National Elections and Global Publics: the US Political Imaginary in 2008

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In spring of this year, a new political movement appeared in the United States. It came into view on the television screen behind the presidential candidate, Barack Hussein Obama, at the time of his first electoral victories. Obama was absolutely correct in saying, "This campaign is not about me." It was about a movement that was not aware of itself before that moment, formed out of the public eye among friends, family, fellow-students, co-workers, and strangers newly connected by the internet. The mostly white, mostly middle-class, middle-age, middle-western voters behind Obama at his first victory speech in Iowa showed a side of the American electorate many believed had become extinct, a public of ordinary

people who could be relied on for a modicum of sanity and good sense in their political actions, who precisely because of their lack of extremism were aware of the extreme dangers to democracy that the nation faces in its political life. Support for Obama has now grown among multiple publics, who cannot be stuffed into narrow pigeon-holes or the predefined scripts of identity politics whereby pieces of the public are cast as stock figures: black/white, male/female, capitalist/worker.

The voters who launched Obama's campaign came together around the most basic political decencies. They rejected rationalizations of torture and offensive war. They refused to excuse administrative incompetence and executive arrogance. And, rather than pushing for programs benefiting their own social and economic self-interests, they formed judgments on issues in terms of the common good. It was unexpectedly refreshing, so out of character with what we in the USA had grown accustomed to see that even the political pundits, those talking heads on television news, appeared at first amazed, and then delighted, as they reported this grass-roots initiative of citizens in a threateningly powerful nation, bearing witness to their responsibility in the eyes of a global public sphere, who had found their own visibility in and through the campaign of Barack Obama.

We are not the first national electorate to have experienced the moment of elation when that abstract word, democracy, takes visible shape and comes alive.

In this, as in many of the less palatable aspects of contemporary historical development—privatization of social services, citizen surveillance, media cartels, government corruption, the ever-growing gap between rich and poor—the so-called developed nations have lagged behind historical trends. Together with these globally shared problems, there are also moments of political hope, when ordinary people wake up from their media-induced slumber to realize that present trends are not inevitable, not their predetermined fate. In the cluttered mass of media trivialities, this moment shines through. Moreover, it recurs, and in the virtual spaces of the new technologies we have seen it, visibly, on the streets of Moscow, Berlin, Beijing, Buenos Aires, Beirut, Karachi, Mexico City. In the first flush of optimism generated by their electoral victories, Lula da Silva, Evo Morales, Fernando Lugo, Caesar Chavez, and Vincente Fox have participated, however temporarily, in its history, and even if such victories are largely symbolic, even if hopes for change have been disappointed, what is important in these moments are the traces of really existing democracy they leave behind.

These experiences of public democracy are shared ones: communist, if you will. Let us revive the word "communist" as a conscious protest against the rhetoric of certain national leaders who have made the phony claim that the democratic dream belongs to them, that it depends on their leadership, giving them the right to

dictate its name. Authentically democratic moments are the legacy of all of humanity. They punctuate the aleatory and irregular movement forward in the unfolding of what Marx called humanity's "species-being." Kant described the French Revolution in such terms, remarking that observers, no matter what their national or pecuniary interests, felt "a sympathy which borders on enthusiasm" with the spectacle of citizens acting freely to overthrow the arbitrary rule of privilege and govern themselves for the common good. The sudden outburst of popular support for Barack Obama in the Spring 2008 primary elections had an undeniable resemblance to these moments. And it was witnessed by a global public who understood that this experience, however fleeting, however virtual, was real.

"Only images in the mind motivate the will," wrote Walter Benjamin, at a time when the politics of the media image was just beginning. In today's media-saturated political landscape, this is the dominant feature. No power without an image. As much as defenders of reason would like to think that issues of policy are determining it as image that politics appears on the global stage. A Chinese youth facing tanks on Tiananmen Square; a hooded prisoner with electric wires on outstretched arms—these images knit viewers together in global human networks that ignore territorial boundaries, communicating beneath the radar of state power. The instant reproduce-ability of the image is a produc-

tive force. It deterritorializes political control and democratizes its distribution, placing power in the hands of the global public.

