

# Transcript of Democracy Now interview with Cornel West

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**AMY GOODMAN:** In the aftermath of the Zimmerman verdict and the mass protests around the country, we turn right now to Dr. Cornel West, professor at Union Theological Seminary, author of numerous books, co-host of the radio show *Smiley & West* with Tavis Smiley. Together, they wrote the book *The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto*, among Cornel West's other books.

Professor Cornel West—

**CORNEL WEST:** Yes, yes.

**AMY GOODMAN:** President Obama surprised not only the press room at the White House, but the nation, I think, on Friday, in his first public remarks following the George Zimmerman acquittal. What are your thoughts?

**CORNEL WEST:** Well, the first thing, I think we have to acknowledge that President Obama has very little moral authority at this point, because we know anybody who tries to rationalize the killing of innocent peoples, a criminal—George Zimmerman is a criminal—but President Obama is a global George Zimmerman, because he tries to rationalize the killing of innocent children, 221 so far, in the name of self-defense, so that there's actually parallels here.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Where?

**CORNEL WEST:** In Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen. So when he comes to talk about the killing of an innocent person, you say, "Well, wait a minute. What kind of moral authority are you bringing? You've got \$2 million bounty on Sister Assata Shakur. She's innocent, but you are pressing that intentionally. Will you press for the justice of Trayvon Martin in the same way you press for the prosecution of Brother Bradley Manning and Brother Edward Snowden?" So you begin to see the hypocrisy.

Then he tells stories about racial profiling. They're moving, sentimental stories, what Brother Kendall Thomas called racial moralism, very sentimental. But then, Ray Kelly, major candidate for Department of Homeland Security, he's the poster child of racial profiling. You know, Brother Carl Dix and many of us went to jail under Ray Kelly. Why? Because he racially profiled millions of young black and brown brothers. So, on the one hand, you get these stories, sentimental—

**AMY GOODMAN:** Ray Kelly, the former police chief of New York City.

**CORNEL WEST:** That's right. And yet, you get the bringing into his circle—

**AMY GOODMAN:** The current one, yeah.

**CORNEL WEST:** And, in fact, he even says Ray Kelly expresses his values, Ray Kelly is a magnificent police commissioner. How are you going to say that when the brother is reinforcing stop and frisk? So the contradictions become so overwhelming here.

**AMY GOODMAN:** But President Obama, speaking about his own life experience, going from saying, "Trayvon Martin could have been my child," to "Trayvon Martin could have been me"?

**CORNEL WEST:** Well, no, that's beautiful. That's an identification. The question is: Will that identification hide and conceal the fact there's a criminal justice system in place that has nearly destroyed two generations of very precious, poor black and brown brothers? He hasn't said a mumbling word until now. Five years in office and can't say a word about the new Jim Crow.

And at the same time, I think we have to recognize that he has been able to hide and conceal that criminalizing of the black poor as what I call the re-niggerizing of the black professional class. You've got these black leaders on the Obama plantation, won't say a criminal word about the master in the big house, will only try to tame the field folk so that they're not critical of the master in the big house. That's why I think even Brother Sharpton is going to be in trouble. Why? Because he has unleashed—and I agree with him—the rage. And the rage is always on the road to self-determination. But the rage is going to hit up against a stone wall. Why? Because Obama and Holder, will they come through at the federal level for Trayvon Martin? We hope so. Don't hold your breath. And when they don't, they're going to have to somehow contain that rage. And in containing that rage, there's going to be many people who say, "No, we see, this president is not serious about the criminalizing of poor people." We've got a black leadership that is deferential to Obama, that is subservient to Obama, and that's what niggerizing is. You keep folks so scared. You keep folks so intimidated. You can give them money, access, but they're still scared. And as long as you're scared, you're on the plantation.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Let's talk about that issue of the civil rights charges.

**CORNEL WEST:** Yes.

**AMY GOODMAN:** During his remarks on Friday in the White House press room, President Obama addressed the calls for the Justice Department to file civil rights charges against George Zimmerman.

**PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA:** I know that Eric Holder is reviewing what happened down there, but I think it's important for people to have some clear expectations here. Traditionally, these are issues of state and local government, the criminal code. And law enforcement is traditionally done at the state and local levels, not at the federal levels.

