

news



The Road Ahead

Conference targets mobilizing for change

By Jessica Hirst

Obama might be a symbol of change for our country, but how can we seize the moment to create real and lasting change? That's one of the questions underlying the "Mobilizing New Constituencies: The 2008 Election" symposium, which will take place from 10 am to 5:30 pm Thursday, Feb. 19, at the Wayne Morse Center at the UO.

The program will examine what strategies worked during the 2008 election for organizing new groups of voters, particularly young voters and people of color. It will also look at how those voters can be persuaded to continue their civic engagement.

The symposium will feature three keynote sessions and two panel discussions. Speakers will include two Obama campaign strategists, members of community-based organizations, and experts on race and politics from the University of Washington and the UO. Kitty Piercy will also speak.



EW spoke with panelist Daniel HoSang, who is assistant professor of political science and ethnic studies at the UO and a 2008-2009 Wayne Morse Center Resident Scholar.

HoSang has studied institutionalized racism and will be offering his perspectives on the real challenges to achieving racial equality.

In his award-winning dissertation, HoSang examined how civil rights opponents have used California's "direct democracy" ballot measure system to get initiatives passed that have resulted in greater segregation in housing and public schooling, and ultimately in low minority enrollment at state universities. HoSang refers to this process as "genteel apartheid."

California's anti-civil-rights ballot initiatives, HoSang argues, are framed from a perspective of constitutional rights (such as property rights) and use a language of tolerance and inclusion. They have allowed voters to identify as liberal while still supporting policies that promote racial inequality.

HoSang says racism does in fact still exist in our country, and he warns against letting Obama's presidency stand in for a final solution. The real path, he says, is political work that addresses long-standing issues.

You wrote an award-winning dissertation about how California's ballot initiatives contribute to a sort of institutionalized racism, even though the state prides itself on being a place of equal opportunity. Can you talk a little about your findings?

The paradox I explore is how a state that regards itself as both diverse and tolerant has consistently voted to sustain rather than challenge racial inequalities in public policy. I talk about the 1990s, where voters banned public affirmative action programs and bilingual education and imposed very punitive criminal sentencing laws and a really draconian tax on immigrants. Then I put that in a broader context, saying that it's not really a phenomenon of the 1990s — it's been happening since World War II. The same patterns were evident then in relation to fair employment, fair housing, school desegregation and English

JUST A FEW MT. BACHELOR LIFT TICKETS LEFT

REGULAR \$57.00
SELL FOR \$40.00

CALL EW OFFICES AT 484-0519 AND ASK FOR JAYME

language policies. I talk about the ballot's role in what I call a disavowal or a denial that any inequalities exist or any subordination exists.

In your dissertation, you argue that California voters have been complicit in a kind of veiled racism. But is it possible that they've been misled by the egalitarian language of the ballot initiatives, and that they've sometimes voted for measures that turn out to be different from what they thought?

I have a little bit of a different take on it, even though I think it's certainly true that you can never conclude decisively whether voters know what they're voting for. Most people skim ballot questions. But we've seen, for example, in 1964, California voting overwhelmingly for Lyndon Johnson and passing a ballot measure that makes racial discrimination in housing a constitutionally protected practice by an equally large majority. And I argue that they came to understand that right to discriminate as a natural right, as a property right. And it's still a racial right, but it became expressed as a property right. And that's part of the way in which California's own history of racial segregation was denied or disavowed, but voters could still regard themselves as quite tolerant and enlightened. It's more than just wanting to preserve segregated neighborhoods; it's believing that that property right was inalienable.

Do you see any similar things happening in Oregon or the Northwest right now?

We're seeing the same kind of proliferation of ballot measures in Oregon, and just this past November we saw a ballot measure attacking English language instruction and another one proposing another sentencing increase. It's true that racial demonology doesn't work the same in Oregon, so I would say that the use of ballot measures is increasingly mimicking California, but it hasn't taken on the same racial contours as California. But it's important to remember that the very first question that Oregon voters voted on in 1859 was whether to have slavery and/or whether to admit free black people, and they voted no on slavery and overwhelmingly not to admit black people.

Do you think that civil rights activists can use the ballot measure system to further their cause in the same way that the civil right opponents have?

I think it's possible. Minimum wage protections, what we might call progressives, have used the ballot effectively. I think the inability of civil rights groups to use it reflects their larger inability to have progressive public discussions about the role that race and racial justice might play in contemporary life. I think that language doesn't exist, those policies don't exist. So that's why they've been reluctant to do it.

