

Introduction

AMERICA LOOKS DIFFERENT from the other side of the Atlantic. As I watched the twists and turns of the presidential campaign in the fall of 2008, I was following the drama from a distance. Living in England, lecturing to students at the University of Cambridge on the American political tradition, and trying in countless informal conversations to explain the unexpected emergence and election of Barack Obama, I began to see connections that had eluded me. Reading and rereading Obama's books, listening closely to his speeches, and thinking about the dynamics of American culture that made possible his rise to the presidency, I began piecing together the patterns traced in this book.

Barack Obama's intellectual and political persuasions emerged from a particular matrix, formed not only from his personal experience but also from the dynamics of American history. Obama's sensibility was shaped both by the period of his own intellectual formation—the years between his birth in Hawaii in 1961 and his ascent to national prominence with his election to the United States Senate in 2004—and by the longer history that stretches from the Puritans to the present. Perhaps because I was thinking about Obama simultaneously in relation to my

Cambridge lectures on the American past and my anxieties about the American future, I was alert to particular themes in his books *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*. I became convinced that these books illuminate certain neglected aspects of American history and point toward a very different vision of the present than I had seen in any of the commentaries on the election.

Barack Obama is the product of three distinct developments. First, it was the history of American democracy, the long, unfinished project stretching from the seventeenth-century establishment of English colonies through the achievements of the civil rights and feminist movements, that produced the institutions and the cultural characteristics that made possible Obama's rise. Those same democratic institutions, and that same unfinished cultural project that we call American democracy, now constrain him as president. The immediate circumstances that led to Obama's election—public dissatisfaction with the greatest economic collapse in the United States since the Great Depression of the 1930s—have now become the single greatest obstacle impeding the realization of his most ambitious plans. The economic crisis resulted directly from policies of deregulation put in place during the preceding two decades by his predecessors Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. Yet many of the Americans who now hold Obama himself responsible for failing to restore prosperity also criticized the steps he took, the stimulus package and bank bailout, which most observers agree helped prevent an even deeper crisis. So incoherent is American pub-

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lic debate that Obama's critics simultaneously blame him for an economic situation he did nothing to cause and oppose larger infusions of money into the economy through much greater government spending, the only option that might directly address the problem. The impasse in which the nation finds itself stems directly from the American people's limited access to power—and their equally limited access to responsible sources of information about how the American economy works. Because shrill, partisan simplifications dominate public debate, Obama's cautious, measured approach to economic reconstruction has infuriated the Right without satisfying the Left. The penetrating analysis that Obama offers in *The Audacity of Hope* explains the short-circuiting of American democracy in the twentieth century and illuminates the reasons why he faces such intractable political as well as economic problems as president. His conundrum, as he understands, is the product of long-term, unresolved problems in American history.

Second, America's principal contribution to the Western philosophical tradition, the philosophy of pragmatism that originated over a century ago in the writings of William James and John Dewey, has provided a sturdy base for Obama's sensibility. It has become a cliché to characterize Obama as a pragmatist, by which most commentators mean only that he has a talent for compromise—or an unprincipled politician's weakness for the path of least resistance. But there is a decisive difference between such vulgar pragmatism, which is merely an instinctive

hankering for what is possible in the short term, and philosophical pragmatism, which challenges the claims of absolutists—whether their dogmas are rooted in science or religion—and instead embraces uncertainty, provisionality, and the continuous testing of hypotheses through experimentation. The distinction between vulgar pragmatism and philosophical pragmatism is not always clear in practice because philosophical pragmatists can and sometimes do recommend what seems simply practical. But I will insist on the difference. The philosophical pragmatism of James and Dewey and their descendants has played an important part in shaping progressive politics since the early twentieth century. The close connection between the philosophy of pragmatism and the culture of democratic decision making illuminates crucial dimensions of Obama's thinking—and the fierce opposition he faces.

If philosophical pragmatism informs Obama's political outlook, the history of pragmatists' engagement in politics also suggests the reasons why pragmatism may be particularly ill-suited to our own cultural moment. At a time when partisans left and right vie to proclaim rival versions of certainty with greater self-righteousness, the pragmatists' critique of absolutism and embrace of open-ended experimentation seems off-key, unsatisfying, perhaps even cowardly. Pragmatists have debated the political consequences of the philosophy for over a century. There is general agreement concerning the tight connection between philosophical pragmatism and democracy. Both are committed to open-endedness and experimentation.

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But there never has been—nor, I think, can there be—a clear, explicit, singular lesson to be drawn from the philosophy of pragmatism for a particular political dispute. Indeed, the idea of such a formula is inimical to pragmatism, which is a method for testing beliefs in experience rather than measuring them against a yardstick of unchanging absolutes. Precisely because consequences matter to pragmatists, one can never say dogmatically, in advance, that one policy or another follows necessarily from the commitment to experimentation. Pragmatism is a philosophy for skeptics, a philosophy for those committed to democratic debate and the critical assessment of the results of political decisions, not for true believers convinced they know the right course of action in advance of inquiry and experimentation. Pragmatism stands for open-mindedness and ongoing debate. The flexibility of pragmatist philosophy, which helps explain Obama's intellectual acuity and suppleness, may paradoxically undercut his ability to inspire and persuade the American electorate and the United States Congress at a time when strident rhetoric and unyielding partisanship have displaced reasoned deliberation and a commitment to problem solving.

