

HOUSE ORGAN

The Obama Phenomenon

The November 4 victory of Barack Obama triggered the most enthusiastic celebration in the United States since the end of the Second World War. People were dancing in the streets throughout the night and hugging strangers. In Brooklyn some were observed pressing up and down on police cars, as the officers of the Law within cheered them on. Add to this the even more remarkable outpouring of joy from innumerable corners of the earth, and we have what was perhaps the largest celebration in world history.

Two seismic currents came together to condition this event: the end of the long night of the Bush administration; and the accession of a black man to power in an exceptionally racist society that happens to be the global superpower.

As George W. Bush is shoveled into the dustbin of history, it is increasingly difficult to recall the fear and loathing evoked by his administration. Yet right up to the eve of the election, near-panic was endemic among those who remembered the theft of the presidency by Republicans in 2000 and 2004 and were in a veritable frenzy at the thought that John McCain and his ghastly running mate, Sarah Palin, might steal this one as well. My friends and I looked at one another and recalled how close we had come to seeking exile over the seemingly interminable years of aggressive war, unbridled criminality and the slide toward fascism. Analogies to the degeneration of Rome from Republic to Empire were commonplace. Add to this the trauma of what is turning out to be the gravest crisis of global capital in 80 years—one, moreover, palpably provoked by the reckless deregulation and speculative frenzy of a style of neoliberalism that McCain was likely to continue—and the anxiety becomes perfectly understandable.

All this seemed to evaporate by 11:00 pm on the 4th. But the wave of relief was lifted yet higher by a deeper, more powerful and once virtually unimaginable tsunami: that there could be a Black President in the White House, a house built by African slave labor! The United States is not a very old country but none is more steeped in racism. If, as Marx held, “the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living,” then for the United States, that nightmare is racist in form and content. Beneath the laws, rules and customs deployed across hierarchies defined by tags like skin color, there lies an unfathomable horror, a condensation of the dark side of our history. One grasps at this through the music of the black diaspora (listen, for example, to Billie Holliday singing “Strange Fruit”), or writers as diverse as James Baldwin or Malcolm X, or, from the white side of the divide, Herman Melville or William Faulkner.

None of this could have been erased on November 4—and as could have been expected, there was an uptick of racism in the backwaters of society in the weeks following, with a burgeoning of hate crime, demented chatter on right-wing talk radio about the new President’s origins, even a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan. But Obama’s victory, a culmination of struggles by multitudes over generations, often under harrowing conditions, was an authentically new day. Its sun shone brightly on November 5, 2008, banishing, for a while at least, the darkness.

Obama's particular struggle is recounted in his memoir, *Dreams from My Father*, a meditation on race inflected by multiple points of difference: being outside the mainstream of African-American life as the child of a Kenyan father rather than within the lineage stemming from chattel slavery; being raised in an all-white family of extraordinary people, especially his wonderful mother; being linked to the Global South through a childhood sojourn in Indonesia where he again felt himself a stranger; and by contending with the absence of his father, which cast a spell of estrangement over the young Obama's life.

The person who has emerged from this matrix seems a perpetual project of self-improvement. During the campaign Obama made an off-handed remark to the effect that that he was not a very good candidate but that he was working to become better—this in the midst of the most brilliant run for the presidency within memory. The continuing overhaul has made Obama into an enigma. Is he the first Black President, or is he the first President who happens to be black? Is he an organic intellectual in Gramsci's sense, and if so, from which class formation does he derive his identity? He is the first President in my lifetime of real intellectual distinction, capable, for example, of ably teaching a course on Constitutional Law at the University of Chicago. But he is also more authentically populist than any recent President—notwithstanding Bill Clinton's "Bubba" identity—thanks to the years as a community organizer in South Chicago, a time to hone his formidable organizational skills, and in the doing, himself as well.

Then there is the matter of Abraham Lincoln, for whom Obama has become a kind of avatar. Obama idolizes Lincoln, has studied him, quotes him. Has the sixteenth, our greatest, come to inhabit the forty-fourth? No one can accuse Obama of being homely, but otherwise the resemblance to Lincoln is remarkable: the charm, the inwardness, an indefinable sense of melancholy, the sly humor, the stern honesty, the eloquence, the imperturbability, most of all, a rise to power from the margins and in context of massive crisis. The crisis facing Lincoln was by political standards, worse—the breakup of the Union still dwarfs everything else in United States history, still shocks with its sheer awfulness. But however the crisis Obama faces may be less agonizing than the immediacy of Civil War, what lies before him, and us, is greater in scale than what awaited Lincoln in 1860, indeed, it is the greatest crisis in world history. For Obama takes power not simply confronting a massive collapse of accumulation along with two obscene wars, he does so in the context of looming global ecological disintegration, with a very narrow window for resolution before irreversible changes set in that could doom civilization and the human species itself. Who knows if he can solve these problems? For the present we have to settle for the thin consolation of having a President about whom such a question can even be legitimately asked, a President capable of recognizing just how radical is the crisis that he faces, and how profound the struggle awaiting him.

