

Political Adulthood

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Barack Obama's speech on race in America (March 18, 2008) drew from the voting public a surprised response: "He speaks to us as adults." Remarkable is the fact that this was considered remarkable. By definition voters are not minors. They are held to be autonomous in their judgments and answerable for their actions. The legal distinction between child and adult is made equally across the demographic divisions of the citizenry not only in the right to vote, but in meeting out punishment, protecting freedom of speech, and legislating morality. Should we not, then, expect campaigning politicians to "speak to us as adults"?

Obama departed in this speech from the usual political rhetoric by acknowledging some inconvenient truths:

that racial prejudice still exists in the United States, that blacks and whites both harbor a bitterness they do not air in mixed company, that they blame each other for their own economic woes, and that expressions of anger at the disastrous policies of the US government can easily be mistaken for lack of patriotism—if patriotic means being uncritical of the United States and imagining a childishly simplified world divided into good guys and bad guys, where there are no gray areas, no room for compromise, and differences are resolved at the point of a gun.

What in the realm of politics is adult conversation? Obama says that as president he will tell us “not what you want to hear, but what you need to know.” Given recent history, that in itself would be revolutionary. But presuming honest reporting of realities, how is adult debate to proceed in the public sphere? Since the European Enlightenment, the meaning of adulthood has preoccupied philosophers. To be modern is to affirm change by doubting established truths. The wisdom of age and ancestral tradition loses authority. Kant described “education for maturity” (*Erziehung zur Mündigkeit*) as the development of autonomy of thought and rational, free will. Anything less (e.g., following one’s natural inclinations) was to submit to the unfreedom of causal determinacy. Adorno interpreted the Kantian question in a social context, claiming that *Mündigkeit* was the capacity of the individual, however fallible, to take a stand against society. Both agreed that factual knowledge is

insufficient. Adorno's single foray into empirical study (the famous F-scale, testing California college students for fascistic tendencies) demonstrated that formal level of education was not a reliable indicator of the capacity to resist pressures to conform.

Obama is by decades the youngest candidate in this Presidential race. He is an outsider to Washington politics, and in that sense a non-conformist. But as a graduate of Columbia and Harvard, he is hardly marginal in society. He speaks of collective unity rather than individual autonomy. Radical is less what he says than how he addresses us. It will clarify matters to compare his interpolation of us as subjects to that of his opponents. The Republican candidate, John McCain speaks to us as if all that makes us one is that as Americans we are threatened by attack. He aligns himself with a traditionally male discourse of adulthood, pandering to masculinist fantasies of war at the expense of global realities. Hillary Clinton claims to speak *for* Americans—women, poor people—who have been traditionally under-represented in the political arena, but she cannot address us *as* women or *as* poor people, because she has built her career on being neither. Obama does not propose to speak as a Black. But he expects us to be adult enough to understand his refusal to disown a Reverend Wright, a Black Chicago minister who, appropriately, *damned* America when the country through its policies dishonored itself.

Is adult discourse the equivalent of rational discourse? Is adulthood synonymous with Reason? Some of my colleagues in the academy would affirm this description. And indeed, it has been an enormous relief to listen to the Democratic presidential candidates on numerous occasions debate social issues and policy differences in a fashion rational enough to make Jürgen Habermas proud. This substantive debate on issues promises an end to the “assault on reason” that one-time Presidential candidate Al Gore has lamented in his recent book of that name. It stands in stark contrast to the dangerous persistence of myth in John McCain’s discourse, that speaks of Islamic extremism as a “transcendent evil” threatening Americans over vast time-spans. His logic, if not his language, is apocalyptic: he is prepared to restrain this *katechon* and defer End Time by use of US military and imperial might. McCain’s language, impenetrable by rational discourse, is truly dangerous, and it represents no qualitative change from present government practice.