An image empowers; but it can also deceive. We discern the difference by the nature of its deployment. A decisive criterion: the empowering image cannot be controlled, circulating in the global public sphere in a way that shoots past its initial intent. It is historically unplanned, an image-event, not an orchestrated spectacle. Not the producer of an image, but the observer is key, and the most reliable observer sees with an eye of global impartiality. YouTube emerges as a trustworthy media ally, whereas image-privatization eviscerates its power. By channeling the circulation of the image, or by keeping it out of the public eye altogether, property rights function to control the image's unwanted or unmanageable effects. Old-time politics learned about selling a candidate from the advertising strategies of private corporations. Nothing distinguishes the new generation more decisively than its appropriation of the channels of communication for its own messages, a form of socialization of the means of image-production made possible technologically on a planetary scale.

In contrast to market-driven practice, an empowering image is not aimed at a particular audience. Its progressive reception is an effect of global recontextualizations. Not that everyone has the same reaction to it. Precisely the differences in viewer understanding instruct the

global public, because the non-identities in reception—of a cartoon image of the Prophet, for example—have the salutary effect of challenging our provincial habits of conceptualizing democracy, social justice, and public civility as narrowly domestic, purely national affairs. Multiple contexts of reception increase the energy of an image, lending it a vitality of its own.

The emerging image of Barack Hussein Obama is itself a political force, and that is what the political establishment—of *both* parties—has tried to contain. Here is the irony: the empowering, out-of-control image of Obama threatens the candidate's own party organization. They are faced with a dilemma: attempts to monopolize control of the Obama image risk robbing the grass-roots movement of its power. When the party's marketing machine is set whirring, it seems false to say: "This is not about me." Controlling the image is paramount, and the public, mined by opinion polls for its likes and dislikes, is stuffed back into more manageable pigeon-holes of race and sex, region and religion—reversing the original logic of the candidacy and weakening its empowering effect. The traditional recipe for political success has been to channel pre-packaged images of the candidate through TV ads and prime-time news. Politicians stick to "talking-points," speak in "sound-bites," and attempt to control news-show "spin." The line between news-event and image-appearance dissipates. Authenticity is merely a staged effect. The cynicism of this procedure

became so blatant during the Bush administration that one of his close advisors told a reporter unapologetically: "We create our own reality."[1] Out of this postmodern political nightmare came a dialectical reversal: Filmmakers (Sean Penn, Michael Moore), media stars (Oprah Winfrey, Susan Sarandon), and comic parodies of TV news (*The Daley Show*, *The Colbert Report*), became Americans' most reliable sources of political truth.

Democracy is not only about freedom of speech. It is about popular control of production, dissemination, and access to what is said and, increasingly, what is seen. This process has already been globalized, and if it remains in the hands of a minority, it is still the most powerful weapon democracy has. From all appearances, the Obama campaign is aware of the new situation. It is attempting to balance image-empowerment with image-control in the midst of a revolutionary transformation in image production. The campaign's first ticklish task in diplomacy has been to negotiate the tension in this transformation between two virtual worlds, the traditional one of hard-print news, domestic television, and land-based telephones, and the cyberspace world of text-messaging, Googling, and mp3s. Negotiations have not been easy.

The Republican campaign of John McCain (who has admitted his alien status in the world of Google) has tried to profit from this situation. But in early August 2008, when McCain's TV advertisement juxtaposed im-

ages of Paris Hilton and Obama as a way to discredit the visible success of the latter's trip to the Middle East and Europe, he ventured deep into media territory and out of his realm of competence, and Paris Hilton herself came out the winner. Her video-image poolside and her lucid, brief, bipartisan energy policy rang true—truer, perhaps, than the carefully orchestrated spectacle of 200,000 Germans cheering a (to them) inaudible Obama, whose strikingly *un*-audacious speech in Berlin earlier the same week was deliberately crafted for US political consumption. In the Berlin speech's references to tearing down walls, there was no mention of the walling off of Palestinians by the Israelis, not a word about construction of a wall at the Mexican border of Obama's own country. Obama's strategy was a disappointment to those American voters whose movement had created the empowering image, while his calculated goal, to gain votes for him among centrists and independents at home, did not receive validation from the polls.

