried to explain to white America why blacks are still angry, while, at the same time, attempting to appeal to blue-collar whites by expressing sympathy for their exploitation by corporate America. In doing so, Obama revealed the ambiguities of hope.

In the first paragraph above, Obama confesses his understanding of how corporate America has employed a successful divide-and-conquer strategy on the working class. Then in the second paragraph above, Obama assures those who continue to aspire to middle and upper class status that he shares their assumptions that parents should be able to expect that their children, when they grow up, will be better off economically than they are.

But do we all share “common hopes?” I don’t think every person in the United States wants “to move in the same direction” and that is the fundamental contradiction in Obama’s worldview. Some hope for a future in which there is social justice. But for that to happen, we will need to learn how to live with less; redistribute our limited resources equitably; and, value community over profit. This hope comes up against the dominant myth—anyone can get rich—that is deeply rooted in our history. It seems to me that all those working class people who support Republican tax cuts for the rich do so because they hope one day to become rich themselves, or at least believe their children will be. Many immigrants came to this country over the last 400 years because they were attracted to the vision of “streets paved with gold.”

“Working hard to get ahead” (regardless of its effect on others) is a fundamental myth of the dominant culture, a myth every aspiring politician must accept and vow to perpetuate. It is a crucial myth underpinning the legitimacy of our stratified society. Last year, an *Economist* article reported a study showing that the more people *believed* there was social mobility the more they tolerated unequal distribution of wealth. There has been some social mobility in this country because first, the Indians were killed and Europeans took their land. Then Africans were enslaved to work it. Then the U.S. government took over most of Mexico and Horace Greely told working class whites to “go west young man.” Then the continental U.S. was filled up and U.S. companies began extorting cheap raw materials from Latin America and beyond.

But what happens now? The oil is running out. China and India are challenging U.S. economic and political hegemony. Global climate change is rubbing our face in the fact that we must accept limits on growth, or go extinct. How does 400 years of expand and grow, shop-‘til-you-drop thinking change? How do you “hope” yourself out of this dilemma?