



## *I HAVE A DREAM: THE IDEOLOGICAL BREACH BETWEEN TWO GENERATIONS IN *THE BUTLER**

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57 years ago, on August 28, 1963, in the very same place where the Emancipation Proclamation was signed by Abraham Lincoln a century before, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his historical public speech known as “I Have a Dream” in Washington, DC. “One hundred years later, the Negro still is not free”, claimed King, baring the existence of a reality that led America to a period of racial and social unrest in the pursuit of equality, pushed by the Civil Rights Movement. This movement for social justice marked a turning point in the way the Black community conceived its role within the American society, becoming more aware and critical against the servile and yielding attitudes White America expected from them, and refusing allegiance to the institutional discrimination. This ideological breach between two generations has been portrayed in Lee Daniel’s historical drama film *The Butler* (2013), which, thanks to its numerous historical references, will be briefly analysed for the purpose of this post.

As said, *The Butler* is the story of two different generations: the ones who served and the ones who rebelled. The movie revolves around the memories of the White House’s butler Cecil Gaines (Forrest Whitaker) while he awaits to meet the newly inaugurated president—as the story is set in 2009, we can deduce it is Barack Obama. From his early years, when he used to serve on a cotton plantation in Macon, Georgia, Cecil has spent his whole life pleasing and assisting others. When he was a child, after a violent event he was taken in by the estate’s caretaker and specifically trained as a house servant. At the age of 18, he moved on to a hotel, where he worked as servant until he was recommended for a job in a hotel in Washington, DC. There, he met his future wife, Gloria (Oprah Winfrey) and had two sons: Louis (David Oyelowo) and Charlie (Isaac White). Soon after, in 1957, Cecil was eventually hired as a White House servant during the administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower. There, he would remain for life.



Despite Cecil's lack of interest on politics, the movie goes on portraying the countless cases of discrimination that the Black community had to endure during those years. While Cecil is shown rejecting all the related events and protests, his son Louis begins to get more and more involved in the different rebellious activities that will lead to the emergence and evolution of the Civil Rights Movement. Persuaded by activist James Lawson (Jesse Williams), Louis will begin his path by taking part in a nonviolent sit-in at a segregated diner, getting arrested afterwards for civil disorder. Even if Louis meets fierce oppression from many sectors of the American society, the conflicts don't stop him from becoming a member of the Black Panthers soon after Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination in 1968. Yet, when the organization radicalizes and becomes violent, Louis will decide to leave it and return to university. There he will earn a MA in political science, something that will later allow him to run for a seat in Congress and fight for the rights of his community.

Yet, even if the events Louis goes through are destined to improve social awareness against discrimination towards the Black community, Cecil doesn't approve his son's rebellious attitudes. The resistance and opposition that Louis has to endure thorough all his career as political activist comes primarily from the White House, where Cecil has worked and dedicated the majority of his adult life without ever getting a salary increase. In this sense, *The Butler* masterfully portrays the difference between two generations that are both oppressed and discriminated by the establishment, although their reactions are very different. On the one hand, during most part of the movie, Cecil represents a conformist stance in the sense that he complies with his role in the society without ever entering into conflict with it, even if this means being an underpaid servant for life. On the other hand, his son Louis embodies the nonconformist generation that became fully aware of the daily oppression Black communities had to endure every day, and who fought for equality and social justice even if conflict put their lives at stake. As Martin Luther King did, Louis in the fiction had a dream to pursue, and likewise do thousands up to this day, as the recent wave of Black Lives Matter protests has shown.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

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