**AMY GOODMAN:** That's President Obama.

**CORNEL WEST:** And that's not true.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Professor Cornel West?

**CORNEL WEST:** That was him saying, "Keep your expectations low. Sharpton, don't get them too fired up. Keep the rage contained." We know, when it comes to the history of the vicious legacy of white supremacy in America, if the federal government did not move, we would still be locked into state's rights. And state's rights is always a code word for controlling, subjugating black folk. That's the history of the black struggle, you see. So what he was saying was: Don't expect federal action. Well, Sharpton is going to be in trouble. Marc Morial, two brothers, they're going to be in trouble.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Urban League.

**CORNEL WEST:** The Urban League, absolutely. Ben Jealous—God bless the brother—he's going to be in trouble. He's getting folk riled up to hit up against this stone wall. The next thing, they'll be talking about, "Well, maybe we ought to shift to gun control." No, we're talking about legacy of the white supremacy. We're talking about a criminal justice system that is criminal when it comes to mistreating poor people across the board, black and brown especially. And let us tell the truth and get off this Obama plantation and say, "You know what? We're dealing with criminality in high places, criminality in these low places, and let's expose the hypocrisy, expose the mendacity, and be true to the legacy of Martin." You know there's going to be a march in August, right? And the irony is—the sad irony is—

**AMY GOODMAN:** This is the march of the—honoring the 50th anniversary—

**CORNEL WEST:** The 50th anniversary.

**AMY GOODMAN:** —of the "I Have a Dream" speech.

**CORNEL WEST:** And you know what the irony is, Sister Amy? Brother Martin would not be invited to the very march in his name, because he would talk about drones. He'd talk about Wall Street criminality. He would talk about working class being pushed to the margins as profits went up for corporate executives in their compensation. He would talk about the legacies of white supremacy. Do you think anybody at that march will talk about drones and the drone president? Will you think anybody at that march will talk about the connection to Wall Street? They are all on the plantation.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Are you invited?

**CORNEL WEST:** Well, can you imagine? Good God, no. I mean, I pray for him, because I'm for liberal reform. But liberal reform is too narrow, is too truncated. And, of course, the two-party system is dying, and therefore it doesn't have the capacity to speak to these kinds of issues. So, no, not at all.

**AMY GOODMAN:** So you're saying that President Obama should not only say, "I could have been Trayvon Martin," but "I could have been, for example, Abdulrahman al-Awlaki," the 16-year-old son—

**CORNEL WEST:** Yes.

**AMY GOODMAN:** —of Anwar al-Awlaki, who was killed in a drone strike.

**CORNEL WEST:** Or the name of those 221 others, precious children, who are—who were as precious as the white brothers and sisters in Newtown that he cried tears for. Those in Indian reservations, those in Chinatown, Koreatown, those in brown barrios, each child is precious. That is a moral absolute, it seems to me we ought to embrace. And if that's true, then we've got monstrous mendacity, hyper hypocrisy and pervasive criminality in high places. That's why Brother Snowden and Brother Manning are the John Browns of our day, and the Glenn Greenwalds and the Chris Hedges and Glen Fords and Bruce Dixons and Margaret Kimberleys and Nellie Baileys are the William Lloyd Garrisons of our day, when we talk about the national security state.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Clearly, the power of the personal representation is what grabbed people on Friday.

**CORNEL WEST:** Absolutely.

**AMY GOODMAN:** You also had Attorney General Eric Holder doing the same thing—

**CORNEL WEST:** The same thing.

**AMY GOODMAN:** —when he was speaking at the NAACP convention on Tuesday. Holder drew parallels between his own experience as an African-American male and those of Trayvon Martin, when he recalled times in his life when he was racially profiled.

**ATTORNEY GENERAL ERIC HOLDER:** The news of Trayvon Martin's death last year and the discussions that have taken place since then reminded me of my father's words so many years ago. And they brought me back to a number of experiences that I had as a young man—when I was pulled over twice and my car searched on the New Jersey Turnpike, when I'm sure I wasn't speeding, or when I was stopped by a police officer while simply running to catch a movie at night in Georgetown in Washington, D.C. I was, at the time of that last incident, a federal prosecutor.