Third, Obama's sensibility reflects the intellectual upheavals that occurred on American campuses during the two decades he spent studying at Occidental College, Columbia University, and the Harvard Law School, and teaching law at the University of Chicago Law School. Those struggles emerged for complex reasons and are difficult to summarize, but they played a crucial role in

shaping Obama's ideas. Again and again he encountered struggles between universality and particularity, and between the ostensibly unchanging and the historical or contingent. Between college and law school, Obama spent three crucial years working as a community organizer in Chicago, and observers unsurprisingly take for granted that there must be a difference between what he learned on the streets of the far south side and what he learned in the seminar rooms of elite universities. To a striking degree, however, the lessons were congruent: Democracy in a pluralist culture means coaxing a common good to emerge from the clash of competing individual interests. Bringing ideals to life requires power. Balancing principles and effectiveness in the public sphere is hard work, an unending process of trial and error. No formulas ensure success.

Many commentators have already examined Obama's personality, his family background, and the role of race in his rise to the White House. Those issues are crucial, and I have learned a lot from such studies. But other factors in addition to psychology and family dynamics have shaped his way of thinking. Race, although it obviously has been and remains one of the crucial issues in American history, is only one of the contexts that matters. Obama will no doubt continue to fascinate biographers and political commentators, who will enrich our understanding of his life and times. My goal here is different. I want to focus on his ideas. Locating Obama's development in the frameworks of the history of American democracy, the ideas of

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philosophical pragmatism, and the intellectual turmoil of the 1980s and 1990s reveals how Obama thinks and why he sees American culture and politics as he does. Reading Obama requires not only examining the central arguments contained in his books and speeches, although that is clearly the first step. Understanding him as a writer, and as a politician, also requires placing his ideas in the deeper and broader contexts of the American political tradition, which neither the pundits nor prophets who dominate contemporary American public discourse have shown much interest in doing. Beginning that process, by placing Obama's ideas in the frameworks of American history and thought, is the modest aim of this little book.

Chapter 1 traces Obama's intellectual development by examining the distinct stages of his education, from his childhood through college, from his years as a community organizer and a law student through his emergence as a contender for national political office. Chapter 2 places Obama's ideas in the turbulent currents of intellectual debate during the closing decades of the twentieth century. Chapter 3 locates the arguments of his books in a much wider historical context, that of the long trajectory of American democratic theory and practice. Almost all historians appreciate the depth of the ideas that some presidents, notably John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John Quincy Adams, and Abraham Lincoln, carried with them to the White House. Many historians now also acknowledge that crucial dispositions and innovative policies of presidents Theodore Roosevelt, Wood-

row Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt likewise depended on ideas, in their case the revolutionary ideas of the pioneers of philosophical pragmatism, William James and John Dewey. Like his eighteenth-century and early twentieth-century predecessors, Barack Obama is a man of ideas. By linking his writings to the intellectual traditions on which he has drawn, quite clearly and deliberately, in *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*, this book provides the first attempt to locate Obama in the contexts of American political and social thought.

In my field of intellectual history, it is customary for scholars who engage in the practice known as contextualism to trace the relation between texts and contexts, between ideas and the circumstances of their historical production and transmission. Those historians who study European ideas typically conceive of contexts primarily in the relation between selected canonical texts and other canonical texts in the history of philosophy or political theory. That is certainly a legitimate and valuable approach, particularly when examining the work of thinkers whose ideas often did not have much immediate impact on anyone except other thinkers.

In the historical study of American political thought, however, it is not enough to focus exclusively on the writings of philosophers, important as they may have been. Many of those who have actively shaped American politics, from the second, third, and fourth presidents to the forty-fourth, have not only drawn explicitly on the ideas of philosophers, they have worked quite consciously, de-

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liberately, and sometimes successfully to translate those ideas into policies. Some have even engaged in serious political thinking and writing themselves, including of course those who played major roles in producing the most prominent and enduring products of the American Enlightenment, the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution, two documents that reflect the creative work of a generation of Americans. The same was true of Lincoln, whose carefully crafted speeches beginning in 1854 manifest his serious engagement with traditions of moral philosophy and political economy as well as with the writings of predecessors such as John Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and John Quincy Adams. Evidence of that tendency to link policies with theories has seemed less clear in recent decades. But scholars are now showing that serious ideas lay beneath the apparent anti-intellectualism of recent American conservative politicians, and a rising generation of historians is excavating the foundations of those ideas in the transatlantic discourse of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.

Likewise, beneath Obama's politics lies a sustained engagement with America's democratic traditions, and this book illuminates those connections. Much has been written already, and much more is sure to come, concerning the crucial personal and social influences that also affected his personality and outlook. This book concentrates on his ideas. Chapter 1 narrates Obama's intellectual development. Chapter 2 focuses on formal political philosophy and social theory to explain the intellectual contexts that

shaped Obama's own ideas. Chapter 3 shows how his understanding of American history informs his approach to politics. It would be false and foolish to claim that the issues discussed in this book exhaust the factors shaping Obama's sensibility. In addition to being a thoughtful and deft writer, Obama has proven that he is a shrewd and savvy politician who has learned a lot from the rough-and-tumble of community organizing in Chicago and from the notoriously down-and-dirty world of Illinois electoral politics. But intelligence and caginess are not mutually exclusive. Just as Lincoln emerged from courtroom wrangling and partisan scuffles full of high-minded principles as well as hard-won lessons, so has Obama, and not much has been written about the ideas he imbibed and the ideals to which he has declared allegiance.

Many of the disillusioned, self-consciously tough-minded, and sometimes cynical commentators who shape public attitudes toward contemporary politics seem disinclined to take ideas seriously, but Obama's books demonstrate that he sees things differently. Ideas matter to him. For that reason understanding what those ideas are, where they have come from, and what difference they have made in shaping the sensibility of the forty-fourth president of the United States should matter to us.