

A Cold Civil War?

French Historian Pap Ndiaye and American novelist Jake Lamar discuss racial turmoil in the USA and its echoes in France

JAKE LAMAR, PAP NDIAYE

On February 1, 2022, the American Library in Paris launched its Black History Month program with a conversation between two well-known figures in France's international Black community.

*Pap Ndiaye is a historian of French and Senegalese descent. As a professor at Sciences Po, he popularized the study of race and identity in French academia, most notably with his book *La condition noire*. In 2021, he was appointed director of the National Museum of the History of Immigration in Paris.*

Jake Lamar is an African American writer who has lived in Paris since 1993. He is the prize-winning author of a memoir, seven novels and a play and teaches creative writing at Sciences Po. What follows are edited excerpts of their exchange.

Jake Lamar: We first met on what I think of as the Obama circuit, that constant swirl of interviews and panel discussions about the campaign in 2008, which now seems like some long-lost Age of Innocence. And looking back to those days, there's a particular quality in your writings, your talks, your interviews that I deeply admire: you are very direct and, at the same time, very nuanced. That's an increasingly rare combination. And you bring such a sharp, fresh eye to American history, and especially African American history, I often feel that I rediscover my native country reading you and listening to you.

Let's talk about this moment in America. I suggested earlier that the dawn of the Obama era seemed very rosy and perhaps overly optimistic in retrospect. And for my generation—I'm exactly the same age as Barack Obama—the generation of kids that grew up watching the civil rights movement and the Black Power movement unfold on TV, we always wondered: What would happen if there was a Black president?

And now we know. Something I badly underestimated was the violence and the longevity of the backlash to the election of a Black president. To my mind, the backlash began the night Obama was elected and is still going on, taking on different forms over the past 14 years. Is that how you see it as well or not?

Pap Ndiaye: I'm curious why you think that the backlash started the night that Barack Obama was elected. I didn't feel that. I felt that even the Republicans, I should say moderate Republicans, acknowledged that the US was living a historic moment, that there was something so important going on this night of November 2008, something that spread throughout the world. I remember, I was in a cab, actually, on the Obama circuit you mentioned earlier, and the cab was driven by a guy from Haiti and he was asking me about whether Obama was elected or not. And it was around three o'clock in the morning. Ohio had just fallen on the Democratic side. So I said, Yeah, I think Obama is elected. So the guy stopped his car because he was crying. He was crying in the streets of Paris. And I think it speaks volumes about the historic moment. This guy was intelligent, he was smart enough to realize that his life wouldn't change with Obama in the White House. But he was very aware that he was living a historic moment. So he stopped his car.

JL: It's true that people the world over celebrated the moment. When I speak about a backlash, I'm really talking about something more in the nitty gritty of American politics. On the night of Obama's inauguration (January 20, 2009), a group of prominent Republicans met in a restaurant and settled on a strategy of total obstruction. In other words, you had half of the legislative branch basically deciding they weren't going to cooperate with this president, and he hadn't even done anything yet. It was the night of his inauguration. In 2013, in the judicial branch, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was eviscerated by the Supreme Court. And the rise of the candidate who shall not be named, Obama's successor in the White House, his whole political career was part of the backlash. I mean, he was a very well-known media figure but his whole political career was a reaction against Obama's presidency: the "birther" conspiracy theory. And subsequently we've witnessed a whole series of events. Certainly, one of the grimmest milestones of this era occurred in Charlottesville, Virginia, in the summer of 2017. And Pap, you actually lived in Charlottesville 20 years before that horror. What went through your mind during those awful days in 2017? Did you think this was something that could happen in the Charlottesville you knew?

PN: No. Charlottesville is a college town, where the University of Virginia is located, with thousands and thousands of students with a very active campus and academic life, and so on. The main campus is a couple of miles west of downtown Charlottesville. It's a fairly small city but I didn't realize that there was a statue of General Robert E. Lee there until late in my stay in Charlottesville as I didn't spend too much time in this area. So it's as if Charlottesville had a campus life on one side and on the other side was a more Southern city, which it very much remains, with the deep divide between the African American and the white populations. There's an African American mayor now, but that was not the case back in the 1990s.