Trayvon's death last spring caused me to sit down to have a conversation with my own 15-year-old son, like my dad did with me. This was a father-son tradition I hoped would not need to be handed down. But as a father who loves his son and who is more knowing in the ways of the world, I had to do this to protect my boy. I am his father, and it is my responsibility, not to burden him with the baggage of eras long gone, but to make him aware of the world that he must still confront. This—this is a sad reality in a nation that is changing for the better in so many ways.

**AMY GOODMAN:** That's U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder. They're the ones, in the Justice Department, who are deciding whether or not to bring civil rights violations, criminal charges against George Zimmerman, who was acquitted in the Trayvon Martin killing. Professor Cornel West?

**CORNEL WEST:** And, no, there's no doubt that the vicious legacy of white supremacy affects the black upper classes, it affects the black middle classes. But those kinds of stories hide and conceal just how ugly and intensely vicious it is for black poor, brown poor. And so you end up with, if that's the case, why hasn't the new Jim Crow been a priority in the Obama administration? Why has not the new Jim Crow been a priority for Eric Holder? If what they're saying is something they feel deeply, if what they're saying is that they're—themselves and their children have the same status as Brother Jamal and Sister Latisha and Brother Ray Ray and Sister Jarell, then why has that not been a center part of what they do to ensure there's fairness and justice?

Well, the reason is political. Well, we don't want to identify with black folk, because a black president can't get too close to black folk, because Fox News, with their reactionary self in oft—in so many instances, will attack them, and that becomes the point of reference? No. If they're going to be part of the legacy of Martin King, Fannie Lou Hamer and Ella Baker and the others, then the truth and justice stuff that you pursue, you don't care who is coming at you. But, no, this black liberal class has proven itself to be too morally bankrupt, too hypocritical, and indifferent to criminality—Wall Street criminality, no serious talk about enforcement of torturers and wiretappers under the Bush administration. Why? Because they don't want the subsequent administration to take them to jail. Any reference to the hunger strike of our brothers out in California and other places, dealing with torture? Sustained solitary confinement is a form of torture. And we won't even talk about Guantánamo. Force-feeding, torture in its core—didn't our dear brother Yasiin Bey point that out, the former Mos Def? God bless that brother. Jay Z got something to learn from Mos Def. Both of them lyrical geniuses, but Jay Z got a whole lot to learn from Mos Def.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Explain that. Yasiin Bey actually underwent—

**CORNEL WEST:** That's right.

**AMY GOODMAN:** —force-feeding—

**CORNEL WEST:** Yes, he did.

**AMY GOODMAN:** —to see how it felt, and broke down and started screaming "Stop! Stop!" in the middle of it, and it was a videotape that went viral.

**CORNEL WEST:** And it happens twice a day for those precious brothers in Guantánamo Bay. And, of course, that's under Bush. People say, "That's under Bush." OK, Bush was the capture-and-torture president. Now we've got the targeted killing president, the drone president. That's not progress. That's not part of the legacy of Martin King. That's not part of the legacy of especially somebody like a Dorothy Day and others who I think ought to be at the center of what we're all about, you see.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Let me turn to another clip. Near the end of his speech on Friday, President Obama said the nation should be doing a better job helping young African-American men feel

that they are a fuller part of society. I want to play that clip in a moment, but how would you do this?

**CORNEL WEST:** Well, when I heard that, I said to myself, "Lord, he came to the York City and said Michael Bloomberg was a terrific mayor." Well, this is the same mayor who, again, nearly four-and-a-half million folk have been stopped and frisked. What's terrific about that, if you're concerned about black boys being part of society? No, no, I would say we're going to have to talk seriously about massive employment programs; high-quality public education, not the privatizing of education; dealing with gentrification and the land grab that's been taking place, ensuring that young black boys—and I want to include all poor boys, but I'll begin on the chocolate side of town, there's no doubt about that—that ought to have access a sense of self-respect and self-determination, not just through education and jobs, but through the unleashing of their imagination, more arts programs in the educational system. They've been eliminated, you see. Those are the kind of things, hardly ever talked about. But, oh, we can only talk about transpartnerships in terms of global training for capital and multinational corporations and big banks. That's been the priority, the Wall Street-friendly and the corporate-friendly policies that I think are deeply upsetting for somebody like myself vis-à-vis the Obama administration.

