

Obama as Philosopher

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Historian James Kloppenberg suggests that Obama deserves a place in the pantheon of American political thinkers. The president’s taste for reconciliation and overcoming of partisanship supposedly stems from his original interpretation of American communitarianism and pragmatism. However, viewing Obama solely as a philosopher comes down to overlooking the man of power he is.

Review: James T. Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition*, Princeton University Press, 2010.

He first captured our imagination with his oratory. The uniqueness of his biography has been extensively analyzed. His ambition to transcend the defining cleavages of American life, such as race and political ideology, marked his campaign and the first half of his presidency. Yet according to a prominent historian’s recent book, Barack Obama has distinguished himself in still another way: he stands out as one of the few presidents to be a genuine “man of ideas”—one for whom interpreting the world is as important as changing it. Situating Obama in American intellectual history helps to throw into relief his deepest instincts: his faith in deliberation, his rejection of dogmatism, his acute sense of the complexity of identity in the modern world. Yet at a moment when the poetry of the hope that he once inspired has given way to the prose of politics as usual, this attempt to induct Obama into the annals of American political thought also runs the risk of bringing to the forefront his greatest shortcomings: a detachment from the daily concerns of his fellow citizens, a reluctance to direct the course of political debates (even those he initiates), and a tendency to allow himself to be defined by his opponents. Could the philosopher Obama be the enemy of President Obama?

An Intellectual Trajectory

In *Reading Obama*, James Kloppenberg, a Harvard historian and a specialist in American intellectual history, seeks to induct Obama into the ranks of several of his most

illustrious predecessors, such as John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, by way of Abraham Lincoln and Woodrow Wilson. All were philosopher-presidents: men who were intimately familiar and in constant dialogue with the political thought of their country (as well as others). To justify the current president's inclusion in so distinguished a circle, Kloppenberg cites his two books (*Dreams from my Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*); various articles he wrote as a community organizer and as a student and professor of law; and the major speeches that have punctuated his political career. While Obama's writing, when compared to that of recent presidents, is indeed remarkable, as much for its literary prowess as for its intellectual depth, Kloppenberg's argument for incorporating it into the canon of American political philosophy is at least partially politically motivated. The president's most strident opponents relentlessly circulate rumors about his "foreignness," suggesting that he is a Muslim, a "socialist," and a non-citizen—everything, in short, that certain elements of the right deem to be the antithesis of "American." What better way to refute the myth of his foreignness than to show him in conversation with Jefferson, Madison, and Lincoln?

Kloppenbergr traces Obama's intellectual odyssey from the moment when his taste for thought was first aroused at Occidental College and Columbia University to the outset of his political career, by way of his formative years as a community organizer in Chicago's South Side, a law student at Harvard, and a law professor at the University of Chicago. Specifically, he reconstructs the debates that shaped Obama's intellectual development and ultimately gave birth to his remarkably coherent worldview. Three intellectual movements, Kloppenberg maintains, proved decisive in forging Obama's philosophical outlook: communitarianism or "civic republicanism," which offer a correction to liberal political thought by emphasizing that individuals are immersed in specific social and cultural contexts rather than simply being the atomized bearers of rights and interests; pragmatism, the only purely American philosophical school, which teaches that we will hold our values all the more dearly when we acknowledge they rest on no objective foundation; and, finally, a reading of the Constitution that holds that its primary goal is not so much to hamstring the state as to promote democratic deliberation.

Communitarianism: Liberalism with Social Roots

Kloppenbergr sees Obama as, in the first place, a communitarian. In the English-speaking world, the term lacks the pejorative connotation it can have in French. In North America, communitarianism, as elaborated by political theorists like Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor, has functioned as a kind of philosophical corrective to John Rawls' liberalism.

While Rawls, in his attempt to explain justice, imagined isolated individuals determining their rights and duties exclusively in relation to their interests (behind a “veil of ignorance”), communitarians reply that we cannot even begin to determine our preferences without adhering to value systems that arise from our rootedness in specific cultural and historical contexts. Communitarianism, in short, is liberalism enriched by a robust conception of social bonds. Communitarians maintain, moreover, that civic life and political participation are not ordinary goods: they are the constitutive values of democratic society, and must be treated with commensurate respect. Consequently, in some of its formulations, communitarianism is known as “civic republicanism”: insofar as they simultaneously emphasize the primacy of community and participation in public life, communitarianism and republicanism walk the same path.

