

Cornel West: 'George Floyd's public lynching pulled the cover off who we really are'

As the US philosopher and civil rights activist looks ahead to the presidential election, he discusses Joe Biden, Black Lives Matter and why Barack Obama was more Kenny G than John Coltrane



'When there is a cold-hearted, neo-fascist like Trump, I have got to try and push Biden over the line' ... West.

by Hugh Muir
19 Oct 2020

Cornel West is a thinker. Readers of Prospect magazine recently voted him the world's fourth-best thinker. And right now he is thinking about 3 November, and whether the United States will reject or endorse Donald Trump. No one knows what will happen; not even West, not least because in the US he sees contradictions that even he can't fully explain.

One such contradiction was Charlottesville, Virginia on the day in August 2017 when far-right activists menaced a community, killed a woman protesting against racism and then basked in the affirmation of Trump calling them "some very fine people". West – always dapper in black suit, black scarf, white shirt, gleaming cufflinks and with his grey-flecked afro standing proud – was there.

“I remember seeing those folk looking at us and cussing at us and spitting at us and carrying on. And then the charge, and the anti-fascists coming in to save our lives. But what I also remember is walking by the park and seeing these neo-fascist brothers listening to some black music. I said: ‘Wow, this is America, isn’t it? These neo-fascist brothers listening to some Motown just before they going to mow us down.’ Ain’t that something?”

What West says matters because of his CV and because he straddles so many platforms: in academia, in the media, in popular culture. He seems too learned to be embraced by popular culture and too popular to have sway in academia, and yet he manages both. It’s capital he intends to expend between now and November.

“I am not crazy about Biden,” he says. “I don’t endorse him. But I believe we gotta vote for him. I am not in love with neoliberal elites either. I think they have to take some responsibility for this neo-fascist moment. But in the end, this white supremacy is soooo lethal ... and it cuts so deep.”



West is arrested in Ferguson, Missouri, for an act of civil disobedience in protest at the killing of Michael Brown by police two months earlier, October 2014.

He pauses and his measured delivery becomes staccato. There is pain there. “When you think about it, 65% of white brothers voted for Trump and 50% of white sisters. That’s the kind of country we live in. It’s like ... Wow! If it wasn’t for black folk and brown folk and progressive white folk ... you voted for him then and you will vote for him again? Is that what we are talking about? With his impact on the world ...everybody knows he is a gangster, everybody knows he is a pathological liar and a xenophobe.”

And how will it turn out? Will Trump win again? If he loses, will he go? West pauses and reflects. “It’s hard to say. Some of us gonna go in and escort him out. He will probably say the election was rigged, he will probably say it was illegitimate. He could

call on his troops to not accept the result of the election. Then we are really in a mess, my brother ... civic strife, man.”

Trump is creating a character for himself. Like a dumbed down version of a Pirandello play

It is, many say, the Covid election. Trump belittled it, under-reacted, ignored his scientists, caught it, recovered – or so he claims – and then made his recovery part of the narrative. Par for the course, says West. “He is creating a character for himself. Like a dumbed down version of a Pirandello play. He is trying to convince us that he is the strongman who is the only one who can save America: that he is a Superman bouncing back from the virus he was in denial about.”

West, 67, sees himself as part of an “anti-fascist coalition” against Trump. He is rooting for the least worst. “What I don’t want to do is present Biden as some great defender of the poor and working people,” he says. “I don’t want to lie. We have had enough lies with Trump.” It’s Hobson’s choice. “When there is a cold-hearted, mean-spirited neo-fascist like Trump, I have got to try and push Biden over the line.”

The same applies to Kamala Harris, Biden’s running mate, and with Biden already 77, a potential president. “She is a brilliant black sister,” says West. But, “she is very much a part of that class and imperial hierarchy”.

