

Obama Rhetoric For Juncture

“If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer” (Barack Obama, Victory Speech, November 4th, 2008).

“Working together, we will begin the urgent task of rebuilding our nation and renewing the American dream. I’ve spent my entire life and business looking at the untapped potential in projects and in people all over the world. That is now what I want to do for our country” (Donald J. Trump, Victory Speech, November 9th, 2016).

To persuade people in matters of politics and public affairs – to inspire and move them to action – one must first have a grasp of the peculiarities of the particular humans to whom one is speaking. Rhetoric is not primarily about turns of phrase and rhythmic repetition. It is about making use of ‘common opinion’ - things most people believe to be true. It connects a proposition (to support a bill, raise taxes, start a war) to sentiments, values and understandings already shared by the audience. It shows that some new plan or idea is like or connected to something with which we are already familiar making it thinkable in some specific way. In so doing rhetoric makes manifest some part of the culture and character of a people, applying it to the problems of the present, testing its mettle.

When the novel proposition is a candidate then the candidate has to in some way connect themselves to something the audience already knows and thinks and to something in its character. Only then can that candidacy become thinkable and meaningful. As the sociologist Jeffrey Alexander – whose account of the rise of Obama I recommend – puts it, one of the things that politics is made of is a public stage upon which political actors (in all senses of that word) ‘project performances of their reasons’. They embody a claim about human affairs - some set of shared beliefs, feelings, moods and meanings – and act as protagonists in our social drama. They are ‘exemplifications of sacred religious and secular texts’. At elections rival candidates perform different propositions. They activate and amplify different kinds of belief and participate in a societal dispute about which parts of our collective character we should cultivate and express.

At such performances Barack Obama was a master. In his 2004 address to the Democratic Party convention Obama announced his presence on the stage as ‘pretty unlikely’ before speaking of his father - ‘he grew up herding goats, went to school in a tin-roof school’ - and his mother, the Kansas born daughter of an oil rigger and soldier. He evoked the old American story of social mobility, expanding it into a newer story of cultures meeting and melding. Obama’s grandparents had a dream which they worked hard to realise; his parents had dreams they too worked hard to fulfil and now Obama on stage in front of fellow Democrats was the fulfilment of that dream even as he too dreamed of the future for his own children: “I stand here today, grateful for the diversity of my heritage, aware that my parents’ dreams live on in my precious daughters. I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story, that I owe a debt to all of

those who came before me, and that, in no other country on earth is my story even possible”. The American exception and the dreams which it is made on, materialised before the audience in the body and words of Barack Obama.

By 2007 Obama’s ‘unlikely presence’ had turned into an ‘improbable quest’ for the nomination. In 2008 after a better than expected loss in New Hampshire it was ‘our improbable journey’. Listing and so integrating his diverse supporters into one unified campaign Obama made the ‘impossible odds’ they faced equivalent to those overcome by ‘generations of Americans’ slaves and abolitionists, immigrants and pioneers, organised workers and suffragettes, Kennedy and King. The pairings unite, the list makes time into one movement (the ‘arc of the moral universe’ which ‘bends towards justice’) at the culmination of which is the Obama campaign itself: “Yes. We can”.

The highest achievement of this art was ‘Towards a more Perfect Union’. Here, on the back foot over the politics of race, Obama modified his story so that it embodied not just the promise of America but the trauma too – the ‘stain’, the ‘original sin of slavery’. Now the improbable thing is the American experiment in democracy itself – an experiment still underway and which, though fraught, could succeed in the form of this improbable campaign. Significantly that speech ended with the story of ‘a twenty-three year old white woman named Ashley Baia’ working for the campaign organizing an African-American community. At an organisers’ meeting, Obama told us, an elderly black man explained that he was there not for health care, the economy, education, the war or Obama himself but ‘because of Ashley’. In ‘that single moment of recognition between

that young white girl and that old black man', Obama implied, we glimpse the perfection of the Union that his campaign promises. And so, in his victory speech in 2008, electoral success was proof of the living dream, the realization of the founders' vision, the instantiation of democracy itself. Who, indeed, could doubt it?