According to Kloppenberg, Obama discovered communitarianism while studying law at Harvard in the late eighties and early nineties. Kloppenberg bases this claim on a thorough examination of the articles published by the prestigious *Harvard Law Review* when Obama was first a member of its editorial board (1989-1990), then its editor (1990-1991)—a position to which he was elected by his fellow students and which counts as one of the greatest distinctions a law student may earn. At the time, the legal world was undergoing a “republican revival” initiated by the likes of legal scholars such as Frank Michelman and Cass Sunstein (who would later join the Obama administration). These theorists rejected the notion that the American Constitution and law more generally seek primarily to protect individual interests. American juridical traditions, they maintain, endow democracy with a positive value, rather than the merely negative goal of protecting the individual from government oppression: democracy promotes civic engagement and participation not simply because they are useful, but because they have inherent value. By the same token, jurisprudence cannot be limited to divining the presumed intentions of the Constitution’s authors (as juridical conservatism holds): law is an essentially hermeneutic undertaking, which demands that law must be interpreted in light of each epoch’s values.

Communitarianism, Kloppenberg suggests, resonated strongly with Obama on a personal level. As we know from *Dreams from my Father*, the leitmotif of the president’s youth was an elusive search for community. This search informed, for instance, his youthful activism in Chicago, where he sought to mobilize the feeling of communal belonging in defense of the interests of the residents of the city’s South Side. He remained under the sway of these arguments when he became a professor at Chicago Law School. He regularly participated in the

Saguaro Seminar organized by Robert Putnam, the Harvard political scientist known for his neo-Tocquevillian views on the centrality of “social capital” (i.e., networks, associations, and values) to democratic life (the author of *Democracy in America* is widely read in communitarian and civic republican circles). The seminar’s intent was to bring together academics and civil society actors committed to revitalizing civic engagement at a time when it seemed severely depleted. The concern for community has thus been, in these ways, a recurring preoccupation throughout Obama’s intellectual journey.

Pragmatism: The Twilight of Universal Values

According to Kloppenberg, the social teachings of communitarianism rest upon a well-defined philosophical and even metaphysical pedestal: that of pragmatism, the school of thought that coalesced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century around Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. In the 1970s, postwar American thought (represented, at the academic level, by analytic philosophy, logical positivism, and rational choice theory) entered a period of crisis, as it faced concerted attacks from historicism, perspectivalism, and other trends that would ultimately be labeled “postmodern.” In the midst of this intellectual upheaval, a pragmatist renaissance occurred. For pragmatism, the twilight of universal values is not so much a loss as an opportunity. Its epistemological stance is known as “fallibilism,” the principle that all knowledge is provisional and thus that thought is an essentially experimental undertaking. Like communitarianism, pragmatism emphasizes the historical and social character of experience. Above all, pragmatism embraces a metaphysics that is ideally suited to democratic pluralism: if no value or truth can lay claim to eternity or universality, the world in which we live is fundamentally open and pluralistic (William James spoke of a “multiverse” rather than a “universe”¹), one in which the meaning we attribute to our values and identity can only be the outcome of collective deliberation.

As with communitarianism, Obama’s personal itinerary goes a long way in explaining his attraction to pragmatism: the fact that in his youth he crossed through several distinct cultural spheres—the Hawaii of his mother and grandparents, the Indonesia he discovered through his mother and stepfather, the New York of his college days, and the Chicago he discovered as an organizer—were so many lessons in the plurality and incommensurability of values. These experiences also impressed upon him the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of

¹ William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* [1896], in *Writings 1878-1899*, New York, The Library of America, 1992, p. 489

forging a coherent identity in the contemporary world. Kloppenberg writes: “In Nairobi or in the smallest villages of rural Kenya, as in Chicago or in the smallest towns of rural Illinois, Obama kept finding pieces of himself, not only pieces of his ancestry but also, and even more confoundingly, pieces of his present. Yet those pieces stubbornly refused to cohere into a unified pattern” (pp. 253-254).

Kloppenbergs sees Obama as a man torn between the communitarian desire for belonging and the pragmatist recognition of the contingency of values. Put slightly differently, Obama feels himself pulled between universalism and particularism. To illustrate this point, Kloppenberg quotes a speech Obama delivered in 2006 at a conference organized by Jim Wallis, the liberal minister. Evoking the feeling of emptiness that modern life elicits in many Americans (a recurring theme in communitarian critiques of liberalism), the future president acknowledged the central role that religion can play in rendering life meaningful and whole. But at the same time, he also observed that the absolute character of religious belief—which, at a personal level, is precisely what makes it so compelling—could prove problematic for collective life: ““Democracy,”” Obama remarked, ““demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religious-specific, values. It requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason”” (p. 144). Thus even as he recognizes the essential role that religion might play in democratic society (contrary to the left’s more resolutely secular constituencies), Obama nonetheless asserts that it must embrace the pragmatist claims that all our values must be submitted to the challenge of democratic deliberation. In this contention, the basic principles of Obama’s approach to politics are discernable: his preference for decisions that are the result of extensive deliberation, in which his own role is limited simply to pointing in a general direction (as during the health care debate, which he left largely in the hands of Congress); his refusal to endorse dogmatic stances (as when, despite his criticism of corporate executives, he appointed General Electric’s CEO to run his jobs commission); his penchant for gradualism (as with the repeal of “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell”) and compromise (witness his recent agreement with the Republicans over the extension of the Bush tax cuts).