West’s yearning to be part of the dominant debate began in childhood in Sacramento, California, where he grew up with his mother Irene, a feted teacher, his father, Clifton, an air force civilian administrator, and three siblings. The Wests raised their progressive voices in the Shiloh Baptist church, as civil rights demonstrators and through the Urban League, a historic civil rights organisation. They took the young Cornel to see Martin Luther King. “He was very powerful. I was too young to understand all his words, but he had an impact on my soul.”

A keen scholar, West took his activism to elementary school. Aged eight, he was kicked out because he refused to salute the flag. A teacher tried to coerce him and a fracas ensued. He had his reason; a family horror, a very American outrage – the death of his great-uncle. “My great-uncle was part of a group from the military who came back from the first world war; a number who were lynched in uniform. They put the flag around them to let them know they were not going to be full citizens, even though they had been willing to give their lives for the country.”

But the young West – assertive and school-less – was lucky to be bright and have supportive parents who knew their way around the system. His mother eventually found him a school across town and then returned each day to teach in her own. West found his metier. “I had a wonderful time,” he says. “I was blessed to bounce back.”

He was set on a stellar trajectory. In 1970, he went to Harvard, graduating in 1973 with a degree in near Eastern languages and civilisation. Then he went off to Princeton to become the first African American to graduate there with a PhD in philosophy. After lecturing at Harvard, he went on to the Union Theological Seminary, New York, the University of Paris and Yale University’s Divinity School. At Yale, during an anti-apartheid campus protest, he was arrested and briefly jailed. In 1988, he returned to Princeton where he spent six years teaching religion and African American studies before re-entry to Harvard – a tenure that ended explosively in 2002 when he fell out

with the university's then president Lawrence Summers. Re-route again to Princeton for more pioneering teaching of African American studies before, in 2017, a triumphant return to Harvard gazetted with fanfare in the New York Times.

Central to his rock star ascent are his books. The first clutch were worthy and well-received. Then in 1993 came West's collection of essays, *Race Matters*. It became the lens through which much of the US discussed race: a standard work in colleges and universities, it was the defining text over which the political and intellectual battles were fought. Bill Clinton, the then president, called West to the White House for a private consultation. Some hailed the book, since republished in a 25th anniversary edition, as an arrow through America's dark heart. Others questioned his analysis. But few argued with the book's contention that race mattered and, in its wake, West mattered, too.

Today, he presents as a genial man of firm positions and strong faith, drawn from a well of Christianity that means Trump, Michael Bloomberg and even Tucker Carlson – the notorious rightwing Fox News anchor – are referred to as brother. Which can lead to problems – for example, when he refers to the controversial head of the Nation of Islam. “When I call Trump a brother, they say: ‘Oh Brother West, my God, he’s so open-minded.’ But I call Louis Farrakhan a brother, and they say: ‘Oh Brother West must be antisemitic.’ As a Christian you are told to love thy neighbour, and it’s not love thy neighbour with qualifications, its love across the board.”



Happier days ... with Obama at a fundraiser in Harlem, 2007. Photograph: Hiroko Masuike/Getty Images

Any love for Barack Obama, however, is disfigured by the solid line he draws from Obama's time in office to the rise of Trump. He has called his country's first black president a “war criminal” because of his use of drones. Now, he says: “People don't understand the weight of the bailout of Wall Street. Why would you use a trillion dollars for the top 0.01% and leave your people dangling, go to them every four years and act as if you're their hero?”

I wouldn't be who I am without an Aretha Franklin or John Coltrane

For West music and culture are vital to his thinking. No one else juxtaposes the thoughts of great poets and philosophers with those of Curtis Mayfield or Bootsy Collins. "I wouldn't be who I am without an Aretha Franklin or John Coltrane," he says. He also prizes hip-hop. As we speak, he is preparing for a hip-hop summit aimed at increasing voter registration. "Geniuses like Rakim and Tupac are wrestling with their conception of what it means to be human in their context," he says. "They are artists and all the artists, as Shelley says in his Defence of Poetry, are the 'unacknowledged legislators of the world'."