Yes, Obama’s rhetoric is reasoned. But rational discourse is not all his address is about. Most of the differences between him and Clinton on the issues, while meaningful, are small, and they do not get to the heart of the matter, which is not merely the reintroduction of social democracy into legitimate political discourse. There is something else going on in this campaign, something, frankly, that transcends reason and, against the odds,

resurrects hope. Obama's success cannot be reduced to this particular man in this particular political setting. It speaks to a moment in history that we share. The subjectivity that Obama addresses has to do with a collective, global experience that has parallels with Brazilians who voted for Lula, and Pakistani lawyers and Burmese monks who risked their lives to protest against politics as usual. It is the times that are developing to maturity, not one nation. To speak in these allegorical terms of the maturity of an era is to remove ourselves from discussions of individual character and psychology. Obama speaks to the promise of the times.

It will occur to certain members of the academy to analyze Obama's political popularity within the Weberian classification of charisma—a value-free category of political authority applicable to any compelling figure, Christ or Hitler, that by passing from the individual to an institution, can be routinized and bequeathed to the successors. The objectivity of distance is implied by this approach, and with it inoculation and immunity from charisma's power. Social science stresses continuities in change and similarities in difference. It discounts precisely what is important here, the particular history-in-the-making that the charismatic figure does not produce but expresses and embodies, giving it form. We who are living these times as political actors—moreover, as self-professed democrats, with faith in our own agency—do

not watch from a safe scientific distance, so that for us, the ability to read the times is all-important. There is, surely a difference between instances of charisma. Political judgments can and must be made.

One thing is clear. When Obama says of his electoral success “this is not about me,” he is correct. The drama we are witnessing is the coming to age of a new national consciousness. His candidacy provides a point of media access, a window that allows this consciousness to come into view, more importantly, to see itself as a movement. American voters have surprised themselves in these primary elections. We are hopeful, we begin to believe, because we see in his broad support that there are millions of us who reject categorically the so-called realism of U.S. politics, that is based on a totally fanatasized, infantilized portrayal of the world, and of America’s place within it. His address, in contrast, is the mark of respect that recognition of our adulthood entails. But not only that.

This election presages the end of identity politics in the United States. Not the voters, but the political establishment is struggling to keep identity politics alive. John McCain counts on the white male vote. Hillary Clinton counts on the vote of women. But Barack Obama’s first victory, in Iowa, was due to the vote of white men. and women. This led to some desperate counter-tactics. Bill Clinton predicted before the South Carolina primary that if Obama won (he did), it would be because of race.

But not only did Obama receive 54 percent of women's votes in South Carolina (compared with 30 percent for Clinton). He claimed 50 percent of white voters under 30. More vicious has been the on-going campaign to discredit Obama through the words of his Black pastor, Reverend Wright. But in stark contrast to the candidate, the Reverend belongs to the older generation (that includes Hillary Clinton and the bulk of the Washington political establishment and special-interest lobbies) who sees politics in terms of separate identities. Obama has staked his entire candidacy on the belief that Americans can rise above this agonistic, identitarian logic.

During the second half of the twentieth century, identity politics *was* a progressive force in history. Multiple national liberation movements against colonialism provided the model for the diverse movements of *negritude*, Islamism, international feminism, nationalist separatism, and homosexual rights. Political movements based on identity provided the effective and necessary antidote to notions of universality that were nothing more than Western prejudice writ large, the provincial idea that Western modernity was the norm of historical progress that all other societies were not only expected, but destined to follow. Until they did, they were pronounced underdeveloped, backward, and significantly, *immature*. Here is the point where Obama's candidacy illuminates historical time with a lightning flash. When old-guard politicians claim that Obama is

“not ready” to serve as president, the weight of their words echoes with the traditional presumptuousness of the West, the claim that other races or nations are “not ready” for democracy, that they childlike at best, and at worst animals, genetically incapable of responding to anything but techniques of behavioral modification. (Foreign policy towards Iran is spoken of as necessitating alternate proddings via carrots and sticks—whereas Obama promises to speak to Iranians as humans and adults). The conventional language harbors preposterous arrogance. Any victory against its perpetuation, in any national election, is a victory for us all.