Deliberation: Democracy’s Core Value

While the concept of deliberation is central to pragmatist philosophy, it also lies at the heart of American constitutional principles, at least according to the school of legal thought that, Kloppenberg contends, was a further influence on the president’s intellectual

development. A well-established legal tradition maintains that the Founders had a fundamentally pessimistic view of human nature, stemming from the Calvinist conviction that mankind's fallen nature was irrevocably egotistical. On this reasoning, law should restrict itself to limiting the damage that results from the reckless pursuit of individual interest, whether by establishing spaces of non-interference (rights) or by limiting power with power (checks and balances). But in recent decades, a new interpretation of the Constitution has been proposed by historians (like Lance Banning), legal scholars (such as Sunstein, Michelman, and Laurence Tribe), and judges (such as Supreme Court justice Stephen Breyer). They maintain that many of the Constitution's key provisions converge on a single goal: that of maximizing collective deliberation. James Madison, the Constitution's primary author, once remarked, speaking of the Constitutional Convention of 1787: "No man felt himself obliged to retain his opinions any longer than he was satisfied of their propriety and truth." All were "open to the force of argument" (p. 154). In this reading, individual rights and the separation of powers existed not as limitations on power conceived as a necessary evil, but as procedures for promoting deliberation. Rather than a product of incipient liberal political philosophy, the Constitution is, from this perspective, a text that is thoroughgoing in its republicanism.

For these reasons, Kloppenberg sees Obama's much discussed desire for reconciliation and the overcoming of partisanship not merely as a personal or emotional preference, but rather as the result of an enlightened engagement with the American political tradition. Democracy, in Obama's eyes, consists of more than a collision of interests; it is also a willingness to debate. The Constitution wants "to force us into a conversation" (p. 161). All the intellectual currents that have influenced him seem to lead to this core idea of "democratic deliberation." Communitarianism emphasizes the importance of civic engagement to collective life; pragmatism absolves our beliefs of their absoluteness, in order to run them through the wringer of deliberation; and the republican reading of the Constitution privileges debate, which it presents as the underlying reason for the superiority of democracy over other political forms. "Democratic deliberation," in Kloppenberg's account, becomes the linchpin of Obama's political philosophy.

It Takes Two to Tango

But as the saying goes, it takes two to tango—just as it takes two to have a conversation. The most striking feature of American civic life today is not its atomization or privatization—the phenomenon that struck neo-Tocquevillians like Putnam twenty years ago—but its

antagonism and bitterness. Recall the disputed 2000 presidential election; the left's rage at Bush's invasion of Iraq in 2003; right-wing vitriol against Obama; the Tea Party's quasi-terroristic rhetoric (and, at times, methods). These are not so much instances of passionate debate, as refusals, from the outset, to engage in debate. Kloppenberg, a true believer in the pragmatic philosophy of which he is also an historian, wants to remind us, through his portrait of Obama, that democracy means experimentation, metaphysical openness, and value pluralism. Yet in the contemporary United States, this conception of democracy is anything but self-evident: it is indeed, one might argue, precisely one of the most essential stakes of current political debates. When the Tea Party describes health care reform as a violation of the Constitution, or when the religious right describes abortion and gay marriage as abominations, the recourse to deliberation is promptly rejected (and these obstacles are not exclusively confined to the right end of the political spectrum). Obama as Kloppenberg imagines him seems at times to be a kind of distant, abstract, intellectual icon, with little connection to real politics—precisely the reproach that many of his critics make.

One could of course reply that if Obama is so committed to deliberative democracy, it is precisely because the United States practices it at present so poorly. But if there is a flaw in Kloppenberg's intriguing portrait of the president's worldview and the times that shaped it, it is in the way that it overlooks the "other" Obama: the one who embraces a realistic understanding of power and of the role of self-interest in social life; the disciple of Saul Alinsky, the father of "community organizing," for whom power is the "very essence, the dynamo of life"²; the student of the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, whom he cited when accepting his Nobel Prize, declaring: "there is evil in the world"; the Obama, in short, who, while preferring deliberation, recognizes that politics is always a struggle, a pitched battle of forces and interests. Doubtless, it is Kloppenberg's Obama, the prophet of deliberation and reconciliation, who seduced us at first; but it is perhaps on the other Obama, who grasps that politics is often war pursued by other means, that our fate now depends.

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² Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals*, New York, Random House, 1971, pp. 50, 51.