So, too, the Wachowskis, the cult film-makers who hired him to play Councillor West in *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*. "That was something," he recalls. "We had intellectual dialogue with Keanu Reeves and Laurence Fishburne, reading Schopenhauer and William James. They are very much intellectuals, they really are."



West in The Matrix Reloaded.

But when this politico-cultural lens seeks out Obama, crosshairs appear. "It is just sad that the first black president ended up being Kenny G rather than John Coltrane," he says. "What can you say? 'Go on Kenny G, play your notes; you're alright ...' Obama's alright. He's not a fascist or anything. But we're looking for Coltrane."

Since the death of George Floyd, people have also been searching for diagnoses and radical prescriptions. An unprecedented stirring, to West's mind, simply explained. "George Floyd's public lynching connected with the pandemic, connected with the neo-fascist gangster in the White House, and pulled the cover off who we really are and what our system really is," he says. "We have been living a lie for so long."

The killing of Breonna Taylor, and the grand jury decision that no police officer should be charged with her death, "shows the system is decrepit; rotten," West says, quietly.

“That is why it is more concerned with bullets going through the white neighbour’s door than the bullet that killed the black sister.”

From race matters to Black Lives Matter: “A beautiful new moment in the struggle for black freedom.” But even there West sees pitfalls and offers advice. There must be clear objectives, he says. It must be “a profoundly human affair that is always multi-racial, multinational, multigender, multi-sexual orientation”. Crucially, it must prioritise those who need it most. “The focus must be on empowering the least of these, to use the biblical term – the poor and working-class. When you are overthrowing monuments, that is not empowering poor people. It becomes a symbolic gesture.”

That strategy, he says, requires deep thought. “Lincoln was a white supremacist for most of his life but, I mean, my God, he grew. He was a force for good. What happens is you begin to alienate certain members of a larger community that you are trying to speak to.”

When I first interviewed West, he was being feted at Cambridge University and in London, while David Cameron was at No 10, dispensing social division and austerity. “Britain is in deep trouble,” West said then. Neither of us saw what would follow. “Johnson,” he spits contemptuously, “is the kissing cousin of Trump. He is just more educated, more polished and more sophisticated, but I think he is in the same Trumpian zone with Netanyahu and Modi and Bolsonaro. I hate to say that I might have been right about Britain,” he says. Then he chuckles and shrugs in sympathy: “I didn’t see Johnson coming either.”

Over Zoom, he is a lesson in deliberation: rocking back and forth in his own time register, but that’s deceptive because he is also a blur of activity. There are the demands of academia, the summits, his podcast *The Tightrope*, an engaging double act with Prof Tricia Rose, the sociologist from Brown University in Rhode Island, spanning race, social affairs and culture. He is slightly giddy, preparing for the academic Oscar award of a hugely prestigious Gifford lecture in 2024, one of the series hosted by Edinburgh University since 1888 and described as “the highest honour in a philosopher’s career”. His subject: wrestling death and dogma and domination.

He is also a very vocal supporter of Julian Assange and the fight to stop his extradition to the US. “He’s a truth teller,” says West. “He has been simply laying bare some of the crimes and lies of the American empire.” But will he pay the price? “I am praying for him,” he says, “but I don’t think it looks good, man.”

If the times are bleak, with just a glimmer of hope for 3 November and thereafter, West insists they follow a predicted trajectory. “Militarism, racism, poverty and materialism; all four of these will suck the energy out of American democracy,” he says, reciting reverently. “Martin Luther King said that right before they killed him – and the truth-tellers often get killed, as you know. That’s the way of the world.” Should he be concerned? He cocks his head and laughs: “Oh shoot, they could kill me any day; that’s all right with me. I am going down swinging, brother, like Ella Fitzgerald and Muhammad Ali – with a little bit of Rakim and some Coltrane.”