We need to look more closely at this phenomenon of the empowering image that moves easily into media culture, in defiance of campaign management and market control. What does it speak to the political public? What does this image want? And, critically important, can the real Obama, the flesh-and-blood political candidate, inhabit this image, win the national election, and prove himself worthy in the global public sphere? How will the machinery of party politics respond?

Since the early writings of Jean Baudrillard, we have been aware of the reality of imaginary politics. It is no longer a question of getting back to a truer reality behind the image. Images have their own lives and reality effects that no one (not even the Bush administration) can completely control. Baudrillard's post-modern pessimism refused to embrace this new situation ("no longer" is Baudrillard's repeated lament). In contrast, W. J. T. Mitchell affirms images as animated and desiring subjects that actively engage their viewers, whose task is not to decipher what they mean, but what they want. It is helpful to distinguish the empowering-image of Obama in this way. If the image is affirmed as autonomous, if it has agency, then we can speak of the surplus, the "more-than-the-man-Obama" that it brings to life and communicates, circulating among viewers who in turn propel its movement. Neither side, image or viewer is passive in this process. Energy is released at the point of their intersection. There need be no uniformity of context among viewers, no consensus on the "more-than" of this surplus of value, only affirmation of its factual existence. And one thing more: given the global disorganization of dissent, the image can organize it.

Before all interpretation is the materiality of Obama's image: his skin is not white. Some may claim that, with a father from Kenya and a white mother from Kansas, he is not black enough. Others may accuse this Harvard Law School graduate of elitism. Others may say that

only his skin color has brought him this far. Still others may argue his color plays no role, only his actions and ideas matter. But before all of these interpretations, color is there *in the image*, and it may well become the face of US power. Nowhere in the world can it be argue that this image-event will not matter. Color on the face of the US president disrupts the status quo of image-power globally, and—here is its organizing force—it does so in a way that can be sensed as empowering to all of humanity. This "more-than" in the Obama image inspires political imagination. Grass-roots in its generation, non-hierarchical in its dissemination, multi-semantic in its recontextualizations, its surplus of meaning has democratic implications that break new political ground.

For the past 200 years, progress in Western democracy has been a process of extending the right to vote beyond its original appropriation by white, property-holding males to include workers, women, minorities, and post-colonial populations. Radical extension of the suffrage has been the very essence of democracy, and there are few who would not herald its achievements. And yet, a gap between the ideal and the reality has always existed no matter what part of political history we observe. For it is only an idealized voter that we could have in mind in making the maximalist demand of radical democracy. We easily admit that, in real life, voters are quite capable of being misinformed, and that their electoral choice may be prejudiced, biased, self-interested, manipulated,

or just plain wrong. But we will not easily conclude that the ideal of voter sovereignty is merely myth, a noble lie. And with good reason. To do so opens the door for vanguard and elitist practices that can emerge any place on the political spectrum.

On the Left, this gap is the Leninist justification for the sovereignty of the Party in the name of workers deemed incapable of recognizing their own true interests. It is the nub of debates in post-colonial theory around the question (raised famously by Gayatri Spivak): "Can the subaltern [the subordinated underclass] speak?" In its populist form, distrust of the voting public justifies the demagogic leader as the iconic embodiment of the people, whose personal will is claimed as identical to their own. On the Right, it leads neo-conservatives to claim that only the rulers can (or need to) know truth, providing an out-and-out defense of the noble lie. Not these extreme positions alone should concern us, but the liberal view as well that equates free elections with free markets, whereby choice is transformed into a mechanism of market control. Nor do we need to embrace as an alternative the anarchist utopia that denies the gap and wishes it away. What if democracy were understood outside the frame of both Left and Right resolutions of the non-identity of reality and ideal? What if it is not a matter of providing an illusion of closing the gap at all, but, on the contrary, keeping it open by keeping it in view?

