

The Power of Discourse: Obama and the American Dream.

Alexander, Jeffrey C. and Bernadette N. Jaworsky (2014) *Obama Power*, Cambridge Polity.

Reviewed by Carol Johnson, University of Adelaide

This book promises “a new interpretation of US politics in the critical four years from January 2009 to November 2012” (pvii). It aims to explain how Obama resurrected his prospects and was re-elected given the Democrats’ disastrous mid-term election defeat and Obama’s falling poll results earlier in his first term. It is an engaging book “not written for academics” but “not written against them either” and it draws heavily on the embedded theory in Alexander’s previous work in cultural sociology (p110).

The authors’ interpretation of US politics centres around arguments that Obama succeeded because of his ability to “make meaning” and “to become a powerful political symbol” (p2) ; that politics is performative and that “citizens don’t deliberate the ‘real’ qualities of candidates so much as they experience emotionally their projected moral tone” (p2). In Alexander and Jaworski’s view that moral tone is closely tied up with conceptions of social solidarity and protecting citizens, including the “hopes and anxieties” around economic issues, health and welfare (p15).

The authors sheet home part of the reason for Obama’s original fall in the polls not only to anxieties over issues such as the U.S.’s economic performance but also to the effective fear campaign run against Obama’s health reforms. They cite polls that showed that an extraordinary 4 in 10 Americans believed that death panels would be set up as a result of those health reforms (p12). By contrast, Obama had been failing to win hearts and minds. Indeed, Obama himself admitted that he had failed to tell an inspiring story to the American people during the initial period of his presidency (p25). Consequently, Obama constructed a new narrative in which he featured as a democratically elected leader fighting for the common good against an extreme and partisan opposition (p29). He also drew on populist rhetoric, depicting himself as the champion of ordinary and marginalized people against the rich and powerful (p30). Mitt Romney’s attacks on those in receipt of government entitlements, including health-care, helpfully played into accusations that Romney was elitist. Meanwhile, Obama argued he was governing on behalf of everyone, including hard-working Republicans and that ordinary voters from both parties believed in giving a “helping hand” to those who genuinely needed it (p73). Obama proclaimed that the American people could see “the scars” and the “gray hair” that had resulted from his fight for a better America but that “after all we’ve been through together, we can’t give up now” (Obama, cited p88).

The authors note that Obama had long “presented himself as embodying the utopian ideals America shared across demographic lines” and as someone who could rebuild America so as to realise those utopian common dreams (p91). His race and relative youth had been built into those narratives, despite the fact that, the authors argue he “rarely spoke publicly about racism, the legacy of slavery, or the suffering of the black underclass” (pp91-2). Rather, Obama projected himself as pursuing the common interest , he “projected empathy for the powerless and excluded, but he did not present himself as serving them. He performed,

rather, as a symbol of American democracy and on behalf of the wider, civil society he believed it entailed” (p92). (Interestingly, recent speeches suggest that Obama’s rhetoric on issues of race is becoming more explicit now his presidency is drawing to a close, though there were earlier examples such as his March 2008 “More Perfect Union” speech, that Alexander and Jaworsky could usefully have addressed more).

The authors acknowledge that Obama was confronting major economic, ideological and demographic challenges. However they assert that: “if we want to understand the outcomes of electoral struggles, such grand issues do not cut close enough to the bone. They were not the cause of Obama’s political recovery, his subsequent electoral victory, or Romney’s defeat. How the big issues were dramatized is what mattered.” (p108). They go on to argue that “Whoever makes meaning better will be the victor in a presidential campaign” (p109).

However, such sweeping and generalizing claims go too far. At its best this book does provide an analytically sophisticated and perceptive analysis of Obama’s discourse. That is where the strength of this book lies. The discursive factors the authors draw attention to are undoubtedly incredibly important in election campaigns. They can even determine the outcome. However they do not necessarily do so. There are many other factors at play ranging from media bias; campaign funding and a divided opposition (as the Tea Party wreaked havoc in Republican ranks) to the role of specific electoral systems. (The electoral system is particularly arcane in the case of U.S. presidential elections and doesn’t necessarily reflect majority views on who won debates).

Furthermore, while the authors correctly identify the importance of the Obama campaign’s use of social media (pp89-106), they emphasise the way in which personal approaches by Obama supporters, via social media, were used to mobilise key demographic groups. However, they neglect a crucial aspect. The Obama campaign also utilized incredibly sophisticated data bases and social media techniques that allowed them to identify *specific* voters whose votes needed to be influenced in the states that mattered. The significance of these micro-targetting techniques were graphically revealed in the outcome of the recent British election. Opinion polls suggested Labour and the Conservatives were neck-and-neck. However, the Conservatives had hired Jim Messina, Obama’s 2012 campaign manager, to help identify *specific* undecided voters in *key marginal seats* who could then be personally approached via social media, phone or doorstep canvassing to encourage them to turn out to vote for the conservatives.

Here, as elsewhere, politicians’ public speeches to broader audiences are only part of the incredibly sophisticated political communication methods used in modern election campaigns. Parties want to target the key voters in the specific electorates that can determine the election outcomes, not waste their efforts on voters who don’t count. Alexander and Jaworsky’s book would therefore have benefitted from engaging more with the extensive American political science literature on how American election campaigns are conducted. (They could also have placed more emphasis on Obama’s innovative use of social media for crowdfunding given the crucial role played by campaign finances in U.S. elections).

Furthermore, despite Alexander and Jaworsky’s analysis of Obama’s discourse generally being very perceptive, there is some existing analyses of U.S. political discourse that appears not to have been engaged with (though it is hard to be certain given that there are 68 pages of endnotes in the book to search through and no bibliography). Those analyses include interesting work by Martha Augoustinos and Stephanie De Garis on Obama’s “post-racial” identity rhetoric and by Frank Cooper on the complex ways in which Obama performs both his racial and gendered identity. George Lakoff’s key work on U.S. political discourse could have been usefully engaged with. So could the important work of Drew Westen, amongst others who have addressed Obama’s use of emotion in his discourse. More could also have been said about Obama’s performance of empathetic and protective masculinity and the

contrast with Romney's more muscular form of masculinity. There are also questions regarding how new Obama's 2012 discourse was and how much it involved merely recasting and clarifying themes from his 2008 campaign.

In addition, the extra-discursive does need to be factored in more fully than Alexander and Jaworsky allow, rather than just focusing on how key issues were dramatized or the narratives told about them as they suggest above. Obama's utopian 2008 election mantra of "Yes we can!" soon encountered numerous practical political and economic barriers, including the impact of the Global Financial Crisis and the power of American capital. The inevitable disillusion that followed did still impact on Obama's vote in 2012, despite his populist rhetoric. The extra-discursive can also influence which symbolism resonates. Obama is evoking the American dream, and American exceptionalism, at a time when the geopolitics and geo-economics of the world is fundamentally changing and America's power is in relative decline. Consequently, Obama's election and re-election as president may reflect a desperate desire to hold on to an increasingly threatened dream, rather than signifying its enduring strength.