

Out-of-place Obama: an intellectual history of a misunderstood president

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*As the initial flurry of hope surrounding Barack Obama's campaign met the realities of an economic recession and political stalemate, criticism of Obama's performance came not just from the right but from people within his own party whom were frustrated and confused over his overly moderate position. **Reading Obama** unearths the US President's intellectual influences, with **Alan Dobson** intrigued by its exploration of the development of modern political philosophy and the links between the political performance of Obama.*



Reading Obama: Dreams, Hopes and the American Political Tradition. James T. Kloppenberg. Princeton University Press. February 2012.

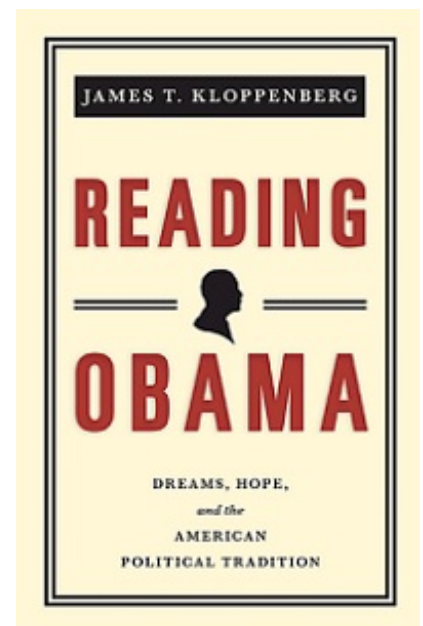
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Reading Obama is an intellectual history that seeks to show the origins of Barack Obama's view of American politics and how awareness of American history and the philosophy of pragmatism have largely shaped his world view. And that world view, it is argued, is seen from the perspective of "a moderate Democrat, a master of mediation drawn toward deliberation rather than drawing lines in sand".

The author sees Obama as a particularly unfortunate victim of circumstance which delivered him the presidency at a time when the USA was on the brink of the most serious economic crisis since the Great Depression and in a political milieu that was increasingly partisan to the point of stark ideological intolerance. Responding to those circumstances by adhering to his moderation alienated him from many on both Left and Right. "In the America of 2012, nuance is out, caricature is in. Inconvenient facts can be ignored and other 'facts' invoked or, if necessary, invented. In that world, the thoughtful, empathetic, moderate Barack Obama can seem out of place."

So, how to read Obama? However one goes about it there are always difficulties with intellectual histories. Making connections between other people's ideas, intellectual cultural developments and the American historical political tradition with the emergence of Obama's political values and his world view are always going to be a little tenuous and contestable. The fact that America's leading political philosopher of the late twentieth and early twenty first century championed the importance of overlapping consensus among many Americans as an important basis for political life does not necessarily mean that John Rawls influenced Obama to the extent that he too took this position: there may have been many other causes in operation as well.

To be fair to Kloppenberg, he repeatedly emphasises the complexity of value and world view formations and what emerges from the overall thesis of the book is plausible and often persuasive.



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There is a problem however, in the fact that at times the thesis becomes a little rhetorical with obvious partisan support for Obama and frustration and dismay at some of his critics.

The thesis is structured through three long and substantive chapters dealing with Obama's education, the philosophical shift from universalism to particularism, and Obama's understanding of American history. The author draws heavily on Obama's writings both his speeches and *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope* for the development of his thesis.

Understandably being of mixed race and having experienced varied places – most importantly Hawaii, Indonesia, and the USA, Obama developed both sensitivity to identity and a complex perspective on life. Such qualities along with his strong intellectual abilities stood him in good stead later when he spent several years as a community organiser in Chicago. He showed “an exceptional willingness to listen to what people were saying...when he left Chicago for Cambridge, Obama had already demonstrated a penchant for drawing on different traditions, a talent for blending apparently incompatible ideas, and a strong preference for flexibility over dogmatism.” At law school he developed further and came to value as central tenets of his philosophy “the importance of community, the centrality of obligations, and the shaping influence of civic virtue in American democracy.”

At law school Obama was also directly exposed to legal and philosophical arguments which Kloppenberg sees as drawing him on intellectually to a position inspired by the ideas of the later Rawls, Michael Sandel and Richard J. Bernstein, to name only the most influential. The net result has been a commitment to civic republicanism, deliberative democracy and a form of pragmatism that celebrates the experimental habit, acknowledges the cultural contingency of rational choice, insists on participatory democracy, acknowledges the changeable nature of the political and cultural world in which we live, and rests upon a conviction that “no single conception of philosophy or any other discipline could capture all the dimensions of the world's cultures or even its physical form or processes”.

And finally experience and intellectual development are wedded to Obama's understanding of the history of the American political tradition. With universalism in disarray, the emphasis is to anchor values within particular historical traditions and for Obama this leads to his understanding of US democracy “not as a house to be built, but as a conversation to be had”. US democracy should also be deliberative in which all citizens are required to engage in a process of testing their ideas against an external reality, persuading others of their point of view, and building shifting alliances of consent.”

This is a fascinating book, not just because it deals with the current president of the United States, but also because it explores the development of modern political philosophy and tries to establish direct links between it and the political performance of Obama.

This reviewer is not always convinced that the links asserted are convincing but others may find otherwise. Not surprisingly, something that remains unresolved is the tension within modern political philosophy involved in the business of values. Sometimes moral right must trump any notion of majoritarianism – as Kloppenberg points out himself regarding Lincoln and slavery.

But what values should society pursue with confidence and without fear of oppressing others. How can the John Dewey's *Quest for Certainty* be consummated? According to Dewey and other philosophical pragmatists it cannot: it is a bootless enterprise. For much of the liberal tradition the position has long been that the state must be neutral regarding the moral preferences of its citizens because of this lack of certainty. So while on one level it makes sense to argue: “Principled partisans of pragmatism and democracy are committed to debate, experimentation, and the critical reassessment of results.” At the same time this begs a question: By what criteria, what kind of values are to be deployed to make the critical reassessments? To really evaluate as opposed to assessing success or failure against whatever benchmarks are chosen one needs substantive moral values. And maybe some are still unsure of what values – apart from procedural ones of open debate and toleration – that truly inform

Obama's position. This is not to say that Obama is not patently decent and humane, but what kind of more substantive political commitments do those qualities translate into?

Whether one likes it or not, the public domain of democracy demands a clear picture of what elected politicians plan to do. If a leader fails to strike the right balance between commitment to value positions and flexibility, or even fails to communicate the moves effectively then problems not surprisingly arise. For some who instinctively feels well disposed towards Obama, this may be a problem.

Alan Dobson is an honorary Professor in the School of International Relations, St. Andrews University and was Professor of Politics at Dundee University, 1999-2011. He is editor of the *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* and Chair of the Transatlantic Studies Association. He has published extensively on Anglo-American relations and the politics and diplomacy of the international airline system. His most recent publications are *FDR and Civil Aviation*, (New York: 2011); *Globalization and Regional Integration: the Origins, Development and Impact of the Single European Aviation Market* (London/New York: 2007), *US Economic Statecraft for Survival 1933-1991* (London/New York: 2002), and with Steve Marsh, *US Foreign Policy Since 1945* 2nd edition, (London, 2006), and forthcoming in 2012 co-editor with Steve Marsh, *Contemporary Anglo-American Relations: A Special relationship?* (New York/London: 2012). [Read more reviews by Alan.](#)

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