

DISSENT

An Unlikely Pragmatist

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**Reading Obama:
Dreams, Hope, and
the American Political Tradition**

by James T. Kloppenberg
Princeton University Press, 2010, 296 pp.

Toward the end of James Kloppenberg's *Reading Obama*, the author ponders an anecdote from the candidate's speech on race in Philadelphia in March 2008: Obama reported that a young white woman named Ashley, telling fellow volunteers in South Carolina why she'd joined the Obama campaign, explained that to save money for her cancer-stricken, bankrupted mother, she'd pretended to love mustard and relish sandwiches. She was volunteering, she said, in hopes of improving health care for families like hers. When an elderly black man's turn came to tell why he'd joined, he said, simply, "I am here because of Ashley," and Obama told his Philadelphia audience that "That single moment of recognition between that young white girl and that old black man is where we start." But it's only a start, especially for Kloppenberg, who writes, "Placing the speech in the context drawn from civic republicanism and communitarianism, from discourse ethics and deliberative democracy, from historicism and Rawls' overlapping consensus, from Geertz's hermeneutics and the neopragmatists' emphasis on fallibilism, it is easy to see in the speech most of the principal components of Obama's worldview."

Well, maybe not so easy: Kloppenberg presents these "principal components" more than a little confusingly. On the one hand, "To a striking degree," he claims, Obama's "sensitivity has been shaped by the developments in American academic culture since the 1960s... and...I want to demonstrate that under-appre-

ciated connection." He recites those developments and names their progenitors—William James, John Dewey, John Rawls, Thomas Kuhn, Hillary Putnam, Richard Bernstein, Richard Rorty, Roberto Mangabeira Unger, Michael Sandel, Martha Minow, Lawrence Tribe, Frank Michelman—so often that sections of the book might be called, "How Harvard Gave Obama to the World." On the other hand, "I am not trying to establish a necessary connection between philosophical pragmatism and Obama's politics....No straight lines run from philosophical pragmatism or deliberative democracy to Obama's positions, strategies, or politics."

It's not that the first connection was wrong, I think, but that Kloppenberg over-appreciates it so much he senses a need to back off. He explains that as president of the *Harvard Law Review* and a student of Tribe, Unger, and Minow, Obama integrated a lot of legal and philosophical thinking into his teaching at the University of Chicago Law School and his writing and politics. Like the academic pragmatists, Obama understands, as Kloppenberg puts it, "what it means to give reasons in a world unbolstered by ultimate truth" and that "our ideas and beliefs must be historicized—placed in the context of a particular time and place—if they are to be understood." Obama's "awareness of the precariousness of even our most deeply held beliefs seems to me among the most unusual features of his sensibility."

But, as Kloppenberg acknowledges, Obama has written of his debt to (in Obama's words) "the prophets, the agitators...the absolutists ...I can't summarily dismiss those possessed of a similar certainty today." What counts most for Kloppenberg is that Obama "embraces community, liberty, equality, and historicism, values often assumed to be in tension but, at least in Obama's writings....mutually constitutive." Obama's politics joins "his idea of democracy as deliberation, his sure grasp of philosophical pragmatism, his Christian

realism, and his sophisticated understanding that history, with all its ambiguities and ironies, provides the best rudder for political navigation."

But what about that Christian realism? By the time Kloppenberg presents the Philadelphia speech as his umpteenth instantiation of Obama's philosophical pragmatism, antifoundationalism, democratic deliberation, and historicism, often accompanied by "We must's"—as in, "We must not pretend that the meaning of [democratic principles] has ever been anything but contested"—I felt as if I were listening to the litany of an antifoundationalist church. Kloppenberg doesn't mention that Obama told California megachurch pastor Rick Warren and a national audience, "I believe that Jesus Christ died for my sins and that I am redeemed through him...and it means that those sins that I have hopefully will be washed away." Can this be antifoundational?

Kloppenberg acknowledges the tension and describes Obama's unhurried embrace of a Christianity whose "Augustinian or Niebuhrian" and "African-American" variants figure importantly in his politics. But how importantly? Was Obama's testimony to "Pastor Rick" merely a prerequisite of his bid for high office, analogous to the prerequisite that kept him from testifying similarly for the philosophers whose influence Kloppenberg means to vindicate?

Obama, keen to be considered a man of faith, not an Ivy League intellectual, granted no interview to Kloppenberg, who limits himself to reading the books, speeches, and articles he's written or edited and to interviewing his former professors. He reprises Obama's Christianity respectfully but doesn't explore it as a paradoxical foundation of Obama's antifoundational sensibility, with its uncanny "iron fortitude" and forbearance, which "critics mistook for weakness." To take religious faith that seriously might pose problems for the pragmatism Kloppenberg celebrates so ardently. Obama may recognize more clearly than his professors that American pragmatism draws a lot on the country's religious roots as well as on its good fortune.

