

# An Open Letter to Obama

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## Racism, Class and Profiling

By Cyrus Bina

Author's note: The arrest of Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates speaks to the question of race and class in America. In terms of the media and pundit response, it also speaks to the absurdity of personalization and thus the substitution, in this case, of Gates's socioeconomic status for the social question of "race" in the United States.

This very question parallels the apologetic and indeed reactionary argument – raised by those who falsely claim that in the June 12th presidential election in Iran – to the effect that Ahmadinejad had not only won but also had the support of the "working class," personified by the seemingly downtrodden paramilitary Basijis. This obtuse claim, which is also made by some "leftists" within the Iranian diaspora, exhibits no understanding that the so-called Revolutionary Guard and its paramilitary Basij are but the very face of the state in the Islamic Republic.

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### *Open Letter to Obama*

I admire your courage, Mr. President, for uttering the word "stupid," when you were responding to reporters concerning the wrongful arrest (i.e., injury), plus attempt to humiliate Professor Henry Luis Gates, Jr. (i.e., insult) by the arresting officer, a member of Cambridge Police Department. However, you seemed to have hesitated, when you should not have, from putting the question of race, ethnicity, and indeed the plague of racial (and political) *profiling* on the front burner. And this is precisely the time that one needs to expose all this when the very history of this nation, on the one hand, and wrongheaded direction of the public discourse, on the other hand, is toward fear-mongering fight against "terrorism." You know better than I do that Professor Gates is a well-known figure, and his face is quite known to everyone, at least in Cambridge area; in other words, he is no stranger in such a tiny little town in which Harvard faculty, especially a handful of Harvard Africa-American faculty, must be known to officials in the city. I am speaking of my own experience when I was serving as an associate, affiliate-in-research, and a visiting faculty over the first half of the 1990s at Harvard. I used to be greeted sometimes by those whom I didn't know.

The question, therefore, is *not* whether Professor Gates "resisted arrest" or "talked back" to the arresting officer; the pertinent question is why an arrest in the first place. Upon hearing the released 911 tape from the Cambridge police--following the caller initial report – the police officer suddenly asks: "... are they White, Black or Hispanics..." The question remarkably provides its own answer, namely, that the typology of race is a premeditating factor that terrifically is on the mind of officer who sends the squad car to Ware Street. As we can see, answer then is racial profiling, which consciously and/or unconsciously has been and still is an

essential part of the police training in all our 50 States, plus the District of Columbia. And, worse, the "science" of profiling of all kinds has decidedly been further fortified by the fear-mongering and civil-liberty-grabbing attitude of the post-9/11 in this country – this needs to stop.

Another difficulty is that the best of the mainstream media do not get it either. For instance, the other night, David Brooks (a *New York Times* conservative columnist) in a T.V. program tried to justify the reaction of arresting officer by putting him in the "working class" as opposed to Professor Gates, a Harvard professor, an "upper class," thus playing on "Karl Marx" in its most farcical parody, perhaps for the sake of the right-wing extremists of his favorite political party. Brooks decidedly missed the point that this matter is not personal at all. Thus, he distorted the fact that indeed the arresting officer is not an individual but the *very face of the state* itself. This is typical of social conservatives in the post-Reagan Republican Party that often employ the notions of class, culture, etc. in their most perverse manner in order to give respect and legitimacy to their reactionary attitude and ideology. And that's why I was deliberately silent on naming the good sergeant from the outset.

The likes of Brooks in media and elsewhere in the society often misidentify the plague of institutional racism that's so enduringly wreaking havoc in this country, as it also overlaps with the attitude of other social classes, including that of the working class. Yet, by a careful glance at the socioeconomic landscape of race (i.e., African-Americans, Hispanics and the working poor in general), one may not fail to see who the working class is. In other words, at least up until the present time, race and (working) class are remaining inseparable. Thus, racism is a matter of class, not in a manner of David Brooks's rhetoric but precisely contrary to his rightwing agenda.

Let's raise a toast to the complete elimination of profiling in all its manifestations in this country.

**--Cyrus Bina**

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