Whether he actually does recognize it and respond properly is an entirely open question at present (early January, 2009). One was not encouraged to hear Obama say, at the press conference on December 15 announcing his energy policy team, that "There is not a contradiction between economic growth and sound environmental policies..." But Lincoln was heard to say at his Cooper Union speech in New York City on February 27, 1860, that "Wrong as we think slavery is, we can yet afford to let it alone where it is . . ." The measure of greatness lies not in correctness but in what is overcome. For the politician this path leads

through the defiles of compromise—in Obama’s case, compromises to enter the playing field in the first place, compromises to weave together an effective coalition, compromises to achieve a strategic balance, and to be sure, compromises for the almighty dollar. Obama raised a mind-numbing three quarters of a billion for his campaign, and though it is most remarkable that as much as a third came from the populist masses who also were the infantry of his campaign, the half billion or so left over amounts to a huge endorsement by the big bourgeoisie, who are not given to backing a candidate unless they have become convinced of his loyalty.

We have already seen many fruits of this poisoned tree in Obama’s foreign policy and economic policy “teams,” the members of which are 100 percent certifiably wheels of the accumulation machine. To me, the worst sign by far has been his toadying to the Zionist power structure that sits astride the nation, dominating the state apparatus, the media, the entertainment industry, and the academy—I say, worst, because Barack Hussein Obama *already knows better*, knows full well what transpires in Israel/Palestine, knows that by his silence at Israel’s bombardment of Gaza he is stoking the genocidal potentials of Zionism. It is not a matter of having to learn something, or remember something, or recognize what is plainly there. It is a matter of coldly and cruelly disregarding what he knows, and betraying the humanity of Palestinians and his own humanity in the same gesture.

All of which is sadly true, but also incomplete. For greatness in a leader is less a dictating from above than a being open to what is below—and in so doing, stirring those below to their own greatness. Leaders, in short, are themselves produced through a subtle mutual embrace with others, for which, however, they have to be capable. The worst President in American history, George W Bush, was also the most closed off. The greatest, Lincoln, was no autonomous mover, but one open to others: elites like his cabinet of rivals, brilliant outsiders like Frederick Douglass, and the most humble, who used to pay him visits in the White House. He may have committed blunder after blunder, and crimes of state as well. But his mind expanded to embrace the tragedy of his times, and his compassion became the stuff of legend. Thus Leo Tolstoy said of him, in 1908 no less, that “Lincoln was a humanitarian as broad as the world. He was bigger than his country—bigger than all the Presidents together . . .”

And Obama, at the threshold, untried and dubious in many ways . . . where should he fit? All we can say is first, that, like Brutus, the fault is not in the stars but ourselves if we are underlings, that is, the answer will be given by the agency of those below; and second, that the 44th President remains capable of being influenced creatively. Not because of what he has done or even wants to do, but because of what is unfinished in him. Willy-nilly, the first black man in the White House is a world-historical figure, a body in whom the scattered portions of humanity can find themselves and come together.

Shem and Shaun

O’Leary, O’Reilly, O’Hare and O’Hara,
There’s no one as Irish as Barack Obama

So went a little ditty that drew quite a few hits on YouTube during the campaign. The song was inspired by learning that Obama’s great great great grandfather was in fact a scion of the

auld sod. In response, the candidate—aka “Barry,” itself a serviceable Irish name—obligingly agreed to an apostrophe between the O and the B, which, he averred, would make everything all right.

From the father-side, Obama comes directly from the Rift Valley, through the Luo of Southern Sudan. The mother’s side, including the Hibernian great great great grandfather, also comes from the Rift Valley, allowing for a few more generations lying in-between. And so do you, and so do I, come from the Valley. The 44th President, as you might imagine, is conscious of these relationships. As he mused on a trip to the Valley during a trip to acquaint himself with his African roots:

This is what Creation looked like. The same stillness, the same crunching of bone. There in the dusk, over that hill, I imagined the first man stepping forward, naked and rough-skinned, grasping a chink of flint in his clumsy hand, no words yet for the fear, the anticipation, the awe he feels at the sky, the glimmering knowledge of his own death. If only we could remember that first common step, the first common word—that time before Babel.”

The man is a book that has not yet been closed. It is up to us to contribute to its composition.

—Joel Kovel