The authenticity of the Obama image is its non-identity with itself. It inspires by making visible the ideal the USA maintains about itself, that what binds this nation of immigrants is not color or ethnicity, but adherence to principles of democratic rule, equal opportunity and universal inclusion. As the first black Presidential nominee of a major political party, he has eschewed identity politics. Seldom has a modern politician been less interested in representing any specific constituency—be it race, region, religion, or political party. Rather than building a coalition of specific interest groups, he addresses a general public, neither black nor white, neither Republican nor Democrat, but rather, the *United* States of America. It is what we could be, not what we are. The Obama image finds its counterpart in the empowering-image of the voting public. US voter and black candidate meet in a political space that is more-than the present. And what prevents his address from the deceptive illusion of closing the gap between ideal and real is the materiality of his blackness. So long as the fact that his skin is not white *matters*, his image has a democratizing power. This image can be communicated to others, launched into a free space between our differences to receive the enthusiastic endorsement of people both radically diverse and commonly human.

Meanwhile, McCain's campaign has put its image-machine on overload in its race to the finish in this election. Is this simply a case of one image-making campaign against

another? No, and we need to be clear about the differences. First and foremost, there is no citizen movement behind the candidacy of John McCain. Instead, he is the nominee of a political party responsible for the Bush presidency that has lost overwhelmingly the confidence of the public, and that McCain can neither embrace nor ignore. His managers have worked to make a virtue of this awkward isolation by packaging him as a maverick, an independent non-conformist, an image that appeals to the voters' own sense of social isolation. This bending of the image of McCain to reflect directly that of disaffected voters short-circuits the political process, and, with it, the whole issue of the gap between reality and ideal in US political life. Second, and most consistently, McCain is portrayed as a war hero because of wounds, imprisonment, and torture that he suffered in Vietnam, visibly manifest in his broken cheekbone and damaged arms that he "cannot raise high enough to salute the country he loves." As powerful as this image is for domestic consumption among certain demographic groups, it is not *em*powering. McCain's military image deals with the past, not the future. It has little positive resonance on the global stage. Past American greatness—military *or* economic—is largely irrelevant today. Insofar as this image *is* effective on the national level, it tempts the United States back into the politics of fear promulgated by the Bush administration after the September 11 attacks, which has been so damaging to domestic democracy and global peace.

The Democratic Party staged an extravaganza in Denver for the nominating convention, carefully designed to display party unity, the importance of family, and a new direction forward based on Change. It was a fully orchestrated spectacle, intended to heal the wounds of the close primary race against Hillary Clinton, and to show that the Democratic candidate's new face was no stranger to American traditions. Did the campaign tip the balance too far toward image-control, losing the power of the grassroots initiative that originally propelled Obama into the national spotlight? Were supporters turned into sports-fans, who observed from a distance as their small-money contributions exploded as fireworks over the Denver stadium? Was the stage-set of ancient Athens too narrowly Western in its democratic connotations to do justice to the global importance of this election? Or was the spectacle successful for reasons not identical with what was displayed on stage: the fact this man, heir to the legacies of Martin Luther King, Jr. and John and Robert Kennedy, and seen as similarly vulnerable to the danger of assassination, was able to appear with his family before a crowd of 80,000, and remain unharmed? The Democratic convention's truly empowering effect on viewers was the overcoming of the culture of fear, so that confronting evil enemies is not what we need to be heroic about.