Walter Mignolo’s pioneering, multi-cultural perspective took the idea to its progressive political limits by recognizing in it a powerful weapon against the Eurocentric definitions of universality that were an ideological justification for Western economic and political imperialism. But with the rise of neo-liberalism a counter-weapon has been forged. Global firms recognize cultural identities as an effective marketing tool. Technological advances made it possible to target specific markets with tailor-made advertising, appealing to different cultures with the same mass product. The application of market-research techniques to political elections dates to the 1980s. This is also when journalist schools began shifting their career-training orientation from the public sphere to public relations, signaling the future deterioration of adult debate in the news media. Ronald Regan exported the new

techniques for use in the elections of the new East European nations. Politicians in all advanced democracies have followed the lead of business in manipulating the public to achieve their goals. Marketers have found that by appealing to a group's self-stereotype, they could lock in the "women's vote," the "religious" vote, the "Blacks," or the "Hispanics." It simplified their job. The image of the politician became their "product"—allowing political parties to target specific populations, changing the packaging but not the substance of political life.

The readiness with which the US government has promoted the framing of Iraqi post-occupation politics in terms of identity politics (Shi'ite, Sunni, Kurd) is to be understood in this context. This simplification belies the complexity of Iraqi society, and under the incredible duress of five years of occupation that has destroyed the infrastructure and left millions of destitute, has fed directly into the violence. Identity politics can foster the most crude political divisions based on religion and ethnicity, that in its extreme form pushes toward the nightmare of genocide.

All of this is in play in presidential candidacy of Barack Hussein Obama, son of a Black Kenyan and a white mother from Kansas. The new cosmopolitanism that he embodies is largely unspoken, but it is felt by his supporters, and threatens to bring the political establishment to its knees. More than particular policies, and precisely against "race," it distinguishes the revolu-

tionary potential of this election. Obama's wife Michelle gives this global dimension the clearest voice, that the very fact of Barack Obama as President would resonate globally as a symbol of change. It is what made Maria Schriver decide on the day of a rally at University of California Los Angeles to appear at Michelle Obama's side, while her husband Arnold Schwarzenegger, the Republican governor of California was switching his support from Giuliani to McCain. Urged to come by her teen-age daughter if she thought she could make even a little difference, Maria Schriver cited a Hopi Indian saying: "We are the ones we have been waiting for." Millions of Americans feel that by acting now they can redeem themselves in the eyes of a global public, and share with them in a new humanity to come.

This is not my typical contribution to a meeting of the Académie de la Latinité. It is not a scholarly piece. It is not about Latinity or Islam. It is a local story about one national election, but it speaks to the urgent concerns. As I write this, the political outcome is far from decided. There is every possibility that if not American voters, then the Democratic Party will shy away from courageous action, and that Hillary Clinton will prevail, damaged, perhaps decisively, by her victory, because she more than anyone has benefited from the high level of political discussion that has characterized the Democratic primary debates, and that Obama has done so much to ensure. And if she stoops to the level of politics

as usual, lumping all members of an identity together and appealing to their special interests, arguing from her experience that so-called “realism” in foreign policy must prevail, she will have a difficult time winning against John McCain, who is demonstrating that he can play this cynical, establishment game of niche-market politics with aplomb.

We feel the pressure of the Bush-like Republican rhetoric already, the one-line repetitions that the surge in Iraq is working, that victory is possible, and that we cannot afford to lose this war without facing one more difficult and more costly in the future. Once the issues are framed in this way, once the media joins the politicians in spinning a spider-web of simplifications that bear the familiar mark of behind-the-scenes manipulation, the conventional politician is sure to get caught in the web, entangled by consenting to play the game. Obama is accused of abstraction, speaking words with no substance. But it is precisely on the level of discourse that the break with the past must take place. What makes the moment so poignant is the fact that in his changed discourse we glimpse a (precarious) way out of the pessimism of post-modernity and the beginnings of a new language of universality, based not on rational consensus but on hope, a language that transcends the limitations of all of our particular identities and provides us refuge.