Can you explain the concept of "colorblind consensus" and why you disagree with this way of viewing race?

It's a consensus between so-called liberals and conservatives that race plays no part in public life. It's an ideal that we would all strive for, but I talk about the way that (the colorblind consensus) cuts off any ability to talk about the structures of racial inequality or experiences even, because of this shared idealization that to talk about that is to move us away from being colorblind. I think that ultimately that does as much to mask the inequalities as it does to bring about a fuller notion of democracy. It's a consensus because it's not just so-called conservatives advancing it.

One could say that Obama finally broke the ice with his speech on race. Do you think the colorblind consensus will disappear during his administration, or will it persist?

It will persist, and if history has taught us anything, it's that ideas about race and the way racism functions never remain static. And there's an Obama paradox as well. On one hand, (his presidency) is undeniably symbolic, rich, meaningful, and important; and on the other hand, Obama himself would face enormous constraints if he were to head-on address questions of structural racial inequality. That makes it difficult to have discussions about racism. So that's the contradiction: Obama's presidency is deeply symbolically important, but in some ways it might actually undermine an effort to get at these long-standing questions, because it could stand in a final solution to racism.

Do you think Obama offers real hope for better racial equality?

Let's imagine the worst-case crisis that Obama is trying to avoid now: 25 percent unemployment, households with no net worth, collapsing education and health systems, environmental degradation rampant in neighborhoods. That describes the baseline conditions for much of black America, many Native Americans in this country, and certain immigrant communities. But Obama's imperative task is

not to address that crisis. It's to make sure that that the crisis isn't realized by the nation as a whole. So that's why I think that while on a symbolic level, (Obama's presidency) is undoubtedly meaningful and likely to affect our understanding of and ideas about race for a generation to come, you can't confuse it with the political work to address long-standing conditions and promote a more substantive equality.

I'm curious about your thoughts on some of the ways organizations can continue to sustain the voter engagement that was achieved during the Obama campaign.

That's the enormous question, and much of Obama's own agenda is how to keep those voters engaged. It's not just Obama that's going to do it — it will actually take place at the local level throughout the country. That's what the symposium on Thursday will address in part. We'll hear from community organizations that were on the front lines, signing up voters and talking to them about issues, and find out what they're doing to engage constituencies of new voters beyond the election.

What are some of the efforts being made now in the Northwest to boost political involvement?

A lot of the focus has been how to take hundreds of voters that an organization has come across and develop an ongoing relationship with them around issues. So, for example, a group in Woodburn that has done a lot of work with immigrant communities, trying to talk to new voters, now has to see if they can translate that into some lobbying they want to do at the state level around immigrant rights issues. So that's one of the challenges: Elections are just one form of participation. The question of whether it opens up into more enduring participation is the one that looms before us.

If you could give Oregon a grade for racial equality, what would you give it?

I can't refuse the question — I would say a C. On the one hand, we still have some affirmative action programs in place. Voters voted to protect the anti-English-only ballot initiative. And I think there is some awareness in our state's political culture of the legacy of racism. I think it's still possible to talk about it. That having been said, Oregon is not much different from many other states in that acknowledging (racism) and imagining new solutions is still in the margins of our political debates. Disparities still exist in our state regarding native rights, racial profiling, and sentencing increases. The disparities are striking but they're not acknowledged.

Do you see any grassroots efforts or potential legislation that address these disparities?

There's no panacea, but there's some very exciting work happening. There's some work centered around Salem and Woodburn with Latino organizations, and in Portland there's some interesting racial justice organizing and multi-racial immigrant organizing with people from Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America. So I think there's some real energy, and it's promising.

But it's a very open-ended moment. Think about a civil rights group that wants to put forward an agenda to address disparities in prisons. On the one hand, it would be very difficult for them to accuse an Obama administration of supporting a racially unequal system. But on the other hand, they might now be able to build some sympathy and acknowledgement of racial inequality.

So I think the election isn't a final solution. It's what we do with it is what matters most.

[Table of Contents](#) | [News](#) | [Views](#) | [Blogs](#) | [Calendar](#) | [Film](#) | [Music](#) | [Culture](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Personals](#)
[Contact](#) | [EW Archive](#) | [Advertising Information](#) | [Current Issue](#)