But I think you're right about the Obama backlash. I'm thinking about it and I'm thinking about this long history of a Republican party that has moved to the right. So much. And it didn't start with the guy that was elected president, after Obama, five years ago. It started a long time ago. And even before Obama was elected, if you think of Newt Gingrich, for example, back in the mid-1990s, when Gingrich led the radicalization of the Republican Party with the idea that the Republicans didn't have to cooperate with the Democrats to find some common ground, that they had to oppose in a very brutal way. You had to engage in an ideological war with the Democrats. There is a long pre-Obama history of this sort of Republican Party. But you're right, in the sense that when Obama was elected, that was another step, I would say, with a very central point: the massive disenfranchisement of people who don't generally vote for the Republicans, especially African Americans, but also the youth and other groups, with the 2013 Supreme Court decision, which you mentioned, that basically dismantled the Voting Rights Act of 1965. That was a turning point. When compared to the 1990s culture war, there is something very disturbing in the way the Republicans now are threatening the very foundations of American democracy.

JL: Well, January 6, 2021 was certainly a huge turning point. And there is actually talk these days about the possibility of a second civil war in the USA. Let me ask you, do you think America is on the brink of a civil war? And what exactly would that look like? And if it's not civil war we're looking at, how would you define the bitter conflict going on in the country right now?

PN: I tend not to buy the historical image, even if it's powerful and seductive in many ways, of a civil war. The actual Civil War was something quite different, we're talking about a real war that killed 600,000 people between 1861 and 1865. Back in the 1960s, there was also talk about a civil war when some Republican

politicians were afraid of the radical left and the Black Power movement and were hoping for Richard Nixon to be elected. Actually, Nixon played very much on this idea to restore order and to end this period of anarchy of the radical left, and he used the idea of a potential civil war that had to be stopped. And there was no civil war, of course, so I think we should be a little wary of that rhetoric. Now, that does not mean that we're not in a serious situation in the United States, with actual threats to democracy because of what happened on January 6th. I really worry about the Republican party. We need a conservative party in the US as well as in France. Conservative people, that's fine, that's part of society. But they have to respect the foundations of their democracy, they have to invent some kind of inclusive policies, they have to welcome anyone, which is not the case with the Republican Party. So for me the real issue is the drift of the Republican Party outside of what is acceptable in a democracy.

JL: But there is a strange sort of re-litigation of the Civil War taking place, whether it's about removing statues and Confederate flags, or the proposed ban on the teaching of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, a major novel about slavery, written by a Nobel Prize winner, a ban that would be imposed in Virginia's public schools. I've heard the expression "cold civil war" and maybe that's apt, that sort of like the Cold War between the USA and the Soviet Union, it's going to be mutually assured destruction if you go all the way. There's been a lot of hostility but we can hope it doesn't become an actual shooting war.

There's an opening on the US Supreme Court and President Biden has vowed to appoint an African American woman, which, of course, has become controversial. So far, there have been only two Black Supreme Court justices: Thurgood Marshall and Clarence Thomas. What do those two figures tell us about the trajectory of American racial politics and the role of the Supreme Court in civil rights issues over their two terms? And how might the presence of the next Black justice affect the court?

PN: When Thurgood Marshall was appointed to the Supreme Court in 1967, he had had a long and distinguished career as a civil rights lawyer. As chief lawyer for the NAACP, he played a major role in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision by the Supreme Court in 1954. By the time Marshall was appointed in '67, Chief Justice Earl Warren had radically transformed the Supreme Court, turning it from an institution that protected property first and foremost to one that protected human rights. That's a major change in the history of the Supreme Court.

But now the Supreme Court is clearly conservative, and seems to be ready to throw out the major advances of the '60s and '70s including, of course, *Roe v. Wade*, but also include a number of issues related to voting rights, the rights of inmates, and so on.

The appointment of Clarence Thomas in 1991 was very much part of this new conservative wave of the Supreme Court. Of course, he hasn't spoken much. He is known to be very quiet in the Supreme Court, but he has constantly sided with the most conservative judges, including Antonin Scalia, who was his mentor in some ways. So being African American is one thing, being liberal or conservative is another thing, and you can always find conservative African Americans such as Clarence Thomas. Now we're talking about the appointment of someone who will make the Supreme Court a little less caricatural. In any case, the appointment of an African American woman will of course be of historic importance.

JL: It's one of those painful ironies of history that Thurgood Marshall was succeeded by someone who dismantled so much of what he fought for. If you think of the gutting of the Voting Rights Act by the Supreme Court in 2013, that was a five to four decision with Clarence Thomas in the majority. I think there's a parallel with Ruth Bader Ginsburg being replaced by Amy Coney Barrett, her ideological opposite.