Another "principal component of Obama's world view" is more "easy to see" in the

Philadelphia speech than are the academic frames Kloppenberg loads onto it: Obama understood the bond between "that young white girl and that old black man" thanks less to religion or philosophy than to a bond between a young black boy and the old white woman he would visit on her deathbed on the eve of his election. Unlike Ashley's bond with her fellow campaign worker, though, Obama's ties to his white grandmother were biological and autobiographical—less philosophical but possibly stronger than Kloppenberg makes clear. As Dartmouth professor Joseph Bafumi explained Obama's cross-racial appeal during the campaign, "It's not something he's doing, it's something he's being." He prizes deliberative, face-to-face democracy not because he became convinced of it in college or law school but because he'd lived it at home and as a child in Hawaii and Indonesia.

This "original position" of Obama's isn't quite what John Rawls had in mind, but it may come closer to Rawls's idea than most people ever do. Yet Obama's default position as a mediator more than as a confronter can disorient those, on the left or the right, who still steer their politics by racialist or nationalist coordinates or by structural standards that drive confrontation.

His constant bridging strains even the cosmopolitan moral imaginations of philosophical pragmatists who underestimate—as Kloppenberg does—how deeply a robust American pragmatism depends on its practitioners' having certain virtues and beliefs and a sense of mission, even power, that pragmatism itself can't provide.

Kloppenberg acknowledges Obama's pre-philosophical strengths, as did the candidate in Philadelphia by noting that his white family members' love made it impossible for him to embrace racial fatalism. But Kloppenberg's intellectual contextualizations submerge his biographical accounts, nowhere providing, for example, the years when Obama entered the Punahou Academy in Hawaii or won a scholarship to Occidental College or transferred to or graduated from Columbia.

Only by reading this book almost against its emphasis on Obama's university years does

one sense why it matters that his maternal grandparents were gauzy universalists, his mother a more culturally nuanced anthropologist, and his father and stepfather both casualties of brutally instructive brushes with real power—the Indonesian stepfather apparently because he was corrupt, the Kenyan father because he wasn't corrupt enough. All this may have disposed Obama to pragmatism, antifoundationalism, and historicism, which Kloppenberg presents in credible if somewhat potted renderings of such work as Rawls's liberalism and the five dimensions of the pragmatism of Richard Bernstein, a distinguished philosopher at the New School whose work Kloppenberg finds "closest to the ideas advanced in Obama's books—although Obama is hardly as systematic" and has never studied or spoken with Bernstein and may not even have read him or Rawls.

Kloppenber is right to remind us that such reckonings were in the air Obama breathed at Occidental, Columbia, and Harvard Law School (from which he graduated in 1991). But he doesn't tell us much about how Obama arrived in his universities so well-primed to draw from them the lessons he carried into "the maelstrom of politics."

His early experiences may also have inclined him to accept too readily some aspects of pragmatism that weaken civic-republican certitudes and, with them, movements for social justice—failings that Kloppenberg mentions only briefly. What, for example, is pragmatism's defense against those who celebrate capitalism as pragmatic, antifoundational, proto-democratic, and historically liberating? The late Christopher Lasch and Jackson Lears, two eminent American historians whom Kloppenberg doesn't mention, have warned that the wealthy and powerful now cling not to old racist, nationalist, or religious nostrums but to swift market currents carrying the mantle of pragmatism even while destroying the communities and values on which many people depend.

Kloppenber does worry, late in the book, about Obama's reluctance to fight "the gap separating the richest from the poorest Americans." He cites John Adams's condemnation of banking as an "infinity of successive felonious larcenies." But he doesn't show where Obama's supposedly luminous Harvard pragmatism parts company with his Harvard neo-liberalism. It's all very well to remind us that Obama thinks we must "examine our motives and our interests constantly" and that "Neither Madison nor Jefferson, neither James nor Dewey, neither Putnam or Bernstein could have said it better." But does Obama say it because *they* said it?

Kloppenber insists that Obama "shares with the young Rawls...an appreciation of the indispensable role played by communities" and, with the Rawls of *A Theory of Justice*, "the view that securing effective rather than merely abstract or formal rights requires minimizing as much as possible the gulf between rich and poor." But what traction or guidance have philosophical pragmatists actually given him here? It's not clear how much they've

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prepared Obama—who is one part Harvard neoliberal, one part Chicago pol, and one part legatee of the best of the civil rights movement—to deal with “hostage takers,” as he called Republican lawmakers in a moment of pique, or with global banks and corporations whose power is increasingly asymmetrical to that of any national government.

Philosophical pragmatism didn’t warn John Dewey off of supporting Woodrow Wilson’s mad foundationalism in waging the First World War, and it offers no inoculation now against a capitalism that, in the name of progress, is turning universities into cultural galleries and career-networking centers for a global elite accountable to no democratic polity or moral code.

Kloppenbergh hasn’t convinced me that a philosopher-king owes as much to academic philosophers as he claims Obama did in preparing to face the Mitch McConnells, John Boehners, and others who are riding riptides they can’t navigate or even comprehend. Philosophers, like poets, have sometimes been the unacknowledged legislators of the world, and they will be again. But if Obama can’t find in himself and the American people the strengths of a Eugene V. Debs or a Martin Luther King, Jr., or even of a Teddy or Franklin Roosevelt, who drew enough from the American political tradition to risk the hatred of Adams’s “larcenous bankers,” no one at Harvard can find those strengths for him.

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