**AMY GOODMAN:** This is what President Obama said Friday.

**PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA:** We need to spend some time in thinking about how do we bolster and reinforce our African-American boys. And this is something that Michelle and I talk a lot about. There are a lot of kids out there who need help, who are getting a lot of negative reinforcement. And is there more that we can do to give them a sense that their country cares about them and values them and is willing to invest in them?

You know, I'm not naïve about the prospects of some grand, new federal program. I'm not sure that that's what we're talking about here. But I do recognize that, as president, I've got some convening power, and there are a lot of good programs that are being done across the country on this front. And for us to be able to gather together business leaders and local elected officials and clergy and celebrities and athletes, and figure out how are we doing a better job helping young African-American men feel that they're a full part of this society and that they've got pathways and avenues to succeed, I think that would be a pretty good outcome from what was obviously a tragic situation. And we're going to spend some time working on that.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Cornel West?

**CORNEL WEST:** Yeah, you see, if you're concerned about poor black brothers, then you make it a priority. It's the first time he spoke publicly about this in five years, so it's clear it's not a priority. When he went down to Morehouse, it was more scolding: "No excuses." Went to NAACP before, "Quit whining." No, we're wailing, we're not whining. So, to say to the country, "Well, we need to talk about caring," well, you've got to be able to enact that, you see. And for those of us who spend a lot of time in prisons, those of us at Boys Clubs, all the magnificent work that various churches and civic institutions do in the black community—and it cuts across race, of course; you've got a lot of white brothers and sisters and brown and others who are there, as well—the question is: Since when has it been a priority in this administration at all? So

that that language begins to ring very, very hollow. Because he's right: We've got to love, we've got to care for our poor brothers and sisters, and especially our black and brown brothers and sisters, because they're lost, they're confused, they're desperate, they're unemployed, they're too uneducated, and they turn on each other, because when you criminalize poor people and criminalize poor black people, we turn on each other. There's no doubt about that. Can you imagine if the creativity and intelligence that goes into turning on each other is turned on the system—not any individual, but the system itself, the unfair system—and tries to undercut the criminality of our criminal justice system to make it fair and to make it just?

**AMY GOODMAN:** You mentioned stop and frisk under Ray Kelly, who is being considered for head of Department of Homeland Security, and under Mayor Bloomberg—

**CORNEL WEST:** That's right.

**AMY GOODMAN:** —700,000 stops and frisks in New York City. It's now on trial, in court, vastly, overwhelming, of young African-American mainly young men, some young women—the vast majority do not get arrested, but they—

**CORNEL WEST:** That's right.

**AMY GOODMAN:** —have these endless encounters with the authorities.

**CORNEL WEST:** Absolutely. And I just never forget Brother Carl Dix and others, right when we were on—we had a week-long trial and had a guilty verdict. But during that week—

**AMY GOODMAN:** When you were protesting and you got arrested.

**CORNEL WEST:** After we protested and went to jail and then went to court and was—had a guilty verdict, right? That week, the president came to New York and said, "Edward Koch was one of the great mayors in the last 50 years," and then said, "Michael Bloomberg was a terrific mayor." Now, this is the same person saying we've got to care for black boys, and black boys are being intimidated, harassed, humiliated, 1,800 a day. It's just not a matter of pretty words, Mr. President. You've got to follow through in action. You see, you can't use the words to hide and conceal your mendacity, hypocrisy and the support of criminality—or enactment of criminality when it comes to drones, you see.

And the sad thing is, Sister Amy, is that we just don't have enough free people, let alone free black people. Black people, we settled for so little, so we get a little symbolic gesture, we get a little identification, and like on MSNBC, which is part of the Obama plantation, they start breakdancing again: "Oh, isn't it so wonderful? He's really one of us. We can now wave the flag again. We can now support our mindless Americanism," in the language of my dear brother Maulana Karenga, intellectual that he is. No. We ought to be over against injustice, no matter what, across the board, and be vigilant about it. I don't care what color the president or the governor or the mayor is.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Let's talk about Stand Your Ground for a minute. You know, Stevie Wonder now says he won't play in any state that has Stand Your Ground.

**CORNEL WEST:** Yeah, that's a beautiful thing, a beautiful thing.

**AMY GOODMAN:** President Obama addressed the issue of the Stand Your Ground law in Florida, the law allowing people fearing for their lives to use deadly force without retreating from a confrontation.

**PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA:** I know that there's been commentary about the fact that the Stand Your Ground laws in Florida were not used as a defense in the case. On the other hand, if we're sending a message as a society in our communities that someone who is armed potentially has the right to use those firearms, even if there's a way for them to exit from a situation, is that really going to be contributing to the kind of peace and security and order that we'd like to see?

And for those who resist that idea that we should think about something like these Stand Your Ground laws, I'd just ask people to consider, if Trayvon Martin was of age and armed, could he have stood his ground on that sidewalk? And do we actually think that he would have been justified in shooting Mr. Zimmerman, who had followed him in a car, because he felt threatened? And if the answer to that question is at least ambiguous, then it seems to me that we might want to examine those kinds of laws.

**AMY GOODMAN:** That's President Obama speaking on Friday. Cornel West?

**CORNEL WEST:** Well, I certainly agree with him that we ought to fight Stand Your Ground laws, but we've got to keep in mind Stand Your Ground laws are part of the legacy of the slave patrol, which is to say it's primarily white brothers and sisters armed to keep black people under control. And I come from Sacramento, California. I remember when the Black Panther Party walked into the Capitol with their guns. Now, you noticed at that moment, all of a sudden people were very much for gun control, even the right wing. Why? Because the Panthers were saying, "Well, let's just arm all the black folk to make sure they stand their ground." Oh, Lord. That's such a challenge. Now, see, you know, as a Christian and trying to be part of the legacy of Martin, you see, I don't want people armed across the board. I do believe in self-defense, just like I believe in self-respect and self-determination, but I don't want people armed. So it's very clear there's a class and a racial bias in these laws, and therefore we ought to fight these laws. There's no doubt about it. But we have to be very honest and candid about the hypocrisy operating when we talk about these things.

**AMY GOODMAN:** It was rather chilling to hear both Robert Zimmerman, George Zimmerman's brother, and also Mark O'Mara, the attorney for George Zimmerman, talking about how—the fact that George Zimmerman is supposed to get his gun back, that he needs it more than ever, because he's targeted, because he's afraid. What is more frightening than a frightened George Zimmerman with a gun?



**CORNEL WEST:** No, it's true. But it's—I mean, when you let criminals off, they feel—they feel as if their criminality has been affirmed, and therefore they want to be able to continue to act as if they—the business is as usual, back to business as usual.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Cornel, as we wrap up this segment, I'd like you to stay for the next segment about—

**CORNEL WEST:** Sure, sure.

**AMY GOODMAN:** —Howard Zinn's books in Indiana. If you were invited to speak at the 50th anniversary celebration of the "I Have a Dream" speech, the March on Washington—August 28th, 1963, is when it happened, 50 years ago—what would you say? Give us a few minutes.

**CORNEL WEST:** I would say we must never tame Martin Luther King Jr. or Fannie Lou Hamer or Ella Baker or Stokely Carmichael. They were unbossed. They were unbought. That Martin was talking about a beloved community, which meant that it subverts any plantation—Bush's plantation, Clinton's plantation, Obama's plantation—and the social forces behind those plantations, which have to do with Wall Street, have to do with multinational corporations. And we're going to focus on poor people. We're going to focus on working people across the board. We're going to talk about the connection between drones, which is a form of—a form of crimes against humanity outside the national borders. We're going to talk about Wall Street criminality. We're going to talk about how we ensure that our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters have their dignity affirmed. We're going to talk about the children.

Martin Luther King Jr. was a free black man. He was a Jesus-loving free black man. Will the connection between drones, new Jim Crow, prison-industrial complex, attacks on the working class, escalating profits at the top, be talked about and brought together during that march? I don't hold my breath. But Brother Martin's spirit would want somebody to push it. And that's part of his connection to Malcolm X. That's part of his connection to so many of the great freedom fighters that go all the way back to the first slave who stepped on these decrepit shores.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Cornel West. Professor Cornel West now teaches at Union Theological Seminary here in New York. Before that, he was a professor at Princeton University and, before that, at Harvard University. He is the author of numerous books, co-hosts a radio show with Tavis Smiley called *Smiley & West*, and together they wrote the book *The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto*. When we come back, we're going to look at the controversy around the late, great historian Howard Zinn in Indiana. Stay with us.

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