There is no doubt that McCain has been forced on the defensive, launching a series of tactical reactions to the initiatives of his opponent. No decision has manifested

this opportunistic, tactical approach more blatantly than his surprise choice for vice-president, the little known governor from Alaska, Sarah Palin. McCain announced his choice immediately following the Democratic convention in order to steal the media spotlight from Obama. His faltering campaign seized this moment to let loose an image about which Republicans had little knowledge or control, so that its effects could not help but be spontaneous. It was a risky gamble, a bet of all or nothing on an untested political product. The process seemed improvisational, and the absence of deliberation had enormous popular appeal. Palin was quickly packaged as a bundle of qualities with specific markets in mind. And if she failed to appeal to one market segment—Hillary Clinton supporters first and foremost—she was *re* packaged; the design changed overnight, as incompatible qualities were heaped upon her: feminist trail-blazer, anti-abortion extremist, beauty queen finalist, gun-toting sports-woman, political reformist, church-going Christian, all-American hockey mom—and when her newly congealing image was punctured by disclosures that her unwed daughter was pregnant, she was converted into a social non-conformist, a young, female version of the anti-Republican, Republican candidate, the re-incarnated maverick, John McCain. Surely these multiple make-overs are not convincing in themselves. But what does appeal to the American voter is precisely the out-of-control aura that surrounds her image. Her candidacy seems

accidental. Her qualifications are minimal. Her publicity skills are undeniable. But her image cannot be called empowering—least of all to herself. She is a pawn in this election, deployed as a diversionary tactic, a short-term shot in the arm of a political party in decline.

The mastermind behind the rejuvenation of McCain's campaign is 37-year-old Steve Schmidt, who as a new recruit in Bush's 2004 election was taught the tricks of the trade of image-politics by the infamous Karl Rove. Rove is the originator of the post-modern political nightmare, wherein a manipulated narrative of reality takes the place of truth. Any news source that tries to correct the record and remind voters of past deceptions is attacked as "elitist." The euphemism for this form of politics is "cultural populism," and it is the most distressing manifestation of the continuity in political practice between George W. Bush and John McCain—a continuity hidden behind the new fiction that McCain is a *break* from that practice (the perfect alibi!), and is himself the agent of Change.

At least temporarily, this blatantly cynical strategy appears successful. Palin's image has visually overshadowed the democratic movement that launched Obama's campaign. Peaceful demonstrators at the Republican Convention were forcefully arrested, and no one seemed to notice. Obama's nuclear family depicts the stereotyped ideal and Michelle Obama's feisty femaleness has been tamed by the image-managers. In contrast, Sarah Palin's family—her five children, silent husband, and pregnant teen-

age daughter—is shown to us with all of its flaws, and the appeal is visceral. Indeed, there is a progressive moment in this enthusiasm, but this potential for voter empowerment is being openly manipulated, and attention is diverted from the issues that matter: the Iraq-Afghanistan war, the global economy, women's rights, and human rights. The battle in the final weeks will be one of images, and of competing narratives as to what these images mean. It may well be that the Karl Rove style of management that now dominates the McCain campaign will "energize" the radical Christian Right to fight yet another battle in the culture wars that won George W. Bush two election victories, and that Palin's image will draw in just enough voters again in crucial geographic areas to ensure four more years of Republican control. But right now (September 8, 2008), I am still betting on Obama.

Notes

1 This appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, October 2004, in an article by the former reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, Ron Suskind, and deserves being cited in full, lest we forget: "In the summer of 2002, after I had written an article in Esquire that the White House didn't like about Bush's former communications director, Karen Hughes, I had a meeting with a senior adviser to Bush. He expressed the White House's displeasure, and then he told me something that at the time I

didn't fully comprehend – but which I now believe gets to the very heart of the Bush presidency. The aide said that guys like me were 'in what we call the reality-based community,' which he defined as people who 'believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.' I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. 'That's not the way the world really works anymore,' he continued. 'We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors… and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.'" (http://www.antiwar.com/justin/?articleid=382CABc2, August 2008).