So let's talk a bit about France now. When we first met in 2008, it was around the time that you published your book *La Condition noire*, which quickly became one of the landmark texts in the study of identity in this country. It might be hard for Americans to realize just how challenging it was, your bringing this sensibility into French academia. Back then, the French didn't even like people to call themselves *noir*. And the word race was and remains a kind of taboo word.

PN: The "R word."

JL: So how has France changed regarding these issues over the past 14 years?

PN: I see it as a twofold evolution. On one side, I do believe that French society is changing in many ways, and that it is possible to talk about issues that were seen as illegitimate 20 years ago. In academia, I'm very happy that there are many very popular courses that discuss racial issues; these did not exist 15 years ago. This is the case at many institutions, which are now, of course, attacked as being "woke"

or leftist. But in any case, it shows how interested students can be. And I'm not only talking about Black students, I'm talking about white students, students of all origins who are interested in exploring racial issues, issues that were for so long swept under the rug, and that remain sensitive in France. So that's one point.

On the other side, there's now a political rhetoric that targets universities, that targets people interested in racial, colonial and post-colonial issues that did not exist to the same extent back in 2008. So that's a matter of concern. But again, I think we should make a distinction between the complexity of the interesting evolution of French society and the French public sphere, the one you see on TV, which is saturated with reactionary, sometimes even extreme right views, rhetoric that targets, in an extremely violent way, anyone who dares to speak of issues that are supposed to be non-French.

JL: I feel that back around the time we first met, there was so much denial, and a reluctance even to use certain words because that leads to examining the issue. I remember, about 14 years ago, a French reader asking me, "Why do you call yourself *Black*?" As if it were some kind of curse!

PN: As if it was a matter of shame! And there is another issue, which is that of accusing people who talk about racial issues of being Americanized or being influenced by the Americans. So there's an anti-American rhetoric, which is extremely powerful around this, around these issues, which is so ignorant of a century-long French history.

JL: Yes, you had a very eloquent response to this sort of attack in the magazine *Jeune Afrique*, the notion that these were ideas that had recently arrived from America. As you point out, Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor developed the philosophy of La Négritude, here in Paris, 90 years ago. I think it's a sign of how successful you've been in getting people to address these issues that you're being attacked in this way. Around the same time that I met you, I also got to know other writers of your generation, Alain Mabanckou, Rokhaya Diallo, Maboula Soumahoro. And you've all thrived in bringing a Black consciousness to the arts, culture, intellectual discourse in this country. This reaction you're seeing against you is like the hysteria around critical race theory in America. I think in France, it's more about wanting to impose that denial again, rather than the same sort of violence one feels in America.

PN: Absolutely. There is denial. But I think it's more possible to say today, “Well, yeah, I'm French, but I'm French and Black. And I shouldn't be ashamed of it.” I mean, what's the problem? It's not some kind of deviant moral thing, just a possibility to be a French Black and that's not turning my back on universalism. As Césaire taught us, Blackness is a way to access universalism, it's not a denial of universalism. It's a road to universalism, but not a Eurocentric universalism. Yes, it is possible to be a Black man, and to acknowledge that, and not to be ashamed of it, and not to deny that, and at the same time, to be truly universal.

JL: Yeah, and speaking about embracing a word, I'm old enough to remember when, in America, the polite term was Negro or even colored. And then, when I was seven years old, James Brown came out with the song, “Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud.” I loved that statement then and I love it today.

About the Authors

Jake Lamar was born in 1961 and grew up in the Bronx, New York. After graduating from Harvard University, he spent six years writing for *Time* magazine. He has lived in Paris since 1993 and teaches creative writing at one of France's top universities, Sciences Po. He is the author of a memoir, seven novels, numerous essays, reviews and short stories, and a play. His most recent work, *Viper's Dream*, is both a crime novel and an audio drama, set in the jazz world of Harlem between 1936 and 1961.

Pap Ndiaye is a historian of French and Senegalese descent who was born in 1965 and raised in the Paris suburb of Antony. After studying at the Ecole Normale Supérieure and at the University of Virginia, he became an authority on African American and Afro-French history. As a professor at l'Institut d'études politiques, better known as Sciences Po, he popularized the study of race and identity in French academia, notably with his book *La Condition noire*. He was a curator of the blockbuster exhibition “Black Models” at the Musée d'Orsay and, in 2021, was named director of France's National Museum of the History of Immigration.



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