Watching Trump's victory speech eight years later we should be struck at first by how similar it is to Obama's. It lacks the fluency of course but it too celebrates a movement that has culminated in victory and which builds its promise around the American Dream; a promise which Trump managed (improbably) to embody more successfully than his opponent. But it's not the same dream. In a precise way Trump's performance is the opposite of Obama's. Where Obama sought to embody the potential success of the American dream Trump embodied recognition of its loss. His campaign organized itself around the idea that the dream required not fulfillment but rescue – not making America great but making it great *again*.

In the quote that forms an epigraph to this essay Trump announces a common project to *rebuild* and *renew*; the implication - the common opinion shared by his audience - is that America has gone wrong, is broken, its potential untapped. Trump's campaign was dedicated in ways often unnoticed to speaking of sorrow and of loss – of jobs, security and dignity; of children killed in badly fought wars against dictators abroad and drugs at home. But having evoked such experiences, common to many in the audience, the rhetoric turned to allocation of blame: China, NATO, establishment politicians, 'crooked' Hilary.

The rhetorical performance of Trump is, as it were, the dark dialectical antithesis to Obama's. Obama represented himself as a fulfillment of the American dream; Trump's political career began as an attempt to prove that Obama was not American at all. Obama's story was 'unlikely; 'improbable' and Trump claimed it was literally so. Where Obama made himself, and remained, so very 'Presidential', Trump – with all the bluster and offence – become the epitome of the un-Presidential in a performance that was thus an implicit critique of the aloofness of the office itself. Obama's was a promise of racial unity. Trump reverses its meaning so that it stands for radical racial division, immigrants and others taking the country for themselves.

At a more fundamental level Obama used his personal story as the script for the performance of an 'exemplar': one who stands out as indicative rather than exceptional. He dissolved his uniqueness into the uniqueness of the country as a whole which was then reflected back at an audience which recognised itself, its own promise, its own dream, its own historical mission. The Trump script was about the exceptional - the huge, the amazing, the most - not the exemplary. He performs himself, the businessman, the one who sees untapped potential, the one who stands out and stands apart from the mainstream. He is the one whose words do not belong to the office of President because his words are his own just as his money is his own and he is his own man. But – and this is very important – he did not project his image of himself directly at his audience. They were not invited to be supplicants to his greatness. His rhetoric does not simply tell his audience how great and wonderful they are but magnifies their sense of themselves as

exceptions-to-the-rule in contemporary America and performs the aggressive projection of that being-expected outwards at the others who are to blame. Audiences can vicariously enjoy Trump's aggression towards others, his mockery and his abuse. "Hope is a joy not constant, arising from the idea of something future or past about the issue of which we sometimes doubt" says Spinoza. Obama's rhetoric, for its audience, inspired just such a joy in the face of uncertainty. "Hatred" says Spinoza, "is sorrow with the accompanying idea of an external cause". Anger is the desire to injure those we hate and "Derision is pleasure arising from our conceiving the presence of a quality, which we despise, in an object which we hate". Hate, anger and derision – these are the emotional co-ordinates Trump's performance enables his sorrowful audience to experience.

Rhetoric succeeds by connecting new propositions to something an audience already believes. But political actors, movements and speechwriters choose which audiences they speak to and which of the many things a people believes should be appealed to. They choose which parts of our character to perform and promote. It is possible to win by appealing to particular constituencies, directing their sorrow at outsiders and giving them the feeling of power that comes with anger and derision. But it also possible (or so progressives must believe) to seek to appeal to what Obama in his last State of the Union address called 'our better selves'. Or, as he expressed it in the eulogy to Clementa Pinckney, to our grace: "...an open heart. That, more than any particular policy or analysis, is what's called upon right now, I think - what a friend of mine, the writer Marilyn Robinson, calls "that reservoir of goodness, beyond, and of another kind, that we are able to do each other in the ordinary cause of things." That reservoir of goodness. If

we can find that grace, anything is possible. If we can tap that grace, everything can change. Amazing grace. Amazing grace”.